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THE INSANE NARRATOR IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

THESIS

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By

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This study is an inquiry into the relationship between the contemporary American writer's understanding of American reality and his attempt to convey this reality by the use of an insane first-person point of view character. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the insane narrator's point of view not only recreates the feeling of absurdity through the disjointed point of view of the madman, but also points to the absurdity in contemporary American life.

The first part of this study analyzes the narrators in Henderson the Rain King, The Bell Jar, and Lancelot. The second part uses A Fan's Notes, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, and Breakfast of Champions to discuss the problems that arise from the use of an insane narrator.

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INTRODUCTION

In response to the question "What is the relation of fiction to life?" René Wellek and Austin Warren state in Theory of Literature that ". . . the novelist offers less a case--a character or event--than a world. The great novelists all have such a world recognizable as overlapping the empirical world but distinct in its self-coherent intelligibility."¹ Wellek and Warren go on to state that the relationship between the writer and the fictional world that he creates is "the central problem of the narrative method,"² and a feature of this problem is the "differing conceptions of reality" that writers have and the "differing modes of illusion" that writers employ to create their fictional worlds.³ According to Philip Roth, this problem is magnified in contemporary American fiction because the contemporary American scene at times seems to defy description and to baffle the imagination of America's best writers.

The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe, and then make credible

¹René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), p. 214.

²Ibid., p. 222.

³Ibid., p. 213.

much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.⁴

One narrative method that Roth and several other contemporary American writers have used to capture the elusive and fantastic reality of present-day American life is an insane first-person point of view character.

R. D. Laing in The Divided Self defines insanity as the "incongruity" that exists between the patient and the therapist,⁵ and in contemporary fiction the insane narrator can be identified by the "incongruity" that exists between the reader's expectations of reality and the narrator's illusions which he offers to the reader as reality. The writer creates a world, giving it form through language and structure with the elements of plot, characterization, point of view, setting, etc., and within the framework of the novel, the insane narrator also creates a world which comes into existence when he relates the story to the reader. The reader, for the most part, approaches the story of the insane narrator (and the fictional world fashioned by the writer) with the expectations of

⁴Philip Roth, in Raymond M. Olderman, Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 2.

⁵R. D. Laing, The Divided Self (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 37.

"'life-likeness' . . . which are really conventions of the realistic novel: a causally related plot, characters who exhibit familiar human feelings, language which is largely referential, logical arguments."⁶ Because the normal tendency of the reader is to "relate it to life," Northrop Frye says the reader expects the novel, in this case the story of the insane narrator, to have "plausibility."⁷ In the novel which contains an insane narrator, the reader's expectations of "life-likeness" and "plausibility" are undercut by the narrator's view of reality, a point of view which is caused by his madness.

For example, James Leo Herlihy's short story "Love and the Buffalo" centers around the attempt of an unidentified narrator to escape from a mental hospital, but as the narrator unfolds his plan, it becomes clear that his story is not lifelike or plausible.

Enough has been said that the reader may have guessed what sort of place this is, this hospital. It's a place for the recalcitrant, for the few who refuse to succumb to Z. We reZist. And we are gathered up, one by one, and placed in these institutions for processing and ultimate dispoZal. We are slowly Z-ed away to nothing, or practically nothing.

For instance, the night before last, Mr. Highet reached the end of his processing. Yesterday morning, Miss Z carried him out in the palm of her hand.

⁶Jean E. Kennard, Number and Nightmare: Forms of Fantasy in Contemporary Fiction (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), p. 21.

⁷Northrop Frye, in Kennard, p. 21.

I said, "What have you got there, nurse?" I knew, but I wondered what she'd say.

"What have I got where?" was her brilliant rejoinder.

"Oh, in the palm of your hand," I said casually.

"This?" She opened her plaster-of-paris fingers. "It's just a capsule."

Obviously they had Mr. Highet in this capsule.⁸

The unreliability of this narrator's point of view--the vagueness of what the "Z" process is and his firm belief that patients are shrunk and removed from the ward in capsules--challenges the expectations of the reader.

Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, commenting on the "eyewitness reporter" in The Nature of Narrative, make a point which helps explain the relation between the insane narrator's story and the reader's understanding of the story:

Since the imagination plays the central role, the factual or empirical aspect of the protagonist's life becomes subordinate to the narrator's understanding of it. Not what really happened but the meaning of what the narrator believes to have happened becomes the central preoccupation with this type of narrative.⁹

Although "the reader gravitates always to what seems the most trustworthy viewpoint,"¹⁰ the reader must remember

⁸James Leo Herlihy, "Love and the Buffalo," in A Story That Ends with A Scream and Eight Others (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1967), pp. 57-58.

⁹Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 261.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 264.

that the only viewpoint offered in Herlihy's story, or any work that contains an insane narrator, is the distorted, disjointed point of view of the madman. Thus, the reader becomes a "victim"¹¹ of the narrator's insanity because the reader now must experience a type of madness and a certain amount of frustration as he separates fantasy from fact, and the reader must also consider the possibility that the story may exist only in the mind of the narrator. To accept the insane point of view of Herlihy's narrator is to admit that his understanding of what constitutes reality is radically different from the reader's expectations of plausibility, and the incongruity which exists between the reader's expectations of reality and the narrator's fabricated reality is the distinguishing characteristic of the novel which contains an insane narrator.

In contemporary fiction, the insane narrator tells his story because it is a way of reliving his fantasies and gaining a sense of control and security, but like any storyteller, especially since his point of view challenges the reader's expectations of reality, he must gain the confidence of the reader. An unusual and elaborate example of an insane narrator's attempt to gain the

¹¹Scholes and Kellogg, p. 264.

reader's confidence appears in the prologue to Philip Roth's novel The Great American Novel.

Call me Smitty. That's what everybody else called me--the ballplayers, the bankers, the bareback riders, the baritones, the bartenders, the bastards, the best-selling writers (except Hem, who dubbed me Frederico), the bicyclists, the big game hunters (Hem the exception again), the billiard champs, the bishops, the blacklisted (myself included), . . . one Bulkington, the bullfighters, the bullthrowers, the burlesque comics and the burlesque stars, the bushman, the bums, and the butlers. And that's only the letter B, fans, only one of the Big Twenty-Six.¹²

The obvious parody of the opening lines of Moby Dick, several more paragraphs of alliterations which follow this passage, extensive references to and critics of British and American literature throughout the prologue (for example, Bulkington is a sailor in Moby Dick who is described in some detail by Melville in the opening chapters of the novel, but soon disappears from the narrative), his acquaintances with Hemingway ("Hem") and several presidents, which are developed later in the prologue, are all part of Wordy Smith's attempt to gain the reader's confidence in him as a writer. Smitty believes that if the reader will accept his credentials as a writer, he will naturally accept the plausibility of his history of the rise and fall of the Ruppert Mundys, a member of the Patriot Baseball League--the third major

¹² Philip Roth, The Great American Novel (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973), p. 1.

league which for many years had existed alongside the American and National Leagues.

Because Wordy Smith deals in fantasy and not reality, like all insane narrators, he presents his story to the reader as an act of faith, a confession, an apology, which tries to justify his behavior, his point of view, and his story. The confessional form characterizes the narrator "by what he reports and how he reports it,"¹³ and therefore, ironically, the honesty and the sincerity of the narrator only reinforce the fantastic nature of his narrative and the unreliable point of view of the narrator. Donald Barthelme's short story "Me and Miss Mandible" takes the form of a personal journal kept by a middle-aged man, and his opening entry illustrates how the honesty of the narrator draws attention to the contrived nature of the story.

13 September

Miss Mandible wants to make love to me but she hesitates because I am officially a child; I am, according to the records, according to the grade-book on her desk, according to the card index in the principal's office, eleven years old. There is a misconception here, one that I haven't quite managed to get cleared up yet. I am in fact thirty-five, I've been in the Army, I am six feet one, I have hair in the appropriate places, my voice is a baritone, I know very well what to do with Miss Mandible if she ever makes up her mind.

In the meantime we are studying common fractions. I could, of course, answer all the

¹³Scholes and Kellogg, p. 264.

questions, or at least most of them (there are things I don't remember). But I prefer to sit in this too-small seat . . . Strangely neither she nor any of the other children seems to see any incongruity in my presence here.¹⁴

The inconsistency in his story is that, while he is a middle-aged man, he is convinced that he is part of a grammar school class, and what surprises him, and what should not surprise the reader, is that the children and the teacher are unaware of his presence. Barthelme's narrator exemplifies the paradox of the sincere yet unreliable insane narrator: to tell the story honestly is unconsciously to demonstrate the narrator's false conception of reality and to emphasize the narrator's tendency to withdraw from the world into self.

The last point is important, because without exception, the insane narrator's story makes it clear that his withdrawal from society is a reaction to an environment that lacks the necessary elements which will foster his growth and development as a human being, an environment that very often is hostile and threatening to the very existence of the individual. The unidentified narrator in Herlihy's "Love and the Buffalo" perhaps illustrates this best because he knows "specific reasons" why he was brought to the ward.

¹⁴Donald Barthelme, "Me and Miss Mandible," in Come Back, Dr. Caligari (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964), pp. 97-98.

. . . love has been done away with, damn near. I've been watching it happen since World War II. At first it seemed fairly gradual, but one should realize that the gradual, seen by some standards other than the purely optical, might indeed be quite appallingly rapid.

Like everything else of value, it's being Z-processed in a thousand insidious ways, but mostly it's being tranquilized out of existence.

The process is simple: Love is caring. Tranquilizers subdue, mute, deaden, the caring centers in the brain. That's all there is to it. A tranquilizer is a lobotomy in pill form. Or to say it more accurately, it is a soporific for the soul. Zzzz-zzzz-zzzz, sleeps the soul. While love dies.¹⁵

Herlihy's narrator may be confused as to the way that love has disappeared ("Z-process"), but that is part of his distorted view of reality. He senses the loss of meaningful and creative relationships in contemporary American society, but the knowledge is useless information as long as the narrator continues to withdraw from the impersonal world into his realm of make-believe. Since the narrator can only point to the conditions in contemporary society, he is a victim both of the system, which causes him to withdraw from the world, and of his own madness, which shuts off personal contact, trapping him within his own fantasies. Nevertheless, he has an important role in contemporary fiction, for the insane narrator not only presents the predicament of the man who finds himself alienated from society but goes on to recreate the

¹⁵Herlihy, p. 61.

distorted, fantastic point of view of this man. The insane first person point of view character becomes a unique character in contemporary fiction, a character who points out the absurdity of American life in the last half of the twentieth century and who recreates that absurdity in a confusing, disjointed view of reality as he escapes one kind of madness only to be engulfed and trapped in another far more dangerous kind of madness.

This study will be divided into two parts. The first part will consist of three chapters and each chapter will be a character study of a contemporary first person narrator who responds to the conditions of modern life by withdrawing from the world. These character studies will include Eugene Henderson in Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King (1959), Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar (1970), and Lancelot Lamar in Walker Percy's Lancelot (1977). The first chapter will develop the phenomenologist's concept of insanity and demonstrate that Henderson's escape from and return to society is a sane response to the world's madness. The second chapter will use Sylvia Plath's fictional autobiography to contrast the insane and sane point of view as Esther Greenwood plunges into madness and slowly recovers. The third chapter will be a character study of one of Walker Percy's insane narrators, Lancelot Lamar, and it will also show

that the insane narrator is one example of the new hero that has developed in contemporary fiction in the sixties and seventies.

The second part of this study will discuss three problems that arise with the use of the insane narrator-- the reliability of the narrator, the authority of the novel, and the purpose of the "unresolved" novel. Each chapter will use one contemporary novel as a touchstone for discussing one of these problems. A Fan's Notes (1968) by Frederick Exley will be used to explore the reliability of the insane narrator and to show that the narrator's madness makes him an outsider, a scapegoat for society, and at the same time, gives the narrator a special insight into the world he is excluded from, which creates a form of romance. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962) by Ken Kesey will be used to examine the problem of authority and to demonstrate that, although madness is used as a point of view, it is not necessarily a cry for insanity as a way of life or as a special form of transcendence as many people believe. Finally, Breakfast of Champions (1973) by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. will show the relation between madness as it appears in fiction and madness as a human experience, with the intention of proving that the novel with an insane narrator is not lifelike and that the unresolved ending is a

way of demonstrating the "fictitious" nature of the narrator's story and of literature itself.

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

EUGENE HENDERSON: ESCAPE AS A SANE RESPONSE
TO THE MADNESS OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE
IN HENDERSON THE RAIN KING

One preoccupation of many contemporary American heroes has been to escape the insanity and sterility of the modern scene by trying to find and occupy some meaningful "space" where freedom and identity are human possibilities. In City of Words, Tony Tanner sees this pattern as basic to American fiction between 1950 and 1970:

The feeling that society is an arbitrary system of fiction which one might simply step out of is one which still motivates a large number of American heroes. Outside all systems and fictions, freedom and reality may be found. At the same time, there has always been the concomitant dread that 'by stepping aside for a moment,' one might simply step into a void. What a man can or does step into when he steps out of society, whether or not it is possible to get beyond systems or fictions, are recurrent preoccupations in the novels [of contemporary American writers] . . . ¹

In his eleventh chapter entitled "Interior Spaciousness," Tanner looks at the attempts of some American heroes to

¹Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 30.

"cultivate and protect an area of inner space" where the hero can enjoy some degree of freedom, but he spends most of the time examining "some of the less happy aspects and effects of cultivating interiority."² Although not directly stated, his concern with Walker Percy's The Last Gentleman and Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar would suggest that "some of the less happy aspects" of an individual's withdrawal from the world are various forms of neurotic and psychotic behavior which ultimately lead to madness; and in fact, the madman is a familiar figure in contemporary American fiction. Holden Caulfield, J. D. Salinger's protagonist in Catcher in the Rye (1951), tells his story from a sanitarium after he recovers from a nervous breakdown which comes about by his refusal to compromise with a "phoney" adult world. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s eccentric millionaire in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965), Eliot Rosewater, is placed in an asylum because he tries to give his money away. The Sunlight Dialogues (1972), by John Gardner, opens with the arrest of a self-proclaimed madman who has painted the word "LOVE" in the intersection of a small New York town. Not only has madness been the subject of contemporary fiction, but several writers also have used madness as a point of view, a perspective which creates for the reader the distorted,

²Tanner, p. 262.

disjointed perspective of the madman as he or she looks at life. The Bell Jar is Esther Greenwood's account of her descent into madness and the long, agonizing process of returning to the world of the sane. Walker Percy's Love in the Ruins (1971) is narrated by a Dr. More, who believes that he has invented a machine which can scientifically read and calibrate the soul. John C. Pratt sees a problem with understanding insanity and, in particular, the insane point of view in contemporary fiction: "If a person is unattuned, if his point of view differs markedly from that of a person with more power, then he risks being called insane. . . . What one person accepts as reality may well be regarded as delusional or schizophrenic by another."³ This problem is compounded, according to Jean Kennard in Number and Nightmare, because many novels seem to argue "that those whom society defines as insane are in fact not really distinguishable from the so-called sane."⁴

This statement is especially true of Eugene Henderson, the narrator and hero of Saul Bellow's fourth novel, Henderson the Rain King. In Radical Innocence,

³John C. Pratt, ed., Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Text and Criticism (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1973), p. viii.

⁴Kennard, p. 30.

Ihab Hassan calls this novel "the most affirmative of Bellow's works,"⁵ and he adds,

Starting with the familiar figure of the solitary American hero, unattached to father, wife, or son, fleeing civilization and in search of love, prodigal in his service to all, Bellow leads Henderson through reality's dark dream to a vision of light, and a commitment that can only bind men back to life.⁶

Despite Hassan's affirmation, there are a number of questions which the novel raises about Henderson's reliability as a narrator and his personal sanity. The novel is a character study of a man who escapes the chaotic existence of American life by taking a trip to the heart of primitive Africa, but the fabulous narrative of his unbelievable adventures in Africa, which only he can verify, his odd behavior before and after his trip to Africa, to say nothing of his misadventures and buffoonery while in Africa, and finally, the fact that he consciously considers madness as an explanation for his meaningless life might be taken as the actions of a madman. To determine if Henderson is insane and to better understand the insane point of view in contemporary fiction one must have an understanding of the way the insane individual experiences and perceives reality.

⁵Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 19.

⁶Ibid.

More precisely, one must have a notion of the way the insane individual creates and exists in his own self-contained universe, a world which is totally withdrawn and dissociated from any reality outside of the insane individual's own mind. By exploring the concept of insanity developed by the phenomenologists and then describing the insane point of view, it can be shown that, despite Henderson's odd behavior and the questionable nature of his story, he never loses his grip on reality.

One school of psychology which attempts to explain the point of view of the madman is existential phenomenology. In The Divided Self, R. D. Laing describes the approach of this branch of psychology:

Existential phenomenology attempts to characterize the nature of a person's experience of his world and himself. It is not so much an attempt to describe particular objects of his experience as to set all particular experiences within the context of his whole being in his world.⁷

This school of psychology differs radically from the more traditional forms of psychology and psychotherapy in two respects: first, phenomenologists do not believe that insanity is an abnormal type of behavior, and second, they disregard, sometimes deny, that mental illness has any recognizable, pathological symptoms. In The Sane Society, a study of the effects of modern society on human development, Erich Fromm insists,

⁷Laing, Self, p. 15.

All passions and strivings of man are attempts to find an answer to his existence or, as we may also say, they are an attempt to avoid insanity. (It may be said in passing that the real problem of mental life is not why some people become insane, but rather why most avoid insanity.) Both the mentally healthy and the neurotic are driven by the need to find an answer, the only difference being that one answer corresponds more to the total needs of man, and hence is more conducive to the unfolding of his powers and to his happiness than the other.⁸

Criticizing the "current psychiatric jargon," R. D. Laing believes

. . . it speaks of psychosis as a social or biological failure of adjustment, or mal-adaptation of a particularly radical kind, or loss of contact with reality, or lack of insight. . . . The denigration is not moralistic . . . But it implies a certain standard way of being human to which the psychotic cannot measure up.⁹

One consequence of the phenomenologists' concern for the individual and his way of existing is that it creates a disbelief in the popular and scientific notion that mental illness, like physical ailments, has symptoms which can be diagnosed. In The Manufacture of Madness, Thomas Szasz argues that the symptoms of mental illness were fabricated when the theological view of medieval man gave way to the scientific view of modern man.

The conditions of behaviors we now call mental diseases were not discovered as diseases such as diabetes mellitus or myocardial infarction were.

⁸Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), p. 29.

⁹Laing, Self, p. 27.

Instead, they had formerly been known by other names, such as heresy, buggery, sin, possession, and so forth--or had been accepted as customary and natural and were therefore not designated by special names. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a host of such phenomena--never before conceptualized in medical terms--were renamed and reclassified as illness. This process, which led to the creation of a discipline known as psychiatry, is an integral part of the larger process which substituted scientific concepts for religious ones. Nature thus replaced God; the State, the Church; and mental illness, witchcraft.¹⁰

In The Divided Self, R. D. Laing demonstrates that a patient's behavior can be seen in two distinct ways: "One may see his behavior as 'signs' of a 'disease'; one may see his behavior as expressive of his existence."¹¹ However, Laing emphasizes in two other studies, Sanity, Madness, and the Family and The Politics of Experience, that "there is no such 'condition' as 'schizophrenia,' but the label is a social fact and the social fact is a political event," and the political event means that each "labeled" person must suffer the consequences of the imposed label.¹²

¹⁰Thomas S. Szasz, The Manufacture of Madness: A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 137-38.

¹¹Laing, Self, p. 31.

¹²R. D. Laing and A. Esterson, Sanity, Madness, and the Family (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1964), pp. 3-12; and R. D. Laing, The Politics of Experience (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), pp. 83-84.

Just as Tony Tanner discussed the contemporary hero and the space that he tries to occupy outside of society and other systems,¹³ the phenomenologists describe insanity in terms of a space occupied by an individual in relation to other people. R. D. Laing, in The Divided Self, defines insanity as a relation that ". . . is tested by the degree of conjunction or disjunction between two persons where one is sane by common consent. The critical test of whether or not a patient is psychotic is a lack of congruity, an incongruity, a clash, between him and me."¹⁴ When a person says he is Napoleon, or "an unreal person" or "dead" and he seriously believes and behaves according to this "concept" of reality, because it differs from the therapist's knowledge of the man as not being Napoleon or as a man who is existing or as a man who is alive, the "incongruity" between the view of the patient and the view of the therapist constitutes insanity.¹⁵ This "clash" between the patient and the therapist arises because the patient responds to the world in a radically different way from the sane individual. Insanity, then, is a perspective or a point of view, but although it may be very different from the sane person's view of reality, in The Politics of Experience

¹³Tanner, p. 30.

¹⁴Laing, Self, p. 37.

¹⁵Ibid.

R. D. Laing states that insanity is "a reflection of and a reaction to" the social structures that surround the individual.

In over 100 cases where we studied the actual circumstances around the social event when one person comes to be regarded as schizophrenic, it seems to us that without exception the experience and behavior that gets labeled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unliveable situation. In his life situation the person has come to feel he is in an untenable position. He cannot make a move, or make no move without being beset by contradictory and paradoxical pressures and demands, pushes and pulls, both internally from himself, and externally from those around him. He is, as it were, in the position of checkmate.

The behavior of the diagnosed patient is part of a much larger network of disturbed behavior. The contradictions and confusions "internalized" by the individual must be looked at in their larger social contexts.

Something is wrong somewhere, but it can no longer be seen exclusively or even primarily "in" the diagnosed patient.¹⁶

The response of the insane person to an "unliveable situation" is to withdraw from the world, as Erich Fromm observes in The Sane Society:

The insane person has lost contact with the world; he has withdrawn into himself; he cannot experience reality, either physical or human reality as it is, but only as formed and determined by his own inner processes. He either does not react to the world outside, or if he does, reacts not in terms of its reality but only in terms of his own processes of thought and feeling.¹⁷

¹⁶Laing, Politics, pp. 78-79.

¹⁷Fromm, p. 36.

R. D. Laing elaborates on this point in The Divided Self and explains that the withdrawal of the individual from the world is caused by a split between mind and body in one's experience.

The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways; in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself 'together with' others or 'at home in' the world, but on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation . . . ¹⁸

The schizoid, the sane person tending toward complete withdrawal, or the schizophrenic, the psychotic, tries to protect himself by enclosing himself within his own personal world, " . . . without recourse to a creative relationship with others, modes of relationship that require the effective presence to him of other people and of the outer world. The imagined advantages are safety for the true self, isolation and hence freedom from others, self-sufficiency, and control."¹⁹ What emerges is a "false self" as the individual creates a buffer zone between his true "inner self" and the outside world which threatens his existence. The effect of this buffer zone is the total isolation of the individual from the world.

Every element . . . comes to be experienced as more and more unreal and dead. Love is precluded and dread takes its place. The final

¹⁸Laing, Self, p. 15.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 77-78.

effect is an overall experience of everything having come to a stop. Nothing moves; nothing is alive; everything is dead, including the self. The self by its detachment is precluded from a full experience of realness and aliveness. What one might call a creative relationship with the other, in which there is mutual enrichment of the self and the other . . . is impossible, and an interaction is substituted which may seem to operate efficiently and smoothly for a while but which has no 'life.' . . . There is a quasi-it-it interaction instead of an I-thou relationship. This interaction is a dead process.²⁰

Unable to act, but at the same time needing to gain some feeling of control, the schizoid or schizophrenic is forced to turn within himself and create a fantasy world detached from the outer reality which threatens him.

In phantasy, the self can be anyone, anywhere, do anything, have anything. It is thus omnipotent and completely free--but only in phantasy. . . . The more this phantastic omnipotence and freedom are indulged, the more weak, helpless, and fettered it becomes in actuality. The illusion of omnipotence and freedom can be sustained only within the magic circle of its own shut-upness in phantasy. And in order that this attitude be not dissipated by the slightest intrusion of reality, phantasy and reality have to be kept apart.²¹

Madness, unlike sanity, becomes the acceptance of what is imagined, and the madman can never move beyond his fantasies or even distinguish fantasy from reality.

Michel Foucault explains the process in Madness and Civilization:

The act of the reasonable man, who, rightly or wrongly, judges an image to be true or false,

²⁰Laing, Self, p. 87.

²¹Ibid., p. 88.

is beyond this image, transcends and measures it by what is not in self; the act of the madman never oversteps the image presented, but surrenders to its immediacy, and affirms it only insofar as he is enveloped by it.²²

The insane individual becomes a prisoner of his own fantasies, believing that he has gained control, which allows safety and freedom, but in fact, he encounters only anxiety, despair, loneliness, and guilt. Finally, "the individual is in a world in which, like some nightmare Midas, everything he approaches becomes dead," and only two possibilities remain, both leading to psychosis--to continue the fantasy or to kill himself.²³

This pattern of experience, as defined and described by the phenomenologists, can be used to characterize a number of narrators in contemporary fiction who respond to the absurdity of modern life by withdrawing from the world into self, but not Eugene Henderson. Henderson is not insane--he is an avoider. He denies reality, he sidesteps it, he imagines it to be different from what it is, and although he flees America, he is never able to escape the world's reality of suffering, madness, and death. It is Henderson's ability to transcend these

²²Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, trans. Richard Howard, first American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), p. 94.

²³Laing, Self, p. 158.

conditions of life which exemplifies his sane response to the world's absurdity.

Eugene Henderson is a huge man with an intensity for experiencing life to the fullest. A millionaire, twice married, he divides his time between raising pigs on his two-hundred-year-old estate and playing his father's violin, but at the age of fifty-five his passion for living is buried under the facts of his own meaningless existence.

The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in my chest. A disorderly rush begins--my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, "No, no get back, curse you, let me alone!" But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns into chaos.²⁴

In Desperate Faith, Howard Harper states, "Henderson is caught in the familiar existential dilemma of Bellow's heroes: yearning for order and meaning in his life, he finds only chaos and meaninglessness,"²⁵ but Henderson is not trapped between death and his inability to know reality as Harper suggests. Several years earlier while

²⁴Saul Bellow, Henderson the Rain King (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1959), p. 3. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

²⁵Howard Harper, Desperate Faith (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina, 1967), p. 41.

in France, a chance encounter with an old acquaintance, Lily, the woman who would become his second wife, causes Henderson to reject death. A tour of the cathedrals, aided by Henderson's drinking and Lily's petty lies, ends with Henderson threatening to kill himself. Driving to Banvules, he stops at the marine station and gazes into the eyes of an octopus in one of the aquariums: "The eyes spoke to me coldly. But even more speaking, even more cold, was the soft head with its speckles, and the Brownian motion of those spectatles, a cosmic coldness in which I felt I was dying" (p. 19). Henderson rejects death and for the next several years concerns himself with the problem of how to live. Now, the sudden discovery of the meaninglessness of his life causes Henderson several moments of anxiety and necessitates a search for truth, a search "first and foremost" for reality.²⁶

Henderson begins his quest by considering madness as a possible explanation for his intensive but seemingly meaningless will to live. Lily, Henderson's second wife, is ". . . handsome, tall, elegant, sinewy, with long arms and golden hair, private, fertile and quiet" (p. 4), but she is a "schizophrenic," and Henderson believes this term might explain his behavior: "I, too, am considered crazy, and with good reason--moody, rough, tyrannical,

²⁶Hassan, p. 17.

and probably mad" (p. 4). Hounded by a voice which cries, "I want, I want" (p. 24), driven by despair and frustration, Henderson is finally forced to admit, ". . . there comes a day, there always comes a day of tears and madness" (p. 24). Given the chaotic state of Henderson's life, he can rationalize his position--"of course, in an age of madness, to expect to be untouched by madness is a form of madness" (p. 25)--but he finds the "pursuit of sanity" (p. 25) equally maddening. Henderson is close to madness, but what he takes for the symptoms of his madness--anxiety, frustration, separation, confusion, and the pointlessness of his life--are actually signs of his desire to withdraw from a world that has become unfamiliar and alien to him. Finally, the world's madness becomes all too apparent when the cook, Mrs. Paxton, dies of a heart attack while Henderson is arguing with his wife. Taking this as an omen, feeling responsible for her death (if he had not been shouting at his wife, the old woman would not have had a stroke), Henderson feels he "should do something" (p. 40). To gain some control over his life, to gain a perspective, Henderson takes a trip to Africa where he can confront his own existence (and possible madness) in a simple, less complex world.

When Henderson arrives in Africa, he secures a guide and soon arrives at the village of the Arnewi

where he is greeted by an English-speaking native, Itelo, who explains that his people are in the midst of a severe drought. Matters are complicated because the natives believe the frogs are evil spirits and they refuse to water their cattle, preferring that the cattle die than be infested with evil spirits. Henderson, as an outsider, offers his advice: "Look here, I'm kind of an irrational person myself, but survival is survival" (p. 59). Henderson knows that life has value, and later when Queen Willa-tale explains "Grun-tu-molani" (p. 85), the spirit to live, he suddenly feels reborn, for he knows that "Grun-tu-molani" is a vital experience, very different from the octopus he had seen at Banvules-sur-Mer which had reminded him of death. Since the Queen has given him new life, he wishes to return the favor by giving life back to the Arnewi by destroying the frogs. He sees their problem as one of values.

I figured that these Arnewi, no exception to the rules, had developed unevenly; they might have the wisdom of life, but when it came to frogs they were helpless. This I already had experienced to my own satisfaction. The Jews had Jehovah, but wouldn't defend themselves on the Sabbath. And the Eskimos would perish of hunger with plenty of caribou around because it was forbidden to eat caribou in fish season, or fish in caribou season. Everything depends on values--the values. And where's reality? I ask you, where is it? I myself, dying of misery and boredom, had happiness, and objective happiness, too, all around me, as abundant as the water in the cistern where cattle were forbidden to drink. And therefore I thought, this will be one of those mutual-aid

deals; where the Arnewi are irrational I'll help them, and where I'm irrational they'll help me.
(p. 87)

By destroying the frogs and giving back life to the Arnewi's cattle, he had hoped to prove that life itself has value, but in his zest to succeed Henderson makes a bomb which destroys the frogs and the cistern which holds the life-saving water. As the water is soaked up by the arid land, Henderson flees to the land of the Wariri and another encounter with primitive man.

Henderson had followed a pattern familiar in the novels of Saul Bellow. He makes a commitment (life is important), he tries to turn this choice into a value (saving the Arnewi's cattle), he encounters failure, the commitment dissolves, and he escapes to rest for the next encounter.²⁷ Retreating, Henderson is forced to examine the primitive world which had temporarily offered him hopes. Even in Africa he begins to recognize the madness of the world: the Arnewi value life, yet their superstitions and fear prevent them from trying to save the cattle which they value most. Henderson's conflict is not in maintaining his sanity, but in not facing the reality of the world, which is suffering, death, and madness.

²⁷Tanner, p. 69.

Most of his life Henderson has felt that he understood the world he lives in. One night he shouts to his wife, "I know more about reality than you'll ever know. I am on damned good terms with reality and don't you forget it" (p. 36). Much later, when Henderson is witnessing the Wariri rain ceremony and talking to King Dahfu about his experience with the Arnewi, he is reminded of this statement, but he understands it in a very different way:

What we call reality is nothing but pedantry. I need not have had that quarrel with Lily, standing over her in our matrimonial bed and shouting until Ricey took fright and escaped with the child. I proclaimed I was on better terms with the real than she. Yes, yes, yes. The world of facts is real, all right, and not to be altered. The physical is all there, and it belongs to science. But then there is the noumenal department, and there we create and create and create. As we tread over anxious ways, we think we know what is real. And I was telling the truth to Lily after a fashion. I knew it better, all right, but I knew it because it was mine--filled, flowing, and floating with my own resemblances; as hers was with her resemblances. Oh, what a revelation! Truth spoke to me. To me, Henderson!
(p. 167)

Howard Harper suggests in Desperate Faith that at this point Henderson realizes that reality is beyond his grasp, and therefore, experiences the absurd because he is separated from a world that he had known and understood,²⁸ but it is his discovery of the unreality of his view of the world that reaffirms and offers to him a second

²⁸Harper, p. 42.

chance to discover the reality of life. Henderson's feelings of frustration and alienation, what he takes for madness, are caused by his conscious effort to deny the reality of the world; and his efforts, although failures, are reminders that he actively chooses to confront and perhaps change a mad world.

King Dahfu becomes Henderson's tutor and friend, and the King takes it upon himself to change Henderson's view of life, which is insufficient: "Granted, grun-tu-molani is much, but it is not alone sufficient. Mr. Henderson, more is required. I can show you something--something without which you will never understand thoroughly my special aim nor my point of view" (p. 218). Daily, the King takes Henderson to confront Atti, a lion that he has captured and befriended. Petrified, intimidated by the cat, chilled at the thought of his own death, Henderson at first hopes it is a "delusion or a hallucination," but the King forces Henderson to face the beast and the reality that it stands for:

"Oh, Mr. Henderson-Sungo," he said, after a long instant of thought, keeping his uncanny pressure on my wrist--there was seldom any abruptness in what he said. "Yes, I easily could understand that--delusion, imagination, dreaming. However, this is not dreaming and sleeping, but waking. Ha, Ha! Men of most powerful appetite have always been the ones to doubt reality the most. Those who could not bear that hopes should turn to misery, and loves to hatreds, and deaths and silences, and so on. The mind has a right to its reasonable doubts, and with every short life it awakens and

sees and understands that so many other minds of equally short-span have left behind. It is natural to refuse belief that so many small spans should have made so glorious one large thing. That human creatures by pondering should be correct. This is what makes a fellow gasp. Yes, Sungo, the same temporary creature is a master of imagination. And right now this very valuable possession appears to make him die and not to live.

(p. 232)

The King wishes to teach Henderson that it is man's imagination which gives form to life, and life without direction, grun-tu-molani, is a delusion. Henderson soon learns this:

I might as well say at this place that he had a hunch about the lions; about the human mind; about the imagination, the intelligence, and the future of the human race. Because, you see, intelligence is free now (he said), and it can start anywhere or go anywhere. And it is possible that he lost his head, and that he was carried away by his ideas. This was because he was no mere dreamer but one of those dreamer-doers, a guy with a program. And when I say that he lost his head, what I mean is not that his judgement abandoned him but his enthusiasms and visions swept far out.

(pp. 234-35)

Henderson's education is complete when he confronts a very different lion. The King is under a "double criticism" because he has not yet captured Gmilo, the lion that contains his father's spirit, and as long as he keeps Atti, the elders think he is being influenced by the evil spirits in Atti. The elders finally bring the situation to a head when they announce that Gmilo has been sighted. The King takes Henderson to the place where he is to

capture the beast, and it is this encounter with the wild lion that strips away the misconceptions that Henderson has so long accepted as reality.

. . . it was no vision. The snarling of this animal was indeed the voice of death. And I thought how I had boasted to my dear Lily how I loved reality. "I love it more than you do," I had said. But oh, unreality! Unreality, unreality! That has been my scheme for a troubled but eternal life. But now I was blasted away from this practice by the throat of the lion. His voice was like a blow at the back of my head.

(p. 307)

The scaffold which the King and Henderson were standing on had been sabotaged, and when the King drops to the ground to net the lion, he is mauled by the creature. Before the King dies, Henderson secures the lion, for the first time facing the reality of death, and tells the King that the lion was not Gmilo.

Henderson's education is complete. The intentional death of Dahfu by the Wariri elders has confirmed Henderson's view of the world, contemporary and primitive: hypocrisy, despair, suffering, madness, and death are the realities of the world. Whereas Henderson had so long thought that the world consumed man in its misery and suffering, from Dahfu and Henderson's own encounter with death, he learns that man's imagination and intelligence give suffering meaning and life direction; and just as the King had loved Henderson enough to teach him this, Henderson feels a duty to return to society

and live a life of service to other men. He makes this clear in the last pages of a letter to his wife, Lily.

"I had a voice that said, I want! I want! It should have told me she wants, he wants, they want. And moreover, it's love that makes reality reality. The opposite makes the opposite" (p. 286).

Determined to enter medical school, Henderson returns to America, and while on the plane, he befriends a small parentless boy, who is to meet relatives when he arrives in New York. When the plane lands in Greenland for refueling, Henderson takes the child in his arms and dashes madly around the plane.

Laps and laps I galloped around the shining riveted body of the plane, behind the fuel trucks. Dark faces were looking from within. The great beautiful propellers were still, all four of them. I guess I felt it was my turn now to move, and so went--running--leaping, pounding, and tingling over the pure white lining of the gray Arctic silence.
(pp. 340-41)

Oblivious to the people watching, Henderson is exuberant. His joyous dash around the plane might be interpreted as the act of a lunatic, but if his action is loony, his vision is sane and redemptive. Henderson's frustration and panic, which are so apparent in the early part of the novel, his feelings of madness, and his spasmodic and haphazardous quest for truth in Africa have been replaced by a self-confidence in his own abilities to live in a chaotic world by service to

others. This new direction in his life is symbolized in his conscious, jubilant dash around the plane. In Radical Innocence, Ihab Hassan notes that man's encounter with madness sometimes creates a perspective which allows a better understanding of the human condition:

The human response to outrage, however, strains our capacities for vicariousness. Its limit is madness. . . . But if the withdrawal results sometimes in madness, it can also afford distance and high lucidity. It offers a way, this side of madness, of rising above the inexorable realms of necessity, of pain, to a higher ground from which necessity may be understood in human terms.²⁹

Henderson has confronted the insanity of modern life and been forced to ponder the possibility of his own madness, but while he sometimes denies the world's reality of suffering, death, and madness, he never withdraws from this reality, and in his struggle to come to terms with the world's absurdity, "Henderson achieves a vision which permits him to take hold of his own fate. In the process, he becomes a model for what Leslie Fiedler regards as the most successful contemporary hero, the man who learns that 'it is the struggle itself which is his definition.'³⁰ But Henderson's vision, personal and untried (there is no guarantee that he can sustain it in America), may collapse

²⁹Hassan, p. 17.

³⁰David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction: Updike, Styron, Bellow, and Salinger (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 123.

at any time, for Howard Harper warns in Desperate Faith that the victories of Bellow's heroes "are always limited ones; and the depths of life remain, within their constant threat of madness."³¹ In the following chapters the topic of discussion will be those first person narrators in contemporary American fiction that lack Henderson's vision, that respond to the world's madness by withdrawing into self and manufacturing their own personal reality.

³¹Harper, p. 196.

CHAPTER II

ESTHER GREENWOOD: INSANE AND SANE RESPONSES TO A MASCULINE SOCIETY IN THE BELL JAR

Eugene Henderson has been able to escape the madness of modern society and to gain from his trip to Africa a vision of life which allows him to transcend the realities of suffering and death, but many contemporary American characters have been able to avoid the pressures of society only by isolating themselves from reality.

In City of Words, Tony Tanner states,

One notable characteristic [of contemporary fiction is it concentrates] . . . on people who precisely are turning themselves into "isolated systems" (or being turned into isolated systems by the world around them); they take in a decreasing amount of information, sensory data, even food, with the result that the sense of their own personal entropy is heightened and this sense is then projected over the world around them.¹

One novel which captures the sense of personal entropy is Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, " . . . perhaps the most compelling and controlled account of a mental breakdown to have appeared in American fiction."² In a letter written to the editors of Harper and Row concerning the first American publication of the novel, Aurelia Plath,

¹Tanner, pp. 146-47.

²Ibid., p. 262.

Sylvia's mother, describes her daughter's intentions and point of view in the novel.

"What I've done," I remember her [Sylvia Plath] saying, "is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalized to add color--it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown. . . . I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorted lens of a bell jar." Then she went on to say, "My second book will show the same world as seen through the eyes of health."³

Although Sylvia Plath never finished her second novel with its "healthy" viewpoint, The Bell Jar is a realistic and personal account of Esther Greenwood's mental breakdown, but Esther Greenwood is neither insane nor unreliable when she narrates the events that surround her mental collapse. Since the novel is told in the past tense, it is her sanity, "coming to terms with reality," as much as her style of expression which makes the story realistic. Lucy Rosenthal, who criticized the novel in the Saturday Review, is mistaken when she argues that the accuracy of the novel rests on the narrator's constant touch with reality.

The slip into breakdown is handled with such skill that the mad girl could be us, and her walk toward madness ours. The achievement is possible because even in the extremity of irrationality and despair,

³Lois Ames, "Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Note," in Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 294-95.

a part of the narrator's fine intelligence remains alert and functioning still attached to reality."⁴

But the intention of the author is to recreate the point of view of a person who is cut off from reality, who sees the world through "the distorted lens of a bell jar."

However, Lucy Rosenthal's remark does emphasize that the novelist is able to present two points of view, madness and sanity, with equal skill and sincerity. The novel is important in the study of the insane narrator because it describes realistically the process of going mad, and it offers the contrasting perspectives of madness and sanity, at the same time suggesting causes for the mental breakdown of the narrator.

Robert Scholes believes the novel succeeds as an accurate picture of the mental breakdown of a young girl because Sylvia Plath uses "superbly the most important technical device of realism--what the Russian critic Shklovsky called 'defamiliarization.' . . . Sylvia Plath's technique of defamiliarization ranges from verbal witticisms that bite, to images that are deeply troubling."⁵ The tornado, train, tunnel, and bell jar images capture and describe in an unusual way the feelings and emotions of

⁴Lucy Rosenthal, rev. of The Bell Jar, by Sylvia Plath, Saturday Review, 24 Apr. 1971, p. 42.

⁵Robert Scholes, "The Bell Jar: Esther Came Back Like a Retreaded Tire," The New York Times Book Review, 11 Apr. 1971, p. 7.

the mentally disturbed, and they create a visual picture which helps define the point of view of the insane individual.

Despite the attention and activity that surround Esther Greenwood's trip to New York as a winner of a fashion magazine contest, she is preoccupied with the impending execution of the Rosenbergs and feels that something is wrong: "I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo."⁶ Compounding this sense of detachment and insensitivity is the feeling of inadequacy--"I felt myself shrinking at a small black dot . . . I felt like a hole in the ground" (p. 17)--and the desire to escape: "I wanted to crawl in between those black lines of print the way you crawl through a fence, and go to sleep under that beautiful big green fig tree" (p. 61). At one point early in the novel Esther tags along with Doreen and her newly-acquired friend, but suddenly Esther feels out of place when the two begin to dance.

There is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the only extra person in the room.

⁶Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 3. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

It's like watching Paris from an express caboose heading in the opposite direction--every second the city gets smaller and smaller, only you feel like it's really you getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier, rushing away from all those lights and that excitement at about a million miles an hour.

(p. 18)

The tornado image had suggested that she is walled in, separated from the normal activities by the circular winds of the storm, but this image implies movement away from reality, away from the lights of Paris toward nothingness. However, Esther sees her escape from reality as a movement toward some inner point of being, and she remembers how her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, had tried to teach her to ski and the exhilarating, uncontrolled dash down the mountain, which ended with her breaking a leg.

A keen wind that had been hiding itself stuck me full in the mouth and raked the hair back horizontal on my head. I was descending, but the white sun rose no higher. It hung over the suspended waves of the hills, an insentient pivot without which the world would not exist.

A small answering point in my own body flew toward it. I felt my lungs inflate with the inrush of scenery--air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, "This is what it is to be happy."

I plummeted down past the zigzagers, the students, the experts, through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromises, into my past.

People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly.

(pp. 107-08)

As in the tornado image, here she has lost all sense of motion even though she is speeding down the hill, and her flight down the slope has created a momentary euphoria. Hypnotized by "the light point" at the end of the tunnel, she moves away from the stillness and perspective she had at the top of the hill, where she had "measured the distance" to Buddy with her eye. The speedy run down the mountain and the blurring of the people and trees receding "on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel" suggest not only a movement away from reality but also a loss of perspective. Losing contact with people around her, she focuses on some inner reality, "the end point of the tunnel," but it is a point of view which is invisible to the spectators who watch her, a point of view created by her swift movement down the hill, her movement away from reality.

The tornado, train, and tunnel images describe the feelings of estrangement, insecurity, isolation, and dread which accompany Esther's withdrawal from reality, but the image which Sylvia Plath uses to describe the condition of insanity is the bell jar. The bell jar first appears as part of Esther's discovery of some of the more "interesting sights of the hospital" when Buddy takes her "into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were

born" (p. 69). The bell jar, with its connotations of death and immobility, becomes the image by which Plath can describe Esther's slip into madness.

After Esther returns home from New York, she becomes more depressed, more convinced of her inabilities to accomplish anything, and she sees her life as coming to a stop:

I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three . . . nineteen poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth.

(p. 137)

She cannot sleep, finds it impossible to write legibly, can read only with great difficulty, and her helplessness becomes apparent when she tries to answer the phone one day: "My hand advanced a few inches, then retreated and fell limp. I forced it toward the receiver again, but again it stopped short, as if it had collided with a pane of glass" (p. 132). Madness, like an invisible and impenetrable curtain, has cut off Esther from the world around her, and she uses the image of the bell jar to describe this state of existence: "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (p. 267). In City of Words, Tony Tanner elaborates on the significance of this image.

When she looks at the features of a face in a photograph they melt away, just as the words in a book she reads start to flow past making no impression on the "glassy surface" of her brain. She finds it difficult to perceive any meaningful patterns in reality, a failure to gestalt which empties perceptions of significance, reducing vision to mere dots and language to sounds. The glassy surface is really the bell jar inside which she sits, through which she perceives the world. To see the world through glass is to register signs without gathering meanings, and Plath's own style with its clear yet remote documentation of the strangeness of the world outside the glass, is a perfect bell-jar style. . . . This is a beautiful image for that inclination to escape the pressure of the moment which is recurrent in American literature. She is the sealed-off spectator, telling herself, "I am an observer."⁷

As a "sealed-off spectator," she sees the world outside the bell jar, but she is unaffected by it.

That afternoon my mother had brought me the roses.

"Save them for my funeral," I'd said.

My mother's face puckered, and she looked ready to cry.

"But Esther, don't you remember what day it is today?"

"No."

I thought it might be Saint Valentine's day.

"It's your birthday."

And that was when I had dumped the roses in the wastebasket.

(pp. 228-29)

Esther not only has lost sense of time, but as Tanner has demonstrated, she can observe the signs, her mother's expressions--"she looked ready to cry"--but she cannot register meaning, her mother's feelings of anguish and helplessness or the causes for those emotions. Cut off

⁷Tanner, p. 263.

from reality, she creates a world within the bell jar and devises strategies and rules by which she can exist. Often she "pretends" to have had a sleepless night, to feel better when she feels terrible, and on one occasion she pretends to comfort a girl who, she believes, wants to be considered mad. As R. D. Laing points out in The Divided Self, "A good deal of schizophrenia is nonsense . . . prolonged filibustering to throw dangerous people off the scent, to create boredom and futility for others."⁸ Pretending allows her a certain amount of imagined control, and it is a way of protecting herself against the doctors and nurses who seem to threaten her, but she also reacts to people who intrude upon her "inner space," giving to her world a certain order and logic. Kicking a Negro aide in the leg because he has served two different tureens of beans, she thinks, "Now I know perfectly well you didn't serve two kinds of beans together at one meal. Beans and carrots, or beans and peas, maybe, but never beans and beans. The Negro was just trying to see how much we could take" (p. 205).

Nowhere is the logic of the "inner space" of the bell jar more evident than in Esther's view of her own suicide. In The Savage God, A. Alvarez states that for centuries society believed that suicide was mixed with

⁸Laing, Self, p. 177.

young love or caused by intense passion or the weather, but the scientific investigations in the last century have shown that "the processes which lead a man to take his own life are at least as complex and difficult as those by which he continues to live."⁹ Like madness, "suicide is a closed world with its own irresistible logic,"¹⁰ and it is the result of a choice, "however impulsive the action and confused the motive."¹¹ But R. D. Laing in The Divided Self cautions that suicide is a very limited choice; "The individual is led to 'kill himself' not only under the pressure from anxiety, but out of his sense of guilt, which in such people is of a particularly radical and crushing kind, and seems to leave the subject with no room to manoeuvre."¹² For Esther there are no moral implications, no concern for family or friends; suicide is the "end point of the tunnel," the only way to escape "the sour air" of the bell jar. Her only concern, enclosed in the depression and despair of her own madness, is how to do it. "Then I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as making my hand go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and time

⁹A. Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide, first American ed. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972), pp. 80-87, 115.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 121.

¹¹Ibid., p. 87.

¹²Laing, Self, pp. 164-65.

again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash" (p. 179). Finally she devises a plan that is painless and should guarantee success. Hiding in a gap behind the furnace in the basement of her house, she takes fifty sleeping pills and just before losing consciousness she feels a momentary "rush" like her exhilarating plunge down the mountain: "The silence drew off, baring pebbles and the shells and all that tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep" (p. 191). She had hoped to escape, but she awakens to the noises and the light of reality:

A cool wind rushed by. I was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth. Then the wind stopped. There was a rumbling, as of many voices, protesting and disagreeing in the distance. Then the voices stopped.

A chisel cracked down on my eye, and a slit of light opened, like a mouth or a wound, till the darkness clamped shut on it again. I tried to roll away from the direction of the light, but hands wrapped round my limbs like mummy bands and I couldn't move.

(p. 192)

Her attempted suicide confirms in the mind of her mother the mental instability of her daughter, yet from Esther's point of view suicide is still an alternative. Transferred to a new hospital, Esther becomes distraught at the thought of missing an attempt to kill herself, even though she might not have jumped if she had the chance.

The journey over the bridge had unnerved me.
 I had missed a perfectly good chance. The
 river water passed me by like an untouched drink.
 I suspected that even if my mother and brother had
 not been there I would have made no attempt to jump.
 (p. 210)

Suicide dominates her thinking because it is the only way that she can escape the confines of the bell jar; it is the only act which will allow her to reach and go beyond the "end point of the tunnel," to take control of her life and slip into the void.

Several weeks of convalescence, a trusting relation with a woman psychologist, and several painless shock treatments push Esther toward the light of reality. Finally, one day she senses a change: "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air" (p. 242). Immediately she begins to relate to the people around her. Gone are her compulsion for self-destruction, her feelings of insecurity and doubt, the glass walls of her madness which had cut her off from the world around her. Raymond Olderman states in Beyond the Wasteland that "traditionally . . . a character's return from withdrawal [Henderson's trip to Africa or Esther Greenwood's madness] is meant to symbolize his coming to terms with reality, his affirmation of life in the world."¹³ If Esther is to come to terms

¹³Olderman, p. 18.

with a reality that has pushed her to madness, she must come to understand the causes for her collapse.

With her sane point of view, her new perspective on life, she discovers a new sense of freedom and a determination to be her own woman. When she gets fitted with a diaphragm, she begins to perceive the causes of her madness.

I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless . . ."

(p. 251)

In the early fifties and at the age of nineteen, "pureness was the great issue" (p. 90), but for Esther the issue had become one-sided: "It might be nice to be pure and then to marry a pure man, but what if he suddenly confessed he wasn't pure after we were married, the way Buddy Willard had? I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (pp. 89-90). Buddy's confession that he had had an affair with an older woman, lasting an entire summer, and his attempt to hide this information from her cause Esther to see marriage and the role she must play as an impossibility.

And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat.

. . . So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.
(pp. 93-94)

Esther wants to experience herself as a woman, sexually, and yet society dictates that she can fulfill herself sexually only through marriage, which she sees as a restricting and limiting role which denies her freedom. As Phyllis Chesler argues in Woman and Madness, the contemporary woman has " . . . existed under a 'bell jar'-- both inside and outside the asylum. For them, madness and confinement were both an expression of female powerfulness and an unsuccessful attempt to reject and overcome [the restrictions imposed by a male-dominated society] . . . "¹⁴

The diaphragm allows Esther to be her own woman, to find a man, and to lose her virginity, which had "weighted like a millstone" around her neck since she had "learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard" (p. 257), but the freedom of the diaphragm will also test her new understanding of the world she must live in.

Practicing her new, "normal personality," she is picked up by a young college professor, and before the

¹⁴Phyllis Chesler, Woman and Madness (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1972), pp. 15-16.

night is over she loses her virginity, but as she waits "for the miraculous change to make itself felt" (p. 257), she feels only a sharp pain. Hemorrhaging badly, and having already gotten permission to spend the night away from the asylum under the pretense of visiting Joan, a girl who had been released from the asylum a week earlier, Esther asks the man to take her to Joan's house. Joan is bewildered by Esther's late-night arrival, but after hearing Esther's story, she takes her to the hospital to receive treatment. Several days later Esther learns that Joan has killed herself, and in some way feeling responsible, she goes to visit Dr. Nolan to try to understand what had happened and how she is involved.

"Of course you didn't do it!" I heard Doctor Nolan say. I had come about Joan, and it was the only time I remember her sounding angry. "Nobody did it. She did it." And then Doctor Nolan told me how the best of psychiatrists have suicides among their patients, and how they, if anybody, should be held responsible, but how they, on the contrary, do not hold themselves responsible.

(p. 271)

Perhaps better than anybody else, Esther should remember her own attempted suicide and the sealed-off world of her own madness, but although she cannot be sure that "somewhere, anywhere--the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, would descend again" (p. 271), she must put these facts behind her to continue to be her own woman in her new life.

Although the novel has recreated the point of view of insanity, like Henderson, Esther has come to terms with reality, but the novel does lay the foundation for understanding those narrators in contemporary fiction who must tell their story through the distorted lens of the bell jar and who never move beyond the glass walls which separate the insane from the sane.

CHAPTER III

LANCELOT LAMAR: INSANITY, THE STRATEGY OF PERSONAL SURVIVAL IN LANCELOT

Both Henderson the Rain King and The Bell Jar end with the narrator making a commitment to life despite its absurdity. Henderson learns that man's imagination gives life meaning and that love is a reality, and so he plans to enter medical school and eventually serve his fellowman. Esther Greenwood, first plunged into madness, discovers from Joan's suicide and her own madness that she can be her own woman despite the restrictions she encounters in a male-dominated society. Like Henderson's, Esther's commitment to life is untested, and Sylvia Plath's own suicide in 1963 is an ironic testament to the real possibility that at any time the world's madness may engulf the individual. In City of Words, Tony Tanner points out that many characters in contemporary fiction, unlike Esther Greenwood, remain trapped in the inner spaces of personal madness:

In Esther's case she does finally come out at the end of the tunnel, so that almost-death is turned into a kind of second birth. But for other characters in other books who also make their retreat

from the world, the tunnel proves to yield no white light at the end of it.¹

One writer who concerns himself with the way individuals withdraw from the world's absurdity and who uses the insane point of view in his fiction is Walker Percy. Discussing Dr. Thomas More, the narrator of his futuristic satire Love in the Ruins, Dr. Percy elaborates on the mental condition of his narrators and their particular response to an insane world.

Dr. Thomas was entirely different. These first young men [Binz Bolling in The Moviegoer and Will Barnet in The Last Gentleman] are, as I say, rather conventional types in current American fiction in the sense of being lost young men, in search of one thing or another, and maybe finding it in one degree of what they are looking for. But, you see, Dr. More is different. From the beginning he knows exactly who he is and what he needs. He has no doubt at all. There's no identity crisis here. He knows exactly. The only problem facing the reader is who is crazy, whether it's Dr. More or the rest of the world. The problem is posed for the reader: whether More is right or the world is right, whether Paradise Estates is right or Dr. More is right.²

While not resolving this conflict, Dr. More's marriage to his nurse Ellen at the end of the novel allows him a way of living which offers personal growth and satisfaction despite the crazy society he is surrounded by, but in Walker Percy's fourth novel, Lancelot, he creates a

¹Tanner, p. 264.

²Charles Bunting, "An Afternoon with Walker Percy," Notes on Mississippi Writers, 4 (Fall 1971), 53.

character who never moves beyond madness. The novel becomes a case study of the individual's and society's madness, told from the point of view of the madman himself, and as Lancelot Andrews Lamar unfolds his story, it becomes clear that his story is fantasy and his purpose is to either destroy or escape from a world that he cannot endure. Further, the stance that Lancelot takes toward reality makes him an example of the new American hero that has developed in American fiction in the last twenty years.

At one time, Lancelot had been a college football star (he still holds the South Eastern Conference record for the longest punt return); a Rhodes scholar; during the sixties, a practicing liberal attorney; but his second marriage, to Margot, the daughter of a wealthy Texas oil man, has allowed him, in his middle age, to become a "moderately happy" alcoholic. He has been content to confine himself to the pigeonier of his New Orleans estate, reading Raymond Chandler novels, drinking, and keeping time by the morning and evening newscasts. Over the course of years, he has slipped into a state of idleness: "Do you know what happened to me during the past twenty years? A gradual, ever so gradual, slipping away of my life into a kind of dream state in which finally I could not be sure that anything was happening

at all."³ Lancelot suddenly becomes attuned to reality when he discovers that he has not fathered Margot's child. His senses become sharp and acute for the first time in many years as he sets out to prove his wife's infidelity. With the help of Elgin, a black student attending M.I.T., he videotapes his wife's continued unfaithfulness only to discover that she has a new lover. The knowledge of his wife's sin fascinates Lancelot, and he makes a plan to participate in the evil by murdering his wife and her lover. During the height of a violent storm, he enters Margot's room, slashes the throat of her lover, and watches his wife succumb to the gas fumes that are seeping in through the air-conditioning duct. Lancelot is saved from death when the house blows up and he is thrown from the holocaust which consumes the bodies of his victims.

These are the facts of Lancelot's story, separated by numerous digressions and violent tirades, gradually pieced together during several visits by an old friend who comes to Lancelot's cell in the asylum. Lancelot's story ends with murder, but the headlines mention nothing about foul play: "BELLE ISLE BURNS. BODIES OF FILM STARS CHARRED BEYOND RECOGNITION. SCION OF OLD FAMILY CRAZED BY GRIEF AND RAGE. SUFFERS BURNS TRYING TO SAVE WIFE" (p. 13).

³Walker Percy, Lancelot (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 57. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

From the narrow view of his cell window, Lancelot looks over a contemporary wasteland consisting of a cemetery, a pornographic movie house, and "if you lean into the embrasure and crane to the left as far as possible" (p. 4), a few letters of a sign which is unintelligible to one looking out from the window. Lancelot's restricted point of view is a reminder of Clifford Pyncheon in Nathaniel Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables, who watches the busy activities of the street from his second story window. Lancelot is also a reminder of Esther Greenwood in The Bell Jar because the explosion at Belle Isle has blasted him from reality, and like Esther, he becomes a "sealed-off spectator," refusing to participate in the activities of a sterile, contemporary society. Just as the small window blocks out most of the outside world, Lancelot's madness, his conscious withdrawal from reality, creates a distorted and narrow view of reality, colored by his own imagination and fancies.

The novel opens on All Souls' Day in a Center for Aberrant Behavior. The appearance of a long-lost friend triggers something in Lancelot's mind which makes him face the present moment. As Lancelot emerges from his catatonic state, he is depressed and unsure of himself. He does not know where he is--"Is this a prison or a hospital or a prison hospital?" (p. 3); why he is confined

to his cell--"I think I am here because of that [depression] or because I committed a crime" (p. 3); how long he has been there--"I think I have been here a year. Perhaps two. Perhaps six months. I am not sure" (p. 3); and it is only after his friend leaves that he is able to remember his own name. During the past year since the explosion on Belle Isle, Lancelot has refused attempts at rehabilitation: "I've refused all psychiatrists, ministers, priests, group therapy, and what not. After all, what is there to talk about? I've nothing to say and am certainly not interested in what they say" (p. 5). Tapping out a message on his cell wall, Lancelot hopes to communicate with a young girl in the adjoining cell who has been gang-raped into psychosis, for even though he has not seen her and "she has not said a word for months" (p. 34), he believes that she may be "the prototype of the New Woman" (p. 35), a woman capable of love. His steadfastness in avoiding any contact with society, except for the young rape victim, is a manifestation of his decision to repudiate contemporary life, a resolution which is uncompromising: "The conviction: I will not tolerate this age. The freedom: the freedom to act on my conviction. And I will act. No one else has both the conviction and the freedom" (p. 156). He never acts on his conviction, although he sees the end of

the old age and the beginning of a new period in human development.

. . . some act, assassinate, bomb, burn, etc., but they are the crazies. Crazy acts by crazy people. But what if one, sober, reasonable, and honorable man should act, and act with perfect sobriety, reason, and honor? Then you would have the beginning of a new age. We shall start a new order of things.

We? Who are we? We will not even be a secret society as you know such things. Its members will know each other without signs or passwords. No speeches, rallies, political parties. One man will act. Another man will act. We will know each other as gentlemen used to know each other--no, not gentlemen in the old sense--I'm not talking about social classes. I'm talking about something held in common by men, Gentile, Jew, Greek, Roman, slave, freeman, black, white, and so recognized between them: a stern code, a gentleness toward women and an intolerance of swinishness, a counsel kept, and above all a readiness to act, and act alone if necessary--there's the essential ingredient--because as of this moment not one in 200 million Americans is ready to act from perfect sobriety and freedom.

(pp. 156-57)

From Lancelot's perspective, the madness of the modern world is the beginning of the end, and if he can have his way he will help destroy it: "The mad Mansons are nothing more than the ultimate spasm-orgasm of the dying world. We are only here to give it the coup-de-grace. We shall not wait for it to fester and rot any longer. We will kill it" (pp. 159-60). His utopian vision creates confusion because, although he would like to consider himself a gentleman capable of acting honestly and freely, like the mad Mansons, Lancelot has killed two people, or at

least he claims to have murdered two people. And yet, Lancelot seems to be aware of his questionable reliability, and he puts the question to his listener and the reader:

Yes, I am a patient in a mental hospital, more than that, a prisoner. Yes, I am aware that you are accustomed to the ravings of madmen. Yes, I see you are aware that I give myself a certain license to talk crazy, so to speak. I might even be joking. But I am also aware from a certain wariness in your eyes that you are not absolutely certain I am not serious. You must decide that for yourself.

(p. 160)

Lancelot, like Love in the Ruins, raises the central question of much of Dr. Percy's fiction: Who is crazier, the madman or the society that creates the madman? Despite Lancelot's distorted, disjointed, illogical narrative, he is able to offer some strong arguments for his apocalyptic vision of the end of society and for his own madness.

Lancelot sees America as a vast debauched, sterile wasteland: "love" has become an old, overused word, a pretense for free sex, pornography, and sexual exploitation, and the reality that is or was love has become so obscured and blurred against the background of American life that Lancelot cannot fathom it, if in fact it exists at all. For Lancelot sees love as "a gigantic hoax by our elders . . . to conceal from us the one simple fact that the only important, certainly the best thing in life,

is ordinary sexual love" (p. 12), but at one time love had been the essence of life itself: "What else is there really in life . . . than love, an October day, a slope of levee, warm lips to kiss" (p. 179). When he met his second wife Margot, love was "wanting her all the time, wanting even the sight of her" (p. 118), but from his cell love is only an "interest or the lack of it" (p. 21). For his second wife, love had been accommodation, "her new ten million and my old house" (p. 81). The movie being filmed at Belle Isle had presented love as sexual freedom--" . . . it is not just screwing, though there is nothing wrong with that either, but a kind of sacrament and celebration of life" (p. 148)--but Lancelot can remember when love was a deep, personal commitment to his first wife, Lucy. Morally, love is not fornication, the malicious act of his second wife, and yet scientifically love is only a biological function as insignificant as a "horsefly scrubbing his wings under my [Lancelot's] hair" (p. 89). It is as hypocritical as Margot's insistence that she loves Lancelot before retiring with her new lover Jacoby, and as honest as his daughter's blind faith to leave Belle Isle at her father's request even though she is fascinated by the movie people. Finding the reality of love blurred beyond recognition and faced with a multitude of conflicting facts that

might explain reality, Lancelot withdraws from the confused landscape of American culture, and as Lancelot begins to create a substitute reality through his fantasies, he becomes a unique example of the new American hero that has emerged in the non-realistic fiction of the sixties and seventies.

In the fiction of the sixties and seventies, the "facts of experience" become less valuable, less meaningful for the writer as " . . . a growing sense of the mystery of the fact itself, and a loss of confidence in our own power to effect change and to control events"⁴ turn facts into fabulous unrealities. The unreliability of factual knowledge has caused many writers to turn from realism to forms of fiction which question the nature of reality. In A First Reader of Contemporary American Short Fiction, Patrick Gleeson states,

The direction which these writers have taken seems quite consistent. "The world is not as familiar as you think," many novelists seem to be warning us: "What you believe to be true may be false; what you think of as timeless reality may be nothing more than your particular delusion."⁵

In The Fabulators, Robert Scholes sees the decline of realism, positivism, and pragmatism as an indication that

⁴Olderman, p. 3.

⁵Patrick Gleeson, A First Reader of Contemporary American Short Fiction (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1971), p. vii.

modern man has lost faith in the long-accepted belief that scientific truth was the only truth--"Instead of being The Way, they now seem just a way."⁶ A consequence of this loss of faith in scientific truth, caused in part by the mysterious nature of fact, is the loss of a "common language" and more importantly, the loss of a "common mode of perception"--the accepted "filters" of time, space, and society,⁷ and in their place the development of a language which Tony Tanner describes in City of Words as "foregrounded,"⁸ language that draws attention to itself rather than pointing out its referents. But more importantly for this discussion, "Foregrounding is also a way of demonstrating one's resistance to, and liberation from, other people's notions as to how one should use language to organize reality."⁹ Just as Joseph Frank in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" has argued that realism is created by cultures that are in harmony with nature, he also discusses the converse: ". . . when the relationship between man and the universe is one of disharmony and disequilibrium, we find that nonnaturalistic, abstract

⁶Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 101-02.

⁷Ibid., p. 100.

⁸Tanner, p. 20.

⁹Ibid., pp. 20-21.

styles are always produced."¹⁰ The blurring of fact, the loss of faith in science, and the replacement of a "common language" with "foregrounded language" are indicative of the decline in realism and the movements towards various forms of fantasy, such as fabulation and romance.¹¹

In the world of the contemporary fantasy writer, choice becomes the problem for the hero. Faced with an absurd world, intimidated by one hundred facts and solutions, all of which might be the answer, the hero becomes detached from reality, which causes a sense of helplessness and denies action as a moral ordering force. In Black Humor, Fiction of the Sixties, Max Schulz describes this new hero: "He remains dissociated, hanging loose . . . coolly presenting individual efforts to realize oneself in relation to the outer world of experience, less on the agony of struggle to realize self than on the bewildering trackless choices that face the individual."¹² This estrangement of the hero from the world produces a nonrealistic fiction as Joseph Frank suggested, but these

¹⁰Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in Criticism, ed. Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, and Gordon McKenzie (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1958), p. 389.

¹¹Kennard, pp. 9-15; Olderman, pp. 1-26; Scholes, Fabulators, pp. 11-14.

¹²Max Schulz, Black Humor, Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1973), p. 7.

new forms of fantasy, just as realism does, try to explain man's encounter with the absurdity of the modern condition. These forms have their foundation in Existentialism, but they represent a shift in perspective, stressing " . . . the premise of the absurd dilemma rather than the more palatable notion that man is free to create himself."¹³ The absurdity which this new perspective emphasizes is not the individual's sudden awareness of a meaningless universe, but the inability to move beyond this discovery because reality is unfathomable: the void seems now malicious, "chaos becomes insanity."¹⁴ The realistic novel, for example Henderson the Rain King, had stressed the absurd hero who defined himself by his freedom to create order where order did not exist. Now the fantasy stresses an inept, comic hero who is trapped in the contemporary "wasteland," who tries to avoid the absurdity instead of facing it, who finds freedom and identity to be luxuries in a world that demands a total effort just to survive, who, unable to act or create, clings only to life.

Madness offers Lancelot a way of "hanging loose," to use Max Schulz's term, a way of being an unaffected observer as he searches for the reality of love because "love" points to any number of human experiences; taken

¹³Kennard, p. 10.

¹⁴Olderman, p. 22.

individually, each has meaning, but thrown together, they become an opaque wall, hiding their individual meaning and significance from Lancelot. Because the very nature of reality is so questionable, Lancelot's quest is in fact an elaborate fantasy, which Lancelot believes to be true, which does explain the absence of love, and which probably justifies, in Lancelot's mind, the murder of his wife and her lover, if in fact he actually did commit the murders.

A game Lancelot played as a young boy illustrates the nature of his search for love, a search that develops only in his own mind.

Elgin's father, Ellis Buell, and I used to play in the dumbwaiter, letting each other up and down the living room to bedroom to attic. If there is something about a concealed hole in the wall which fascinates Ohio tourists, there is something about traveling in it from one room to another by a magic and unprovided route which astounds children. Children believe that a wall is a wall, that the word says what is and what is not, and that if there is something else where the word doesn't say, reality itself is tricked and a new magic and unnamed world opens.

(pp. 45-46)

Lancelot, as his name suggests, seeks the magic behind the wall, just as Esther Greenwood had sought the light point at the end of the tunnel; Lancelot wants to discover the reality of love that hides behind the façade of language and fact. But Lancelot also knows that he must communicate this reality to others in a new way, and in

this respect he shares a problem that modern writers face, as Walker Percy explains:

The main difficulty is that of language. . . . When you speak of religion, it's almost impossible for a novelist because you have to use standard words, like "God" and "salvation" and "baptism" and "faith," and the words are pretty well used up. They're still good words, but the trick of the novelist . . . is to sing a new song, use new words.¹⁵

For Lancelot, tapping out a code to the girl in the next cell, a code that she could never understand, is one way of communicating that cannot be confused with the old language. Although the act is one of a madman, it implies that Lancelot is unconsciously aware that the reality of love is found only in personal relationships with other people.

His quest for reality takes the form of a search for sin, because to prove the existence of evil is to confirm the existence of God, and indirectly, of love.

But what if you could show me a sin? a purely evil deed, an intolerable deed for which there is no explanation? Now there's a mystery. People would sit up and take notice. I would be impressed. You could almost make a believer out of me.

In times when nobody is interested in God, what would happen if you could prove the existence of sin, pure and simple? Wouldn't that be a windfall for you? A new proof of God's existence. If there is such a thing as sin, evil, a living malignant force, there must be a God.

(p. 52)

¹⁵Bunting, p. 44.

Proving his wife's infidelity does not satisfy Lancelot, and his next step is to "feel" evil by murdering his wife and Jacoby, but at the moment he slashes Jacoby's throat, or the moment he thinks that he cuts his throat--he is not sure--Lancelot feels nothing.

I was cutting his throat, I think. No, I'm sure. What I remember better than the cutting was the sense I had of casting about for an appropriate feeling to match the deed. Weren't we raised to believe that "great deeds" were performed with great feelings--anger, joy, revenge, and so on? I remember casting about for the feeling and not finding one.

(p. 242)

At the end of the novel, Lancelot prepares to leave the asylum--there is still doubt that he committed the murders and a greater doubt that he will be able to leave the asylum, but he seems to echo the futility of his quest, because he finds nothing: "The question? Very well. The question is: Why did I discover nothing at the heart of evil? There was no 'secret' after all, no discovery, no flickering of interest, nothing at all, not even any evil. . . . there is no answer. There is no question" (p. 235). Lancelot is betrayed by his own insane point of view. Fantasy has allowed him a way of explaining the world as he wants to see it, but since he has avoided contact with all elements of a society that he despises, he has not had the opportunity to experience love. His insanity, while creating a point of view, also isolates him from others

and prevents him from establishing relationships with other persons, and the fantasized murders are just a manifestation of his inability to establish meaningful relationships with others. However, the novel ends not with Lancelot's nihilism, but with a litany between Lancelot and the friend who has listened patiently. Ironically, the exchange between the two friends indicates that Lancelot has been able to communicate his ideas, the first step in establishing a relationship, but since Lancelot is trapped in madness, the only maturity and growth appear in the listener.

Lancelot's listener is an enigma, a type of everyman, for Lancelot identifies him so exactly that he becomes totally mysterious. At the opening of the novel, Lancelot is not sure whether his friend is "one of those failed priests who go into social work or 'counseling,' or one of those doctors who suddenly decides to go to the seminary" (pp. 4-5). Lancelot bestows several names on his friend: Northumberland, Harry, Harry Hotspur, Prince Hal, Percival or Parsifal (finder of the Holy Grail), Pussy (the least objectionable fraternity name), and the religious name John--"But is it John the Evangelist who loved so much or John the Baptist, a loner out in the wilderness?" (p. 10). Some facts do emerge. When they first meet, the friend is not wearing his priest garb, and Lancelot senses that

his friend, like himself, is "a loner in the wilderness." During the first several visits Lancelot catches his friend looking out the cell window and staring at the modern wasteland, and despite Lancelot's insistence, the listener cannot be pulled away from the window. By the end of the novel, the listener has put on his Roman collar and decided to take a small parish in Alabama. The exchange between the friends affirms the priest's faith and his ability to transcend the madness of contemporary life, while Lancelot remains trapped in madness.

You are silent. So you are going to go to your little church in Alabama and that's it?

Yes.

So what's the new beginning in that? Isn't that just more of the same?

You are silent.

Very well. But you know this! One of us is wrong. It will be your way [faith] or it will be my way [insanity].

Yes.

All we can agree on is that it will not be their way [contemporary society]. Out there.

Yes.

There is no other way than yours or mine, true?

Yes.

One last question--and somehow I know the answer. Do you know Anna?

Yes.

Do you know her well?

Yes.

Will she join me in Virginia and will she and I and Siobhan begin a new life there?

Yes.

Very well. I've finished. Is there anything you wish to tell me before I leave?

Yes.

The priest has the last word. He might tell Lancelot that he is not free to go since he has confessed to murder or that he might be detained for the moment for further observations since his behavior is still questionable or that Lancelot cannot survive in the world armed only with a utopian dream based on an archaic chivalrous code, or that for a time, he will have to live without Anna, since only minutes before she has told Lancelot that she will not go with him. All these are possibilities, and the novel ends, as it opens, in confusion; but the final "yes" is a subtle indication that Lancelot's view of life is at least incomplete and possibly unacceptable. Unable to accept faith, incapable of human involvement, threatened by society, insanity becomes a haven for Lancelot, the contemporary hero who cannot transcend, by faith or love, the absurdity of the modern wasteland.

Eugene Henderson, Esther Greenwood, and Lancelot Lamar are three contemporary heroes who encounter the absurdity of American life in the last half of the twentieth century, and each in his own way tries to escape this absurdity. But while Eugene Henderson and Esther Greenwood are able to come to terms with reality, Lancelot Lamar never reconciles himself with an age that he cannot tolerate. Lancelot's perspective, the distorted view of a madman, allows Walker Percy to demonstrate the insanity of the modern age

and the difficulty of sustaining a meaningful existence in the face of the world's absurdity. But if Jerome Klinkowitz is correct in his belief that fiction should "maintain a sense of life within the sense of art,"¹⁶ then the "sense of life" which is created through the insane point of view seems to be achieved at the expense of art because the novel raises questions about the reliability of the narrative, the authority of the narrator, and the purpose of an "unresolved" novel.

The novel which contains an insane narrator presents technical problems for the writer, as can be seen by Walker Percy's response to a question about his own narrators in The Last Gentleman and Love in the Ruins.

. . . there was a real difficulty . . . with the last two--because in both cases the protagonist is, sometimes, mentally ill, so the trick was to present the narrative faithfully, that is in a disjointed way that would be true to the disjunction in the narrator's mind, and yet to do so without confusing the reader.¹⁷

But the writer's fidelity in maintaining the narrator's mad point of view in Lancelot raises doubts about the reliability of the narrative: not only must the reader decide who is really sick, Lancelot or the society that produces such a character, but also the reader must

¹⁶Jerome Klinkowitz, "Literary Disruption; Or What's Become of American Fiction," Partisan Review, 40 (Fall 1973), 444.

¹⁷Bunting, p. 40.

consider the possibility that Lancelot's story is fantasy and that his pessimistic vision of American life is only his own personal nightmare.

Lancelot's unreliability also creates a problem with the authority of the novel. Even though Lancelot ends with the priest's reaffirmation of his lost faith, Lancelot's madness and the pertinaciousness with which he clings to it indicate that insanity may be one way of avoiding contact with the world and the responsibility that life in a society demands of the individual. It also implies that madness is a way of "transcending" the limits of society, that madness may even be a higher form of awareness, as R. D. Laing states in The Politics of Experience.

Perhaps we will learn to accord to so-called schizophrenics who have come back to us, perhaps after years, no less respect than the often no less lost explorers of the Renaissance. If the human race survives, future man will, I suspect, look back on our enlightened epoch as a veritable Age of Darkness. They will presumably be able to savor the irony of the situation with more amusement than we can extract from it. The laugh's on us. They will see that what we call "schizophrenia" was one of the forms in which, often through quite ordinary people, the light began to break through the cracks in our all-too-closed minds.¹⁸

The ending of Lancelot presents another problem besides the attention that it draws to insanity as a sanctuary from the problems of everyday living and as a

¹⁸Laing, Politics, p. 90.

way of transcending the mundane experiences of life. John Gardner states,

Everybody, these days, is thinking and feeling what Walker Percy is thinking and feeling. Lancelot rages, at one point, "I will not have my son or daughter grow up in such a world. . . . I will not have it." Paddy Chayefsky's mad TV news commentator and his disciples say the same--only better--in the movie "Network." Everybody says it. Over and over, film after film, novel after novel, people keep whining about the black abyss and turning in their ignorance to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, as if no one had ever answered them. . . .

Fiction, at its best, is a means of discovery, a philosophical method. By that standard, Walker Percy is not a very good novelist; in fact "Lancelot," for all its dramatic and philosophical intensity, is bad art. Like Tom Stoppard's plays, it fools around with philosophy, only in this case not for laughs but for fashionable groans. Art, it seems to me, should be a little less pompous, a lot more serious. It should stop sniveling and go for answers or else shut up.¹⁹

Like other novels that contain an insane narrator and that begin and end with the narrator's continued madness, Lancelot offers a point of view without offering answers. Jean Kennard in Number and Nightmare elaborates on this point when he comments on the self-destructive nature of certain fantasy writers of the sixties and seventies.

The novelist of number, whose Post-existential world view denies the significance of any act, uses literature to dramatize its own impossibility. The novel of number is, therefore, self-destructive; it unmakes itself. But even an attempt to bring about an experience of the absurd in the reader

¹⁹ John Gardner, "The Quest of the Philosophical Novel," The New York Times Book Review, 20 Feb. 1977, p. 20.

is a moral gesture, an attempt to communicate one's own position.²⁰

Lancelot, in the light of Kennard's remark, raises a crucial question: Why does the author offer a position, a point of view, especially of madness, and yet never offer answers or resolve the insanity of the narrator? The second part of this paper will discuss the technical problems that arise from the use of a first person insane point of view in contemporary American fiction.

²⁰Kennard, p. 37.

PART TWO

CHAPTER IV

A FAN'S NOTES: RELIABILITY AND
THE INSANE POINT OF VIEW

A Fan's Notes (1968) by Frederick Exley is the personal recollections of a man cut off from the illusive promises of the American dream. A chronic alcoholic, three times committed to insane asylums, Exley sustains himself only by his avid involvement with the successes and failures of the New York Giants, and in particular, the success and failure of Frank Gifford. But as Exley finds it more and more difficult to achieve personal identity, success, and happiness in the mainstream of American life, he becomes more than just a devoted fan of the Giants. Retreating to his mother's davenport or the unused sofa of his close friend, the Counselor, Exley begins to live out in fantasy his dreams of fame, gaining identity but maintaining anonymity, achieving success without failure, living life without anxiety. He steps out of life, becoming a passive observer, and the novel becomes the confession of a man who finds that he cannot participate in the "American" life, a man who

comes to realize that he can only be a fan of life
itself:

In a moment I would fall asleep. But before I did, all the dread and dismay and the foreboding I had been experiencing disappeared, were abruptly gone, and I felt guilty. They disappeared because, as I say, I understood the last and most important reason why I fought. . . . I fought because I understood, and could not bear to understand, that . . . it was my fate, my destiny, my end to be a fan.¹

A "seizure," which Frederick Exley takes to be a heart attack, actually brought on by a weekend of "heroic drinking," and the thought of death which the seizure brings force Exley to examine the possibilities which life may hold for himself: "I saw myself some years hence, drunk, waiting 'for the game,' without self-denial, without perseverance, without hope" (p. 21). Trying to understand the causes for his failure to enter the American way of life, he recreates the events of his life, which are the notes for the novel. As he unfolds his story, it becomes clear that madness has offered him the only escape from life; and although Exley, as narrator, at times presents a sane point of view, showing objectivity, restraint, and keen perceptions, most of the time he recreates the distorted perspectives of the madman. By the end of the novel, after three trips to mental institutions, a short marriage, the birth of twins,

¹Frederick Exley, A Fan's Notes (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 356-57. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

a divorce, and two dismal attempts at teaching, Exley still finds himself an outcast of society and a man unable to cope with life. Exley's fantasies of owning the Giants and fame and success have turned into a nightmare vision of America: "The dream is weird and unsettling and infinitely sad, and not in the least because I am being beaten" (p. 385). Because he cannot win, the novel ends with Exley running from the reality of American life (possibly to the safety and security afforded by schizophrenia): "But then the evening comes, and sleep, and then the dream, and then that shuttering of heavy darkness. And then when again the vision comes, I find that, ready to do battle, I am running: obsessively running" (p. 385).

The novel, especially the ending, rings with a sense of urgent sincerity; however, the reader is left with one final question: How reliable are Exley and the story he tells? Madness adds a twist to the problem of reliability because all the facts and the fantasies which make up the novel have been filtered through an on-again, off-again madman. Exley, out of touch with the mainstream of American life, handcuffed by his chronic alcoholism, may be just verbalizing the personal, tortured despair of one American failure, and his vision of American life may be as unrealistic as his own fantasy of owning the New York Giants. The problem of Exley's reliability or

unreliability as an insane narrator is not easy to resolve because Frederick Exley and other insane narrators in contemporary American fiction are examples of two diametrically opposed concepts of madness: the madman as genius, which has existed in Western literature for more than two thousand years, and the madman as scapegoat and victim, which has developed in the last three hundred years and which is the point of view of much of contemporary fiction. A brief overview of the development of the two concepts of madness and how these two ideas are interrelated in the character of Frederick Exley will prove that the insane narrator's reliability is strengthened rather than hindered by his psychosis.

Although the association between madness and genius is popularly considered a product of the nineteenth-century Romantics,² in The Manufacture of Madness, Thomas Szasz states that in Western literature madness has always been considered a characteristic of genius and the madman possessor of a "special knowledge." This idea that madness is not less meaningful than sanity--indeed that the madman, like the so-called genius, sees reality more accurately than the ordinary person--occurs frequently

²Jacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1970), p. 66.

in Western literature.³ Jacques Maritain, in Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, observes that for the Greek philosopher Plato " . . . the concept of the Muse is bound to passion, mania, and madness."⁴ In Theory of Literature, René Wellek and Austin Warren expand upon the Greek concept of poetic imagination: "The poet is the 'possessed': he is unlike other men, at once less and more; and the unconscious out of which he speaks is felt to be at once sub- and super-natural."⁵ Examples of the madman's genius can be found in the New Testament, in Roman times, and in the folklore of the early German tribes.⁶ For the ancient Romans, the actions of the drunkard and the madman were not considered irrational or meaningless but rather were thought to express the true, inner feelings of the individual.⁷ The notion was at least known by medieval man, for the idea appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, when the Pardoner, preaching against the vice of gluttony, paraphrases Seneca:

Senek saith a good word doutedles:
 He saith he can no difference finde
 Betwixe a man that is out of his minde
 And a man which that is dronkelewe,

³Szasz, p. 121.

⁴Maritain, p. 62.

⁵Wellek and Warren, p. 81.

⁶Szasz, pp. 121-23.

⁷Ibid., p. 122.

But that woodnesse, yfallen in a shrew,
Persevereth lenger than dooth dronkenesse.⁸

By the fifteenth century, madness fascinates simply because it is knowledge. Michel Foucault reports in Madness and Civilization,

In the Middle Ages . . . man's dispute with madness was a dramatic debate in which he confronted the secret powers of the world; the experience of madness was clouded by images of the Fall and the Will of God, of the Beast and the Metamorphosis, and of all the marvelous secrets of Knowledge.⁹

This "Knowledge" belonged not to the alchemist, the philosopher, or the theologian, but to the "Fool," who was able to see reality in a special light.

While the man of reason and wisdom perceives only fragmentary and all the more unrelying images of it [secrets of man's own nature], the Fool bears it intact as an unbroken sphere: that crystal ball which for all others is empty is in his eyes filled with the density of an invisible knowledge.¹⁰

In Cervantes' Don Quixote and Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear, the madman becomes the hero because madness is " . . . the absolute laceration that gives . . . access to the other world."¹¹ And in Shakespeare's time madness was accepted as a form of goal-orientated behavior, as Thomas Szasz states in The Manufacture of Madness:

⁸Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale," in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. H. M. Abrams et al., 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1962), I, 226, ll. 204-09.

⁹Foucault, p. xii.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 22.

¹¹Ibid., p. 32.

. . . in Elizabethan England men understood not only there is a difference between bodily disease and spiritual disharmony, but also that insane behavior, no less than sane, is goal-directed and motivated; or as we might say today, that it is tactical or strategic. In short, Shakespeare and his audiences regarded the behavior of the madman as perfectly rational from the point of view of the actor or the afflicted individual . . . ¹²

From a different perspective, A. Alvarez notes in The Savage God that the affliction of the Elizabethan Age was melancholy, and one reason this disease appealed to the Elizabethan was because it was associated with superior minds.

What "neurosis" and "alienation" once were to us, what "schizophrenia" is to R. D. Laing and his disciples, so "melancholy" was to the Elizabethans: a blanket term which covered every quirky sensibility from the genius to the certifiable lunatic. There were melancholics who thought they were wolves or chamber pots, that they were made of glass or butter or brick, that they had frogs in their bellies. There were also the melancholics who thought they were poets. "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of Imagination all compact": Ferdinand, in The Duchess of Malfi, who suffers from lycanthropy; Hamlet, who feigns madness and contemplates suicide; the melancholy Jaques, who moralizes the fancies himself a poet--they were all in their different ways, melancholics. ¹³

Michel Foucault states in Madness and Civilization that by the seventeenth century madness occupies a neutral position far removed from the tragic heights that were sustained by Cervantes and Shakespeare.

Thus madness is no longer considered in its tragic reality . . . but only in the irony of its

¹²Szasz, p. 123.

¹³Alvarez, pp. 165-66.

illusions. It is not a real punishment, but only the image of punishment, thus a pretense. . . .

Yet this absence of seriousness does not keep madness from being essential--even more essential than it had been, for it brings illusion to its climax, it is from this point that illusion is undone. In the madness in which error has enveloped him, the character involuntarily speaks the truth in spite of himself. . . . To put it another way, madness is the false punishment of a false solution, but by its own virtue it brings to light the real problem, which can be truly resolved. It conceals beneath error the secret enterprise of truth. It is the function of madness, both ambiguous and central, that the author of L'Ospital des fous employs when he portrays a pair of lovers who, to escape their pursuers, pretend to be mad and hide among madmen; in a fit of simulated dementia, the girl, who is dressed as a boy, pretends to believe she is a girl--which she really is--thus uttering, by the reciprocal neutralization of these two pretenses, the truth which in the end will triumph.¹⁴

And in the seventeenth century madness does not hide in the hospitals but is present in the literature and in the streets.

This world of the early seventeenth century is strangely hospitable, in all senses, to madness. Madness is here, at the heart of things and of men, an ironic sign that misplaces the guideposts between the real and the chimerical, barely retaining the memory of the great tragic threats--a life more disturbed than disturbing, an absurd agitation in society, the mobility of reason.¹⁵

By the nineteenth century, with the arrival of the Romantic Age, the madman once again gains heroic stature, but not so much for the insights that madness holds for the possessed as for the suffering and pain that go into the

¹⁴Foucault, pp. 32-33.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 37.

struggle to gain the ultimate vision. In Going Crazy, Otto Friedrich states,

Even among those who knew the suffering of the insane, the madman remained a kind of spiritual hero in the Romantic Age. He was a Promethean figure, a man who had tried to climb too high, to see too much, to grasp the divine secrets. And if he suffered, that was the Promethean destiny, the price he paid for his sensitivity.¹⁶

If the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries chose madness as the subject of literature, the nineteenth century, perhaps because of the sensitivity associated with madness, made insanity a point of view in its literature. Perhaps the earliest example of an insane narrator can be found in Nikolai Gogol's "The Diary of a Madman" (1835), which is the account of a Russian clerk who believes that he is the king of Spain. The story ends with the clerk in an asylum, very confused by the mistreatment he is receiving.

No, I have no strength left. I can't stand any more. My God! What they're doing to me! They pour cold water on my head. They don't listen to me, they don't hear me, they don't see me. What have I done to them? Why do they torture me so? What do they want from me? What can I give them? I haven't anything to give. I have no strength, I cannot bear this suffering, my head is on fire, and everything goes in circles. Save me! Take me away from here! Give me a carriage with horses swift as wind! Drive on,

¹⁶Otto Friedrich, Going Crazy (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1976), p. 70.

coachman, let the harness bells ring! Soar upward, my horses, carry me away from this world . . . ¹⁷

At the same time in America, Edgar Allan Poe was experimenting with several different types of unreliable narrators, including the insane narrator. "Berenice" (1835), "Ligeia" (1838), "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1840), and "The Black Cat" (1842) are stories which illustrate Poe's ability to create psychotic narrators. Although many of Poe's short stories are constructed around the Romantic notion of madness, that the madman's sensitivity is the source of his insights, his short stories also point out, surprisingly, that insanity means mental confusion, irrational argumentation, and hallucinations. The self-possessed narrator in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" claims that his "disease" has sharpened his senses.

True!--nervous--very, very, dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses--not destroyed--not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and the earth. I heard many things in hell. Now, then, am I mad?¹⁸

¹⁷Nikolai Gogol, "The Diary of a Madman," in The Diary of a Madman and Other Stories (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1960), p. 28.

¹⁸Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart," in The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1960), p. 173.

E. Arthur Robinson, in "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" describes the weaknesses of this "sensitive" but mad narrator.

. . . the narrator bases his plea upon the assumption that madness is incompatible with the systematic action, and as evidence of his capacity for the latter he relates how he has executed a horrible crime with rational precision . . . At the same time he discloses a deep psychological confusion. Almost casually he admits lack of normal motivation. . . . Since such processes of reasoning tend to convict the speaker of madness, it does not seem out of keeping that he is driven to confession by "hearing" reverberations of the still-beating heart in the corpse he has dismembered, nor that he appears unaware of the irrationalities in his defense of rationality.¹⁹

By the twentieth century the hypersensitivity of the madman, which was characteristic of Poe's stories and the Romantic Age, disappears, but despite the emphasis on scientific investigation, the madman is still believed to be a special type of person who possessed a special type of knowledge. Even Sigmund Freud, the founder of modern psychology, was convinced that the creative process was a means by which "an obdurate neurotic" avoided insanity.

The artist is originally a man who turns from reality because he cannot come to terms with the demand for the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction as it is first made, and who then in phantasy life allows full play to his erotic and ambitious wishes. But he finds a way to return from the world of phantasy back to reality; with his special gifts, he moulds his phantasies into

¹⁹E. Arthur Robinson, "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" in Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales, ed. William L. Howarth (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 94.

a new kind of reality, and men concede them a justification as valuable reflections of actual life. Thus by a certain path he actually becomes the hero, king, creator, favourite he desired to be, without the circuitous path of creating real alterations in the outer world.²⁰

There is also at least one documented study which confirms the intuitive powers of the madman. In 1972 Professor David Rosehalm of Stanford University performed an experiment to test the consistency and accuracy of different psychologists. He and twelve accomplices entered twelve hospitals complaining of hearing voices (a common "symptom" of schizophrenia) and upon admittance told the doctors the voices had stopped, but nevertheless it took between nineteen and fifty-four days for the men to be discharged. While the doctors had difficulty determining the sanity or insanity of Dr. Rosehalm's "psychotics," each one of his men reported that almost immediately the patients, the diagnosed madmen, sensed that they were frauds.²¹

Although the concept of the madman's genius persists into the twentieth century, especially in literature, by the early seventeenth century the social attitudes toward the madman and madness begin to change. From that time until the present, society has begun to identify the madman with the nonconformist, the criminal, the deviant,

²⁰Sigmund Freud, in Wellek and Warren, p. 82.

²¹Friedrich, p. 37.

and the helpless. In The Manufacture of Madness, Thomas Szasz states that madness, like witchcraft, is a tag which society places on individuals who do not live up to certain prescribed standards of behavior.

In the new--secular and "scientific"--cultural climate, as in any other, there were still the disadvantaged, the disaffected, and the men who thought and criticized too much. Conformity was still demanded. The nonconformist, the objector, in short, all who denied or refused to affirm society's dominant values, were still the enemies of society. To be sure, the proper ordering of this new society was no longer conceptualized in terms of Divine Grace; instead, it was viewed in terms of Public Health. Its internal enemies were thus seen as mad; and Institutional Psychiatry came into being, as had the Inquisition earlier, to protect the group from this threat.²²

Szasz goes on to argue not only that for more than three centuries has madness been associated with sickness, illness, stupidity, and deviance, but also that the madman has become the scapegoat for a sane society, that society at times creates "madness" in order to confirm the goodness of society itself.

The scapegoat is necessary as a symbol of evil which is convenient to cast out of the social order and, which through its very being, confirms the remaining members of the community as good. It makes sense, too, that man--the animal distinguished by his capacity to make symbols, images and rules--should employ such in practice. For the animal predator in the jungle, the rule of life is: kill or be killed. For the human predator in society, the rule is: stigmatize or be stigmatized. Because man's survival depends on his status

²²Szasz, p. 13.

in society, he must maintain himself as an acceptable member of the group. If he fails to do so, if he allows himself to be cast into the role of scapegoat--he will be cast out of the social order, or he will be killed. We have seen the way the rule was enforced in the Middle Ages, in the Age of Faith; and the way it is enforced in the modern world, in the Age of Therapy. Religious classification in the former and psychiatric classification in the latter form the bases for the process of social inclusion (validation) and exclusion (invalidation); for methods of social control (banishment, commitment); and for ideological justification for the destruction of human differences ("sin," "mental illness").^{2,3}

Because this association of "abnormal behavior" and madness was accepted in society, literature of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century reflects this new concept of madness. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Minister's Black Veil," Goodman Gray's response to the black veil which hides Rev. Hooper's face is to consider it a sign of the minister's insanity. The main character in Melville's short story "Bartleby" is thrown into jail at the end of the story because he refuses to do anything. By the end of the story Bartleby merely exists, refusing to eat, to talk, or to move, and for these "crimes" against society, he is imprisoned with criminals and madmen. In "The War Prayer," Mark Twain describes the scene before the young men go off to fight the enemy. During the minister's sermon, an old man sent from God tells the congregation that their prayers for victory over

^{2,3}Szasz, p. 268.

the enemy also is a prayer for the destruction of the enemy; but because the people are more concerned with winning the war than with saving their fellowman, they brand the old man a lunatic and disregard the truth of his message.

In contemporary times the criminal, the homosexual, the con-man, and the madman, that small percentage of individuals which society has branded as "abnormal," have occupied an important place in American fiction. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg state in The Nature of Narrative that science, psychology, comparative religion, and community behavior have made man less noble.

Man is simply a less noble creature, less rational and self-controlled, than he was thought to be until the advent of systematic observations of human behavior. . . . In fact, images of the ugly and the absurd . . . have now come to predominate in much of contemporary esthetic literature. . . . [and] the questioning child of Carroll and Dickens has in the twentieth century become the Negro, the Jew, the homosexual, [the madman,] and other types of what Leslie Fideler calls the "psychologically exploited."²⁴

Thus, the hero in contemporary fiction is the "anti-hero," the man on the fringe of society who is exploited and used for the advantage of the group, and according to Ihab Hassan, it is this point of view which is associated with this hero that gives modern fiction its substance:

²⁴Scholes and Kellogg, p. 153.

In fiction, the unnerving rubric "anti-hero" refers to a ragged assembly of victims: the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal, the poor sod, the freak, the outsider, the scapegoat, the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause, the "hero" in the ashcan and "hero" on the leash. If the anti-hero seems nowadays to hold us in his spell, it is because the deep and disquieting insights revealed to us by modern literature often require that we project ourselves into the predicament of victims.²⁵

Hassan's observation about the "insight" of the man who is victimized by society suggests the paradox of the insane point of view in contemporary fiction: the insane narrator is a combination of two opposite but prevailing attitudes about madness--the madman as genius and the madman as scapegoat. An observation which Frederick Exley makes about his own life in A Fan's Notes will clarify this paradox.

For my heart . . . will always be with the drunk, the poet, the prophet, the criminal, the painter, the lunatic, with all whose aims are insulted from the humdrum business of life. . . . Be happy and tell my sons that I was a drunk, a dreamer, a weakling, and a madman, anything but that I did not love them.

(pp. 361-62)

Exley's statement presents the paradox of the madman in contemporary fiction: the madman is associated with the imagination, inspiration, and insight of the artist; and on the other hand, the madman, like the criminal, the drunk, and the weakling, has been branded as a social out-cast and a scapegoat for a self-righteous society. By

²⁵Hassan, p. 21.

looking at how each viewpoint is developed in A Fan's Notes, it can be demonstrated that Exley's madness enhances the reliability of the narrative.

Looking first at the notion of the madman as victim, as an alcoholic, as a mental patient, as a divorcé, and as a man incapable of holding a job, Exley is a man of questionable character. Further, his tendency for fantasy and make-believe, his refusal to accept reality, at least from society's perspective, make Exley's narrative unacceptable and unreliable; but Exley seems to understand the doubt that his point of view creates when he reflects on the causes for his second stay at Avalon Valley.

I had been in a hospital before--a private one, to be sure--and had come to understand that there was in the treatment of patients (I had come to call them inmates) certain overtones of punishment, some subtle, some not so subtle. We had failed our families by our inability to function properly in society (as good a definition of insanity as any); our families, tears compounded by self-pity in their eyes, had pleaded with the doctors to give us goals that would set our legs in motion again.

(p. 75)

Exley is not concerned with the facts of his story any more than he is concerned with the "acceptability" of his character. In fact, Exley, as the author of the novel, asks to be judged a writer of fantasy, and the subtitle of the novel is "A Fictional Memoir." Exley, the narrator, while commenting on the death of Mr. Blue, a man who comes to symbolize for Exley "the perennial

mock-epic hero of his country, the salesman" (p. 296), states that the novel bears little resemblance to the facts of Exley's life. "And though Mr. Blue's way of death was fitting, I never tell anybody the way it really happened; anymore than in a hundred places in these pages I have told what 'really' happened" (p. 296).

A Fan's Notes pretends to be realistic, pretends to be the factual autobiography of Frederick Exley, but the novel and the reliability of the narrator can only be understood in terms of the Romantic notion of the mad-man as genius. René Wellek and Austin Warren in Theory of Literature state, "The romance . . . may neglect verisimilitude of detail . . . addressing itself to a higher reality, a deeper psychology."²⁶ Just as Hawthorne, who defined the nature of romance in the Preface to The House of the Seven Gables, used the past as a mode for avoiding "actuality," at the same time addressing himself to "the truths of the human heart," the modern writer creates romance by using an insane point of view which offers insight at the expense of fact. If, as Raymond Olderman suggests in Beyond the Wasteland, the new Romantic novel of the sixties "may not be just capturing the truths of the human heart, it may be describing the texture of life,"²⁷ then the behavior, the fantasies, the insights,

²⁶Wellek and Warren, p. 216. ²⁷Olderman, p. 6.

and the point of view of the madman, who lives at the edge of society and reality, create a sense of life more vital and meaningful than the factual reality of the sane member of society. Thus, the paradox of Exley's mad point of view, his insight into society, and his alienation from society, give the novel its ring of authenticity and its reliability, which go beyond the superficiality of fact to a vision of failure, which, although tragic and depressing, is for Exley and many others the only reality that American life offers.

CHAPTER V

ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST: AUTHORITY AND THE STRUCTURAL PURPOSE OF THE INSANE POINT OF VIEW

Tony Tanner states in City of Words "that for anyone interested in trying to appreciate what was going on in both American literature and society in the late sixties, Ken Kesey is a figure who has to be understood and, it seems to me, respected."¹ Kesey's first and most popular novel, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962), not only is an important commentary on the sixties but is also the first contemporary American novel that uses an insane narrator, for until this time, for almost one hundred and twenty years, the insane narrator had been the invention and sole property of Edgar Allan Poe and his critics. A review of the similarities between one of Poe's narrators, the unidentified first person narrator of "The Black Cat" and Kesey's Chief Bromden, the schizophrenic first person narrator of Cuckoo's Nest, and the critical response to both works will demonstrate the confusion and misunderstanding that the insane point of view creates in contemporary literature, a confusion

¹Tanner, p. 392.

caused by critics' insistence on viewing the insane point of view as a thematic element rather than a structural element in the work.

In "The Black Cat," Poe's narrator reconstructs "a series of household events"² which have "terrified--have tortured--have destroyed" (p. 103) the narrator, and although these events are "nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects" (p. 103), they have driven the narrator to murder his wife and hideously dismember her body. Told from his cell on death row--"But to-morrow I die" (p. 103)--interlaced with urgent and penitential overtones, his story becomes a defense for his actions and a final confession of guilt before he is executed. In Kesey's novel, Bromden, like Poe's narrator, is a prisoner, not held in jail, but confined to a mental institution which Bromden first describes.

They're out there.

Black boys in white suits up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped up before I can catch them.

They're mopping when I come out the dorm, all three of them sulky and hating everything, the time of day, the place they're at there, the people they got to work around. When they hate like this, better if they don't see me. I creep along the wall quiet as dust in my canvas shoes, but they got special sensitive equipment detects my fear and they all

²Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," in The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales, p. 103. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

look up, all three at once, eyes glittering out of the black faces like the hard glitter of radio tubes out of the back of an old radio.³

Pretending to be deaf and dumb has allowed Bromden to live his "dirty life" (p. 15), but while Poe's narrator sees himself as a victim of circumstances, Bromden sees himself, at the least, as a victim who has survived the Big Nurse and her bag: ". . . Full of a thousand parts she aims to use in her duties today--wheels, and gears, cogs polished to hard glitter, tiny pills that gleam like porcelain, forceps, watchmakers' pliers, rolls of copper wire . . ." (p. 4), and the black orderlies, "humming hate and death and other hospital secrets" (p. 3). For Bromden, the urgency to relate his tale is brought about not by a fear of death but rather by the realization that he has failed once again to escape or that he may never be able to escape again from the Big Nurse and her orderlies.

The least black boy and one of the bigger ones catch me before I get ten steps out of the mop closet, and drag me back to the shaving room. I don't fight or make any noise. If you yell it's tougher on you. I hold back the yelling. I hold back till they get to my temples. I'm not sure it's one of those substitute machines and not a shaver till it gets to my temples; then I can't hold back. It's not a will-power thing any more when they get to my temples. It's a . . . button, pushed, says

³Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Text and Criticism, ed. John C. Pratt (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1973), p. 3. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

Air Raid Air Raid, turns me on so loud it's like no sound, everybody yelling at me hands over their ears from behind a glass wall, faces working around in talk circles but no sound from the mouths. My sound soaks up all the other sound. They start the fog machines again and it's snowing down cold and white all over me like skim milk, so thick I might even be able to hide in it if they didn't have a hold on me. I can't see six inches in front of me through the fog and the only thing I can hear over the wail I'm making is the Big Nurse whoop and charge up the hall while she crashes patients outta her way with that wicker bag. I hear her coming but I still can't hush my hollering. I holler till she gets there. They hold me down while she jams wicker bag and all into my mouth and shoves it down with a mop handle.

. . . It's gonna burn me that way, finally telling about all this, about the hospital, and her, and the guys--and about McMurphy. I have been silent so long now it's gonna roar out of me like floodwaters and you think the guy telling this is ranting and raving my God! you think this is too horrible to have really happened, this is too awful to be the truth! But please, it's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen.

(pp. 7-8)

One of the most important similarities between the two narrators is that almost immediately both narrators betray their unreliable perspective. In "'The Black Cat': Perverseness Reconsidered," James W. Gargano suggests that although the narrator's actions can be explained by normal cause and effect, the whole purpose of his narrative is to circumvent any moral obligations for the murder of his wife by seeing himself as a victim of perverseness.

Next to his own statement that he is a victim of the imp of the perverse, we must place the evidence of a gradual enfeebling of the moral nature under

the impact of increasing self-indulgences. Finally, his frenetic deeds and rationalizations have all the appearance of a blind attempt to escape from ineluctable moral consequences whose authority he unconsciously admits by contemptuous degradations of them. He resembles William Wilson in his schizophrenia, but he is more subtly intellectual than Wilson fabricating an ingenious dialectic to explain his moral aberrations.⁴

Bromden's reliability is not destroyed so much by his attempt to defend his madness as it is by the objectivity his madness creates. For in his attempt to relate events "too awful to be the truth" (p. 8), he also betrays his madness since he cannot distinguish reality from his fabricated unrealities. In John Pratt's introduction to the Viking edition of Cuckoo's Nest, he states, "For the Chief, reality is being transformed at every moment. While the fog swirls or the lights glare, he cannot glimpse the real outlines of his world, but the reader can" (p. xi).

A final point to be made about the similarities between the narrator of each work, which explains why, especially in the case of Kesey's narrator, the unreliability of the narrator seems to be disregarded, is that the endings of both works detract from the unreliable nature of their narrators. "The Black Cat" is very much like another Poe story, "The Tell-Tale

⁴James W. Gargano, "'The Black Cat': Perverseness Reconsidered," in Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales, p. 88.

Heart," because both short stories end on a shocking note of horror. The narrator of "The Black Cat" would have the reader believe that his perversity, his obsession with killing the double of his first cat, Pluto, has led him to murder his wife, but the narrative comes to an abrupt and chilling climax because of an oversight by the narrator. In his haste to bury his wife and conceal his crime, he also has buried the cat which had so long been his nemesis.

Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak, swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party on the stairs remained motionless, through extremity of terror and awe. In the next a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb.

(p. 112)

Since Poe's most important objective was creating an effect, ". . . the psychological impact a story makes upon its reader,"⁵ the bizarre and unexpected ending takes the attention from the narrator and draws attention to the final, climactic event which incriminates the narrator. Although Kesey's novel has a very different ending, its effect draws the reader's attention in the

⁵William L. Howarth, "Introduction," Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales, p. 10.

same way. In the final scene of the novel, after McMurphy has been lobotomized, Bromden suffocates McMurphy, lifts the control panel, smashes it through the window, and escapes into the vast obscurity of the night. Terry Sherwood suggests that the Chief's story is a manifestation of his madness since the story is told from an asylum after the fact, but even though he adds that "Perhaps the only escape from modern life is the tenuousness of hallucination," he believes that Bromden's escape from the asylum is ". . . euphoric. . . . [and] the book's beginning is too easily forgotten and we are pushed along by Bromden's optimism. We are to hope, not despair, and, more importantly, not define the line between."⁶

Despite the similarities in narrators, and keeping in mind the nature of the ending of each story, critical response to the first-person narrative techniques used by each author has been, unbelievably, totally different. Poe's critics seem to be much more aware of the narrative techniques of their writer than Kesey's critics. In Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales, William L. Howarth makes three general observations about Poe's unreliable, oftentimes insane, narrators. Unlike Kesey's

⁶Terry Sherwood, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and the Comic Strip," Critique, 13 (Spring 1971), 109.

critics, Poe's critics have discussed and raised questions about Poe's narrative techniques and Poe's conscious awareness of these devices.

Though disapproving of Poe's characters, many critics have commented favorably on his handling of narrators. The fact that most of the tales are told in retrospect by a first-person voice raises certain questions. Does the pronoun "I" indicate that Poe is narrating, or is the "I" an imaginary character? Narrating in retrospect, he knows the end of the tale as he begins it; how can he create suspense without fraud? And if what he tells is only what he has seen and understood, why should we accept it as reliable, especially if he gives any evidence of being mad? Poe recognizes these difficulties but delights in not resolving them.⁷

A second observation Howarth makes is that because the unreliable narrator is the only source of information, the reader must accept the point of view of the story even if he questions the truth of the story.⁸ Finally, drawing on the criticism of E. Arthur Robinson and James Gargano, Howarth suggests that "moral simplicity" is the key to understanding Poe's insane narrators: ". . . moral simplicity in the narrators may reflect their mental instability. . . . When a Poe narrator speaks too constantly in his own defense, when he ignores evidence that might contradict him, then we should mark him down for cautious observation."⁹

⁷Howarth, p. 13.

⁸Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁹Ibid., p. 16.

Each of Howarth's points, which could be applied to any insane or unreliable narrator, is ignored for the most part by Kesey's critics. Howarth notes that critics have taken an interest in Poe's narrative techniques, but few of Kesey's critics consider the point of view of the novel when discussing the structure of the novel. Irving Malin has stated that the novel "keeps us in balance by revealing our madness,"¹⁰ and Joseph Waldmeir has remarked that the novel takes the reader "to the realm of the absurd,"¹¹ but while both critics are aware of the madness presented in the novel, neither discusses or realizes that the absurdity of the novel, the madness of the novel, is created by the insanity of the narrator who presents everything to the reader through the narrator's own schizophrenic eye. Howarth observes that the reader may challenge the content of the unreliable narrator's story but not his point of view, but even though some critics are aware of Bromden's influence on the story, they lose sight of the fact when they analyze the story. Terry Sherwood falls into the dilemma when he argues, "We are left with a somewhat sentimentalized oversimplification of moral problems.

¹⁰Irving Malin, "Ken Kesey: One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," Critique, 5 (Fall 1962), 84.

¹¹Joseph J. Waldmeir, "Two Novelists of the Absurd: Heller and Kesey," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, 5 (Autumn 1964), 192.

Admittedly, Kesey's opposition of Good and Evil is less bald and the victory of Good less clear than might seem."¹² The moral problems, for that matter the moral world described, is Bromden's, not Kesey's. Sherwood might have corrected this error by considering that the "moral simplicity" of Bromden's view only reinforces the unreliability of the narrator's mad point of view, for if McMurphy is too "good" and Miss Ratched too "evil," it is not Kesey, but Bromden who has created this simplistic world view. Finally, Howarth suggests that the madness of the narrator may be identified by his simplicity, but too many of Kesey's critics go one step further and attempt to relate the theme of the novel with Bromden's madness. Leslie A. Fiedler considers Bromden's madness and the relationship which McMurphy and the Chief develop during the course of the novel as an indication that madness has become the last uncharted frontier of the American hero.

. . . But One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest survives the experiments and rejections which followed it; and looking back five years after its initial appearance, it seems clear that in it for the first time the New West was clearly defined: the West of Here and Now, rather than There and Then--the West of Madness . . .

It is only a step from thinking of the West as madness to regarding madness as the true West, but it took the long years between the end of the fifteenth century and the middle of the twentieth

¹² Sherwood, p. 108.

to learn to take that step. There is scarcely a New Western among those that I have discussed which does not in some way flirt with the notion of madness as essential to the New World; but only Leonard Cohen (though Thomas Berger comes close) and in Kesey is the final identification made, and in Kesey at last combined with the archetype of the love that binds the lonely white man to his Indian comrade--to his mad Indian comrade, perhaps even to the madness of his Indian comrade, as Kesey amends the old tale.

We have come to accept the notion that there is still a territory unconquered and uninhabited by palefaces, the bearers of "civilization," the cadres of imperialist reason; and we have been learning that into this territory certain psychotics, a handful of "schizophrenics," have moved on ahead of the rest of us--unrecognized Natty Bumppos or Huck Finns, interested not in claiming the New World for any Old God, King, or Country, but in becoming New Men, members of just such a New Race as D. H. Lawrence foresaw.¹³

The contrast between the critics of Poe who view the unreliable insane narrator as a structural device and Kesey's critics who seem to lose sight of the point of view of the novel or see this point of view as a theme of the novel illustrates the problem with understanding the purpose of the insane narrator in contemporary fiction. Stated specifically, the problem is this: although any novel that deals with the insanity of the individual or even the meaninglessness of society, which oftentimes is best described in terms of irrational behavior and madness, may make a value judgment about the nature of madness in relation to the individual, his life, or the

¹³Leslie Fiedler, The Return of the Vanishing American (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), pp. 184-85.

society he lives in, the insane narrator is primarily a structural device which allows the writer to gain some control over his subject and at the same time describe the reality of life by creating a radically different perspective.

Control and perspective are the key concepts for understanding the purpose of the insane narrator, and Ken Kesey was aware of both when he wrote Cuckoo's Nest. The point of view of the novel was a preoccupation with Kesey. In a letter written to Ken Babbs during the early stages of the novel, Kesey elaborates on the purpose and the nature of his narrator.

I'll discuss point of view for a time now. I am beginning to agree with Stegner, that it truly is the most important problem in writing. The book I have been doing on the lane is a third person work, but something was lacking; I was not free to impose my perceptions and bizarre eye on the god-author who is supposed to be viewing the scene, so I tried something that will be extremely difficult to pull off, and, to my knowledge, has never been tried before--the narrator is going to be a character. He will not take part in the action, or even speak as I, but he will be a character to be influenced by the events that take place, he will have a position and personality, and a character that is not essentially mine (though it may, by chance, be). . . .

I am swinging around to an idea that I rejected to at first; that the novelist to be at least true and free must be a diarist. Have you read Trocchi's work for Evergreen, Cain's Book? Some of the best prose going. Almost as good as Naked Lunch. Both have power and honesty, but lack something I plan to try to add--control.

(p. 339)

In the introduction to the Viking edition of Kesey's novel, John Pratt describes the nature of Chief Bromden and contrasts him with a number of other first person narrators in American fiction.

Where Kesey differs from those others who told stories in the first person is his use of a narrator whose own values are not only to be questioned but are often patently unreal. Unlike Melville's Ishmael, Hawthorne's Miles Coverdale, or Huckleberry Finn, Kesey's Chief Bromden is obviously deforming the events that figure in the early part of his narrative. That fact distinguishes him too from Faulkner's Benjy in the first part of The Sound and the Fury, for Benjy sees exactly what happens, even though he doesn't connect one event with another. Chief Bromden makes connections, but sees everything through a distorted haze. The fact that he is insane produces the same state of mind in him that Kesey attempted to produce in himself while writing the novel, a state in which there are no preconceptions.

(pp. x-xi)

Pratt implies that the simplicity of Bromden's view ("What the Chief does see is a basic struggle for survival, with McMurphy as the 'good guy' on his side") and the fact that the Chief sees but does not comprehend the complexity of his vision, in the same way that a naïve Huckleberry Finn presents a cynical view of the Mississippi River society even though he may not be able to articulate this criticism,¹⁴ cause Cuckoo's Nest to admit and substantiate almost any interpretation (p. xiii). Therefore to "plumb the consciousness" of Kesey, to get

¹⁴Scholes and Kellogg, pp. 263-64.

beyond the criticism, much of which confuses the issue, to understand the nature of Kesey's perspective and intent, whatever the subject of the novel, is a difficult task. However, it may best be accomplished by stating Kesey's intention and showing how his idea fits into the mainstream of contemporary fiction by looking at Marshall McLuhan's observations about the artist's role in society and then seeing how Kesey develops this perspective in his novel.

To use Kesey's own words, he takes the readers of Cuckoo's Nest to "Edge City,"¹⁵ that is, to an almost unbelievable and to a certain degree unliveable position, which can be sustained in words, which offers a multi-perspective view of life, where not one but all points of view have significance. Thomas Wolfe, who wrote The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, a book about Kesey, and who may be responsible for drawing attention to Cuckoo's Nest, calls this ability to "reach for connections between . . . vastly different orders of experience" synchronicity (p. viii). In City of Words, Tony Tanner amplifies Wolfe's idea:

. . . the point about Edge City is that it is a place, a state of consciousness, an experience, in which one may learn something new about the relationship of individual identity to the flow the

¹⁵Tom Wolfe, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), p. 41.

longing to escape the rigid structures of society which block out reality--and from which one can return, perhaps to tell the tale, perhaps to have the tale told, as Wolfe tells us about Kesey.

Kesey believes that our concept of reality is changing and that a new generation is coming along which will take up different attitudes to life, adopt different priorities and values. . . . by aiming to live at the edge he identifies himself as one of those who hope to see more things, and see them first.¹⁶

Kesey's efforts to understand a rapidly-changing reality and to recreate a new perspective for seeing reality are the intent and purpose of all great art, according to Marshall McLuhan. In Through the Vanishing Point, co-authored by Harley Parker, McLuhan argues that the artist creates "anti-environments" that allow men to understand and become aware of an environment that is invisible to them because of its familiarity.

Comparison and contrast have always been a means of sharpening perception in the arts as well as in general experience. Indeed, it is upon this pattern that all the structures of art have been reared. Any artistic endeavor includes the preparing of an environment for human attention. A poem or painting is in every sense a teaching machine for the training of perception and judgement. The artist is a person who is especially aware of the challenge and dangers of new environments presented to human sensibility. Whereas the ordinary person seeks the security by numbing his perceptions against the impact of new experience, the artist delights in the novelty and instinctively creates situations that both reveal and compensate for it. The artist studies the distortion of sensory life produced by new environmental programming and tends to create artistic situations that correct the sensory bias and derangement brought about by the

¹⁶Tanner, p. 393.

new form. In social terms the artist can be regarded as a navigator who gives adequate compass bearings in spite of magnetic deflection of the needle by the changing play of forces. So understood, the artist is not a peddler of ideals or lofty experiences. He is rather the indispensable aid to action and reflection.¹⁷

So in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Kesey, through the eyes of a schizophrenic Indian, offers the reader a world, where "we suspect with horror that we are seeing very possibly . . . our highway of ordinary travel, fantastic as it may seem,"¹⁸ and a world within a world where Bromden's madness allows the reader to see a multitude of perspectives which mix, blend, and shade to give the reader a new awareness of his all-too-familiar world.

In the first section of the novel the most obvious contrast, really a confrontation which will continue for the entire novel, is between McMurphy who "speaks an older American language of freedom, unhindered movement, self-reliance, anarchic humor and a trust in the more animal instincts,"¹⁹ and the Big Nurse who "speaks for the fixed pattern, the unbreakable routine, the submission of individual will to the mechanical, humorless control."²⁰ However, there are a number of subtler relationships that are developed.

¹⁷Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker, Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 238.

¹⁸Olderman, p. 49. ¹⁹Tanner, p. 373. ²⁰Ibid.

The first, and perhaps the most important, is McMurphy's role as an OUTSIDER, which perhaps unconsciously forces the Chief to recall the past--"He talks a little the way Papa used to, voice loud and full of hell, but he doesn't fool like Papa; Papa was a full-blood Columbia Indian--a chief" (p. 11)--and to focus on the present: "I know he's no ordinary Admission. I don't hear him slide scared along the wall" (p. 10). If anything sets McMurphy apart from the patients, it is his robust laugh.

He stands there waiting, and when nobody makes a move he commences to laugh. Nobody can tell exactly why he laughs; there's nothing funny going on. But it's not the way that Public Relation laughs, it's free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and spreads in rings bigger and bigger until it's lapping against the walls all over the ward. Not like that fat Public Relation laugh. This sounds real. I realize all of a sudden it's the first laugh I've heard in years.

(p. 11)

As an outsider, McMurphy does not understand the psychology of being a patient--"nobody ever dares let loose and laugh, the whole staff'd be in with notebooks and a lot of questions" (p. 14). The charisma of McMurphy, for Chief Bromden, is the prospect that life can be lived differently than on the ward, perhaps as the Chief had once known it on the reservation with his father.

Almost immediately McMurphy's actions are challenged by Harding, "the president of the Patient's

Council." The contrast between McMurphy's point of view as an outsider and Harding's point of view as an insider who has accepted the condition of the ward is suggested through the physical description of their hands and made explicit in their debate over the merits of the therapeutic sessions. McMurphy is a man of the world whose activity is revealed in the texture of his hands:

. . . there was carbon under the fingernails where he's worked once in a garage; there was an anchor tattooed back from the knuckles; there was a dirty Band-Aid on the middle knuckle, peeling up at the edge. All the rest of the knuckles were covered with scars and cuts, old and new. . . . the palm was callused, and the calluses were cracked, and dirt was worked in the cracks. A road map of his travels up and down the West.

(p. 23)

However, Bromden's description of Harding's hands suggests a man of sensitivity, but a man whose sensitivity has forced him to watch life, and in some instances recoil from life. "He's got hands so long and white and dainty I think they were carved each out of soap, and sometimes they get loose and glide around in front of him free as two white birds until he notices them and traps them between his knees; it bothers him that he's got pretty hands" (p. 19). The contrast in the lifestyles symbolized in the description of each character's hands comes to the surface in a heated exchange over the therapeutic value of the group sessions. As a newcomer, McMurphy sees the group sessions for what they are, a "peckin'

party" where the patients pull and tear at each other's already weakened self-images, like a flock of chickens that "gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they'll go to peckin' at it, see till they rip some chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers" (p. 55).

Harding's first response to this accusation is to call McMurphy "an illiterate clod, . . . a backwoods braggart with no more sensitivity than a goose" (p. 56). Finding this tack ineffective, Harding pursues another and identifies the Big Nurse as "a veritable angel of mercy . . . She's unselfish as the wind, toiling thankless for the good of all" (p. 59). Finally, he withdraws to a position where he reveals his point of view about life on the ward:

"This world . . . belongs to the strong my friend! The ritual of our existence is based on the strong getting stronger by devouring the weak. We must learn to accept it as a law of the natural world. The rabbits accept their role in the ritual and recognize the wolf as the strong. In defense, the rabbit becomes sly and frightened and elusive and he digs holes and hides when the wolf is about. And he endures, he goes on. . . .

"Mr. McMurphy . . . my friend . . . I'm not a chicken, I'm a rabbit. The doctor is a rabbit. Cheswick there is a rabbit. Billy Bibbit is a rabbit. All of us in here are rabbits of varying ages and degrees, hippity-hopping through our Walt Disney world. Oh, don't misunderstand me, we're not in here because we are rabbits--we'd be rabbits wherever we were--we're all in here because we can't adjust to our rabbithood. We need a good strong wolf like the nurse to teach us our place."

(p. 62)

Rationalism allows Harding a way of justifying his inability to act but it does not diminish his sensitivity, since he sees one relation between the Big Nurse and the patients, between the strong wolf and the weak rabbits, which the other patients sense but cannot articulate. MrMurphy, with his alien point of view, built on personal confidence and experience in the world, forces Bromden and Harding and all the patients to examine their preconceptions about life on the ward. What is important to note is that he does this unintentionally, for as an outsider he sees the ward from a different perspective, and his point of view clashes with the narrow perspective of Bromden's insanity and Harding's rationalism. The clash leads McMurphy to bet that he can get the Big Nurse's goat and to prove that the invincible nurse is vulnerable.

Learning that the Big Nurse is powerless to do anything to a patient unless he ends up "cussing her out or busting a window or something like that" (p. 70), and incensed by the chicken attitude of the patients, McMurphy bets the men five dollars a man that he can get the best of the Big Nurse in a week's time. The patients think they have found a sucker because they know, from their own experience, that the rules and the Big Nurse, who

enforces them, are unconquerable, a fact that only further emphasizes their weakness. Harding sums it up:

"Those are the rules we play by. Of course, she always wins, my friend, always. She's impregnable herself, and with the element of time working for her she eventually gets inside everyone. That's why the hospital regards her as its top nurse and grants her so much authority; she's a master at forcing the trembling libido out into the open--"

(p. 70)

Much to the dismay of the unbelieving patients, McMurphy wins the bet. Getting up at 6:30 in the morning, wearing his cap and a towel which conceals a pair of "gaudy underpants," he goes to the latrine to brush his teeth, but the black orderly tells him the toothpaste is locked up--ward policy, so Mac brushes his teeth with soap powder. By the time the Big Nurse gets to McMurphy, she is upset because he is not wearing the green hospital gown. When the orderly finally brings one, Mac plays his ace card.

. . . McMurphy just acts confused, like he don't know how to take the outfit the black boy's handing to him, what with one hand holding the toothbrush and the other hand holding up the towel. He finally winks at the nurse and shrugs and unwraps the towel, drapes it over her shoulder like she was a wooden rack . . .

I think for a fact that she'd rather he'd been stark naked under that towel than had on those shorts . . . That's more'n she can take. It's a full minute before she can pull herself together enough to turn to the least black boy; her voice is shaking out of control, she's so mad.

(p. 96)

Immediately, McMurphy becomes the hero of the patients, but Tony Tanner suggests in City of Words that his "power," unlike the real weakness of the patients, is an illusion.

In the contemporary world . . . to be a hero you have to act a hero . . . McMurphy has had to base his act on the only models he has encountered, in cartoons and movies. He is, if you like, a fake, a put-together character with all the seams showing. But, the book suggests, such fakery is absolutely necessary, unless you want to succumb to authentic weakness and the mindless routine supervised by the Big Nurse. It is McMurphy's fakery and fantasy which leads others out into reality.²¹

McMurphy's power may be an illusion, but as a gambler and a flim-flam man, he has an understanding of human nature which allows him to take high percentage risks and come out a winner. He makes this very clear to the men whom he has "suckered" into betting that he can't get the Big Nurse's goat.

" . . . There ain't nothing noble or complicated about it. I like to gamble. And I like to win. And I think I can win this gamble, okay? It got so at Pendleton the guys wouldn't even lag pennies with me on account of I was such a winner. Why, one of the big reasons I got myself sent here was because I needed some new suckers. I'll tell you something; I found out a few things about this place before I came out here. Damn near half of you guys in here pull compensation, three, four hundred a month and not a thing in the world to do with it but let it draw dust. . . .

"Another thing: I'm in this place because it's a better place than a work farm."

(pp. 71-72)

²¹Tanner, p. 394.

What is more beneficial to McMurphy is his understanding of the mechanics of breaking, twisting, ignoring, and even in some cases, using rules to achieve his own personal ends. He knows that rules are necessary for life, but he also knows that rules are arbitrary creations and expedients only when people are willing to acknowledge their usefulness. When the patients make the rules for the bet, he knows that the patients will abide by the rules to make some easy money just as McMurphy will follow these rules, knowing all the time that he can operate within their restrictions, because he will make some money at the patients' expense.

The patients, from their perspective of weakness, see the rules as impregnable barriers which make emphatic the abnormality of each patient; however, McMurphy begins to show the patients alternatives to their limited view. The most obvious is the one which allows him to win the bet--ignore the rules. As an outsider, a "new admissions," McMurphy can pretend not to be familiar with the rules, and although this is a distinct advantage over the patients, who must acknowledge the rules, they soon catch on to his plot. When they boycott their afternoon chores to watch a blank TV set because the Big Nurse has refused to let them watch the World Series, the act is insubordination but it is difficult to punish

the men for acting like "crazy" people since they are in an asylum.

And we're all sitting there lined up in front of that blanked-out TV set, watching the gray screen, just like we could see the baseball game clear as day, and she's ranting and screaming behind us.

If somebody'd of come in and took a look, men watching a blank TV, a fifty-year-old woman hollering and squealing at the back of their heads about discipline and order and recriminations, they'd thought the whole bunch was crazy as loons.

(p. 138)

The first section of the novel ends with this act of insubordination, but from the Chief's perspective, McMurphy is deliberately jeopardizing the patients' lives.

Nobody complains about all the fog. I know why now: as bad as it is, you can slip back in it and feel safe. That's what McMurphy can't understand, us wanting to be safe. He keeps trying to drag us out of the fog, out in the open where we'd be easy to get at.

(p. 123)

There is nothing deliberate about McMurphy's action with respect to the patients; like the Big Nurse, he is too "big" to ignore, but at the same time, he is too new to be trusted or understood. Mack's flamboyant style and his unpredictable shenanigans are a constant reminder to the patients that it just might be possible to live, and when the patients join in with Mack to protest against the Big Nurse, there is a hint that the men are beginning to understand Mack's ways and, more importantly, to see life from a different perspective.

McMurphy's victory is short lived and demonstrates that he has underestimated the cunning of the Big Nurse, for she knows that McMurphy is committed, and sooner or later he will have to realize that "the length of time he spends in the hospital is entirely up" (p. 150) to the staff and depends very much on his proper behavior. The Big Nurse makes it clear that there is nothing special about McMurphy.

"No. He isn't extraordinary. He is simply a man and no more, and is subject to all the fears and all the cowardice and all the timidity that any other man is subject to. Given a few more days, I have a very strong feeling that he will prove this, to us as well as the rest of the patients. . . . our red-headed hero will cut himself down to something the patients will all recognize and lose respect for: a braggart and a blowhard of the type who may climb up on a soapbox and shout for a following, the way we've seen Mr. Cheswick do, then back down the moment there is any real danger personally."
(p. 149)

The contrast between McMurphy's and Cheswick's behavior in the second section of the novel illustrates the dramatic shift in perspective the novel takes when McMurphy discovers that he is committed.

McMurphy's brazen attitude begins to rub off on the patients and at one of the meetings Cheswick demands that the cigarettes which the nurse confiscated be returned to the men. McMurphy is quick to pick up on this notion and defend Cheswick's point, and together they antagonize the Big Nurse for the remainder of the meeting. Before

the next meeting, McMurphy learns from the lifeguard that he is committed, and at the next group session Mack becomes passive, docile, almost invisible.

And that afternoon in the meeting when Cheswick said that everybody'd agreed that there should be some kind of showdown on the cigarette situation, saying, "I ain't no little kid to have cigarettes kept from me like cookies! We want something done about it, ain't that right Mack?" and waited for McMurphy to back him up all he got was silence.

He looked over at McMurphy's corner. Everybody did. McMurphy was there, studying the deck of cards that slid in and out of sight in his hands. He didn't even look up. It was awfully quiet; there was just that slap of greasy cards and Cheswick's heavy breathing.

"I want something done!" Cheswick suddenly yelled again. "I ain't no little kid!" He stamped his foot and looked around him like he was lost and might break out crying any minute.

(pp. 163-64)

When one by one the patients avoid eye contact with Cheswick, including McMurphy, Cheswick begins to panic and as he is screaming at the nurse that he is not a little boy, two orderlies throw a strap around him and carry him off. The Chief knows McMurphy is doing the smart thing, the thing all the patients and the Chief do to survive, "But me, I know why. I heard him talk to the lifeguard. He's finally getting cagey, is all.

. . . I told myself it was the smart thing to do. . . . It's safe. Like hiding. It's the smart thing to do, nobody could say any different" (p. 165). Even Cheswick apologizes to McMurphy for putting him on the spot because he did not know that Mack was committed. On the

same day that he apologizes to McMurphy, because he lacks the brashness and bravado of McMurphy or the self-confidence to live, Cheswick drowns himself in the pool.

In Kesey's theology, the man of single vision, the one-dimensional man like Harding who sees life through his rationalistic perspective or the chief who sees life only through the filter of madness, is a man of weakness. In this one respect, McMurphy is no different from the patients because he sees the ward only from the point of view of a strong-willed individual who always controls the situation. If McMurphy sins, it is when he chooses to give up his point of view and conform to the rules and regulations of the Big Nurse so that he can get himself uncommitted and out of the asylum. The paradox and irony of Mack's decision are that he gives up his strength, real or imaginary, which he can maintain as long as he pretends to be ignorant of the rules, by capitulating to the demands of the Big Nurse, thereby admitting his weakness and her strength in this situation. Although he would not like to identify himself as a "patient," when he discovers that all the patients, with the exception of a few, are voluntary, that the patients choose to live on the ward because it is easier than living in the world, McMurphy realizes that he is no different from the patients--both are operating from a position of weakness. At the same

time, McMurphy's choice becomes a strength because it forces him to see the patients, the Big Nurse, and himself from a different point of view. As Cheswick begins to act like McMurphy, standing up for what he believes and defying the Big Nurse, Cheswick becomes a loud, rather pathetic individual, who is ostracized by the group; but that is exactly what happened to McMurphy when he first arrived. The whole purpose of the bet is to establish McMurphy's credibility, and the fact that Mack succeeds while Cheswick fails indicates the real nature of the patient's character. When Cheswick goes round from man to man begging for support, and finds nothing but blank faces that avoid eye contact, it is no different than when Mack first attempts to get votes to watch the World Series.

. . . What does surprise him is how the Acutes act when he asks them what they think of the idea. Nobody says a thing. They're all sunk out of sight in little pockets of fog. I can barely see them.

"Now look here," he tells them, but they don't look. He's been waiting for somebody to say something, answer his questions. Nobody acts like they've heard it.

(p. 114)

Indirectly, as a consequence of McMurphy's choice not to act, McMurphy becomes responsible for Cheswick's death, but he does not see this until Harding tells him that all the patients are voluntary. At this point in the novel, McMurphy understands his position for the

first time because he discovers and accepts the possibility of two points of view, the "synchronicity" of his position. More importantly, two points of view offer alternatives which must be accepted or rejected; he can either continue to be like the patients, giving in to the demands of the Big Nurse, existing, with a slim chance of one day getting out of the ward, most likely ending up like Billy Bibbit or Cheswick or Bromden, or he can be his old self, laughing, cutting up, raising hell, perhaps teaching the patients what life is all about, knowing that he will never get out of the ward. As the second section comes to an end, McMurphy becomes his old self: "he was the logger again, the swaggering gambler, the big redheaded brawling Irishman, the cowboy out of the TV set walking down the middle of the street to meet a dare" (p. 189). With his new understanding, McMurphy for the first time sets out to help the patients, to save them from the very thing that for him is inescapable.

It has been suggested that the novel is an attempt to define and isolate particular, often very different, points of view, to demonstrate that the man of single vision (Harding, Bromden, or McMurphy in the second section) is the man of weakness, and that to live one must see life from several different points of view. At

the end of the second section, because McMurphy understands the nature of the patients' weakness--that they chose to be weak because it was safe while he chose to be weak because it was the only way to get out, because McMurphy has experienced their point of view and rejected it, he now again challenges the Big Nurse. It is no longer a game, for the stakes are the lives of every patient. If McMurphy has anything to offer the patients, it is not just his ability to discredit and harrass the Big Nurse, for even if McMurphy should win, she would be replaced by another representative of society and the patients would continue to be intimidated. McMurphy, with his understanding of their point of view, must create opportunities for the patients to see life from a different point of view, create, to use McLuhan's term, an "antienvironment" which allows the patients alternatives to life on the ward. In the third section of the novel McMurphy does this by taking the patients on a fishing trip, moving them outside of the jurisdiction of the Big Nurse and even the confines of society, taking them to the edge of the land and beyond, to a place, which in the true sense of the word is not a location as much as a state of mind, where they learn to laugh at themselves and, by laughing, see life from a new perspective.

The fishing trip itself is a monument to McMurphy's ingenuity and resourcefulness. He gets a pass for himself and nine men for a weekend by convincing the staff that "two sweet old aunts" of his, who in reality are a pair of prostitutes that Mack knew when he was on the outside, will go along as chaperones for the men. When the Big Nurse informs him that the pass will be cancelled unless he gets two more people, he talks the doctor into going and forces Chief Bromden into signing up, even though that will blow the Chief's cover since the Big Nurse and the men will know that he is not really deaf. The men set off for the Oregon coast in two cars, but the Chief knows that "the bravado" that the men display at the gasoline station and to the inquisitive bicycle rider who asks about all the green uniforms is only "pretending to be brave" (p. 227). He understands Mack's point of view.

I think McMurphy knew better than we did that our tough looks were all show, because he still wasn't able to get a real laugh out of anybody. Maybe he couldn't understand why we weren't able to laugh yet, but he knew you can't really be strong until you can see a funny side to things. In fact, he worked so hard at pointing out the funny side of things that I was wondering a little if maybe he was blind to the other side, if maybe he wasn't able to see what it was that parched laughter deep inside your stomach.

(p. 227)

McMurphy understands all too well the pressures that squeeze the laughter out of a man, and perhaps he is

trying too hard to show the men another point of view, but as the men move out into the ocean, as they move farther and farther away from the safety and security of the shore, and as they become involved in a frantic, wild scramble to corral an enormous fish which Bromden has caught, McMurphy backs off and for the first time the men are alone facing, coping with, and enjoying life.

I [Chief Bromden] heard McMurphy laughing and saw him out of the corner of my eye, just standing at the cabin door, not even making a move to do anything, and I was too busy cranking at my fish to ask for help. Everyone was shouting at him to do something, but he wasn't moving. . . .

While McMurphy laughs. Rocking farther and farther backward against the cabin top, spreading his laugh out across the water--laughing at the girl, at the guys, at George, at me sucking my bleeding thumb, at the captain back at the pier and the bicycle rider and the service-station guys and the five thousand houses and the Big Nurse and all of it. Because he knows you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy. He knows there's a painful side; he knows my thumb smarts and his girl friend has a bruised breast and the doctor is losing his glasses, but he won't let the pain blot out the humor no more'n he'll let the humor blot out the pain.

I notice Harding is collapsed beside McMurphy and is laughing too. And Scanlon from the bottom of the boat. At their own selves as well as the rest of us. And the girl with her eyes still smarting as she looks from her white breast to her red one, she starts laughing. And Sefelt and the doctor, and all.

It started slow and pumped itself full, swelling the men bigger and bigger. I watched, part of them, laughing with them--and somehow not with them. I was off the boat, blown up off the water and skating the wind with those black birds, high above myself, and I could look down and see myself and the rest of the guys, see the boat rocking there in the

middle of those diving birds, see McMurphy surrounded by his dozen people, and watch them, us, swimming, a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave.

(pp. 237-39)

This scene is the most important in the novel because the actions of McMurphy, the new understanding of the patients, and the insane point of view of Bromden are the same, and it is at this point that the novel presents most clearly Kesey's point of view. Bromden may see McMurphy as a teacher, and certainly McMurphy's actions are intended to instruct, but at the same time students have to learn and at some point act independently of the teacher. McMurphy stands back, because life, like laughter, cannot be taught; it must be experienced. As the men experience life, they create a new perspective by laughing. Laughter does not change the situation (" . . . you have to laugh at the things that hurt you . . . "), but it does create a point of view ("keep[s] you in balance") because to laugh at oneself demands that the individual remove himself from the situation, become objective and see the total picture ("he won't let the pain blot out the humor no more'n he'll let the humor blot out the pain."). This idea is reinforced by Bromden's description of the scene. Bromden sees himself as "part of them," but at the same time "off the

boat, blown off the water . . . high above myself, and I could look down and see myself and the rest of the guys." This is not an illusion nor an hallucination of a schizophrenic, but rather a spatial and figurative description of Bromden's new perspective on life because, for the first time in the novel, Bromden sees life from two different points of view simultaneously. He is part of the laughter, but because he can understand its implications, he is above it, experiencing a freedom and control over his life, like the "diving birds" which hover over the laughing men.

The novel does not end here, because the patients could not sustain this euphoric moment, and after all, McMurphy has shown them only a point of view. Like laughter it does not change the situation; it only allows them to understand it better. However, this is the climax of the novel, and all subsequent actions in the novel, Bromden's and McMurphy's fight with the orderlies, the faltering hesitation of the men when the Big Nurse suggests that McMurphy is using them, the party on the ward which leads to the triumph, humiliation, and suicide of Billy Bibbit, the rape of the Big Nurse, McMurphy's lobotomy, and the Chief's final escape after suffocating the lobotomized McMurphy, make sense only in respect to this passage.

This novel's preoccupation is with creating points of view and at the same time sustaining these different perspectives as they are presented through the eyes of Chief Bromden. Just as McMurphy shows the patients a new way to experience life, Bromden presents life to the reader in a way that challenges his expectations. Although the events of the story are questionable, perhaps the wishful thinking of a weak man who will never face reality, his madness does create a point of view. Bromden may not be able to understand the implications of his story or the debility of his point of view, but the reader can. John Pratt concludes in his introduction to the Viking edition of the novel,

His own consciousness newly restored, the Chief may well see what the readers of the novel can see: the meaning-filled clutter of existence, the spontaneity of life, the multifaceted, many-colored mess which is what living is all about. . . . The struggle of life will continue, to be sure, but how we bring it clear in our own minds is entirely, and rightfully, up to us.

(p. xv)

Pratt's statement is true of all novels that use an insane first person narrator, because these novels, like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, use the narrator as a structural device which allows the author to handle the substance of life, form it into a world, and present to the reader a reality which offers him a new way of interpreting the all-too-familiar world that he lives in from day to day.

CHAPTER VI

BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS: THE UNRESOLVED ENDING AND THE RELATION OF LIFE TO THE INSANE POINT OF VIEW IN FICTION

Breakfast of Champions (1973), Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s seventh novel, is a perplexing work which is as much about the madness of human existence in America in the last half of the twentieth century as it is about the nature and purpose of Vonnegut's own fiction. Like all of Vonnegut's novels, it fits into the spectrum of modern fiction, especially with its blending of fact and fiction and its "return to a self-conscious form that announces itself as contrived."¹ Contained within the story of Dwayne Hoover's mental collapse is a dispersion of American trivia, "a sidewalk strewn with junk, trash which I throw over my shoulder as I travel in time,"² as Vonnegut describes it, starting with the national anthem and a picture of the American flag and progressing through every facet of American life, from cows to chemistry to smile buttons to Colonel Sanders' Kentucky Fried Chicken.

¹Olderman, p. 24.

²Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Breakfast of Champions (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973), p. 6. Subsequent page references are given parenthetically in the text.

Vonnegut further blurs the distinction between fact and fiction by incorporating characters from earlier novels into Breakfast of Champions, so that Dwayne's insanity is partially a result of Eliot Rosewater, the millionaire in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965), and Eliot's interest in Vonnegut's alter ego, Kilgore Trout, a science fiction writer who appears in Slaughterhouse-Five (1969). This blurring of fact and fiction in Breakfast of Champions draws attention to the complexity of the modern landscape as Raymond Olderman points out in his general survey of the modern fabulist in Beyond the Wasteland:

The contemporary fabulist does not seek an escape to an unencumbered experience; he is attempting to deal with the vital mysteries of contemporary fact. If we enter fully into the spirit of the sixties, we will not only lose ourselves in the paradoxes of fact, but we will begin to see the strangely paradoxical possibility that the fable, in a fabulous world, may be "realism," for only through fable can we be faithful to the strange details of contemporary life.³

When Vonnegut becomes one of the characters in Breakfast of Champions, the novel moves beyond the mystery of fact and begins to explore the imaginary and illusionary nature of the novel form. There develops a twofold movement when the author enters his own story: the development of the plot continues, ending when Dwayne Hoover and several of the people he has injured on his insane rampage are

³Olderman, p. 24.

being transported to the local hospital; but at the same time, Vonnegut begins to "unmake" the novel, first by drawing attention to his role in creating the story, and finally in the epilogue when Vonnegut discovers that he too must "disappear" because with the end of Dwayne's story his role as "the creator" of the story comes to an end also. The twofold movement in the novel, the development of the plot and the "unmaking" of the novel, illustrates the complex relation between art and life and further suggests the relation between the insane point of view in fiction and the human experience of insanity. These relationships can best be seen by understanding the way Vonnegut uses madness as the subject of the novel and as the basis for the structure of his novel.

The foundation of Breakfast of Champions rests on an unusual and recently-developed concept for the causes and cure of schizophrenia. In the preface to the novel, Vonnegut suggests that the premise of the novel, "that human beings are robots, are machines . . ." (p. 3), is based on his observation, as a young boy, of a man on "the corner of Meridian and Washington Streets" (p. 3) in downtown Indianapolis who was in the last stages of syphilis: "This man looked like an old, old man, although he might have been only thirty years old. He thought and thought. And then he kicked two times like

a chorus girl. He certainly looked like a machine to me . . . " (p. 3). The novel, as Vonnegut tells the reader several times, is about Dwayne Hoover, a man who "was on the brink of going insane" (p. 7) because of bad chemicals in his body. For this reason, Dwayne Hoover becomes one of the most unique characters in contemporary fiction because his insanity is not, as R. D. Laing suggests, a special strategy that one uses to live in an unlivable situation,⁴ like Bromden in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest or any other of the insane narrators discussed so far, but rather a result of chemical imbalances which Dwayne has no control over.

The idea probably came to Vonnegut from the personal experience of his own son. Mark Vonnegut was diagnosed and treated three times for schizophrenia, and in his autobiography, The Eden Express, he concludes that his madness was caused by chemical imbalances in his system and he also believes that he was cured by a combination of a proper diet and large doses of certain vitamins.

There's also no doubt that psychological traumatic events often trigger off a schizophrenic episode. Just prior to my crackup, my parents were splitting up, the woman that I had been virtually married to took off with another man, my father was becoming more and more outlandishly famous. But these things and much worse happen to lots of people who never go crazy, and I doubt very much that maturity, insight, or understanding is the

⁴Laing, Politics, p. 78.

missing ingredient. Working out these "traumas" had nothing to do with my recovery. To tell you the truth, Anita, all three issues and lots else still puzzles the hell out of me.

So what is it that's different about me and possibly you? The only decent answers I've been able to come up with are biochemical ones. Admittedly biochemistry is boring as mud nest to psychology, religion, and politics, but the objective evidence for schizophrenia's being biological is overwhelming. . . .

As poetic as schizophrenia is, I know of very few case in which poetry was of much help. It's unlikely that any understanding you can reach, will have much effect on how things go. As irrelevant as it may seem, what you eat, how much sleep you get, and similarly pedestrian factors are what matters.⁵

But Kurt Vonnegut does not overlook the fact that insanity can be a result of psychological and social forces, and so he fashions an insane world around Dwayne Hoover, but in a very peculiar manner. The novel is a birthday present to himself and he feels it is a chance to discard the clutter of his mind: "I think I am trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born . . . for the things that other people have put into my head, at any rate, do not fit nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of proportion with one another, are out of proportion with life as it really is . . ." (p. 5). But as he clears his mind, he incorporates all the absurdity, cruelty, self-centeredness, and madness of American culture into his

⁵Mark Vonnegut, The Eden Express (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1975), pp. 210-11.

story and therefore into Dwayne Hoover's world. So the narrative is filled with discursive scatterings that interrupt the narrative, especially the preoccupation of Americans with sex and money: "So there was a madness about wide-open beavers. There was also a madness about a soft, weak metal, an element, which had somehow been declared the most desirable of all elements, which was gold" (p. 24). He even rewrites American history: 1492 was "simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill" (p. 10) the millions of people who already lived in America, and Thomas Jefferson was "a slaveowner who was also one of the world's greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty" (p. 34). All these facts of American life would more than explain why Dwayne or anybody else might go insane, if Dwayne did not already have the bad chemicals in his body, but Vonnegut is able to connect these facts to Dwayne's insanity in a very clever way. The chemicals in Dwayne's body are activated because of an idea that Dwayne comes across as he reads Kilgore Trout's novel Now It Can Be Told: "You are the only creature in the whole universe who has free will. . . . Everybody else is a robot, a machine" (p. 253). Since nobody else has feelings, Dwayne feels no remorse in destroying the machines and robots that make his life miserable.

Almost from the moment Vonnegut begins narrating the events which lead to the breakdown of Dwayne Hoover and of the bizarre world that he lives in, Vonnegut systematically begins to destroy the "reality" of the story by drawing attention to his role in creating the story. Vonnegut's technique is not new, as René Wellek and Austin Warren point out in Theory of Literature.

. . . the romantic-ironic, deliberately magnifies the role of the narrator, delights in violating any possible illusion that this is 'life' and not 'art,' emphasizes the written literary character of the book. The founder of this line is Sterne, especially in Tristram Shandy; he is followed by Jean Paul Richter and Tieck in Germany; by Veltman and Gogol in Russia. Tristram might be called a novel about novel-writing, as might Gide's Les Faux-Monnayeurs and its derivative, Point Counter Point. Thackeray's much-censured management of Vanity Fair--his constant reminder that these characters are puppets he has manufactured--is doubtless a species of this literary irony; literature reminding itself that it is but literature.⁶

What makes Vonnegut's structure interesting is that he uses the illusion of an insane narrator, or more accurately, the illusion of a schizophrenic narrator who represents different stances which Vonnegut takes toward his work and in the creation of his work. In the preface to the novel, Vonnegut informs the reader that he becomes one Philboyde Studge--"that's who I think I am when I write what I am seemingly programmed to write" (p. 4)--and so the preface is signed, not by Vonnegut, but by

⁶Wellek and Warren, p. 223.

his alter ego, Philboyde Studge--Vonnegut the writer as opposed to Vonnegut the human being. To further emphasize that he is the master of Dwayne Hoover's universe and all other characters in the novel, Vonnegut becomes a character in the book itself, playing himself--Vonnegut the author and narrator of Breakfast of Champions. One of the first things he does after he enters the novel is to "mouth" the word "schizophrenia" (p. 194), and although this may be just the capricious whim of the all-powerful author, it does suggest the structure of the novel. In the rest of the novel, Vonnegut will constantly switch back and forth between a conventional third person narrator who tells the story--"Dwayne was hoping that some of the distinguished visitors to the Art Festival, who were all staying at the Inn, would come into the cocktail lounge" (p. 195)--to the unconventional narrator who draws attention to his mastery over the other characters in the work--"The bartender shook several anxious looks in my direction. . . . I did not worry about him asking me to leave the establishment. I had created him, after all" (p. 202).

In the end, Vonnegut proclaims, "I would go on and on with the intimate details about the various lives of the people on the super-ambulance, but what good is more information" (p. 298), for he has already warned the

reader that "this isn't the kind of book where people get what is coming to them at the end" (p. 274). The irony is that it does not only apply to Dwayne Hoover, who is left with the unconsoling fact that "he doesn't have doodly-squat now, but he used to be fabulously well-to-do" (p. 280), but also to the reader who expects the novel to end at this point and to Kilgore Trout who is given a chance to "live" outside the novel. For despite the pessimism in the story, the author has discovered that Dwayne, Kilgore Trout, the other characters in the novel, and the readers of the novel somewhere inside of themselves have "a band of unwavering light" (p. 225), and because Kilgore Trout is the only character that Vonnegut created "who had enough imagination to suspect that he might be the creation of human being" (p. 240), Vonnegut decides to set him free.

"I am approaching my fiftieth birthday, Mr. Trout," I said. "I am cleansing and renewing myself for the very different sorts of years to come. Under similar spiritual conditions, Count Tolstoi freed his serfs. Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career.

"You are the only one I am telling. For the others, tonight will be a night like any other night. Arise, Mr. Trout, you are free, you are free."

(pp. 293-94)

In Breakfast of Champions, Vonnegut's construction of reality within the novel becomes insanity: "I would

write about life . . . I would bring chaos to order" (p. 210), but at the end of the novel Vonnegut must "de-materialize" (p. 294) because like the reader, and Kilgore Trout whom he has set free, Vonnegut must now face "the void" (p. 294), life itself. Vonnegut not only describes the texture of life in the novel; he takes the reader to that point where the chaos of his novel ends and life, which is the only reality, begins, because Vonnegut knows, "It is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done" (p. 210). Therefore, Vonnegut has undone the fabric of his novel, purposely destroyed the "illusion" of realism, because the only order he sees in life is chaos: "I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. All facts would be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order . . ." (p. 210). So Vonnegut too must slip into life, giving up his role of writer, and confronting the voice of his father and the more distant voice of his mother who had left him "a legacy of suicide" (p. 294). Although Vonnegut has learned to accept life, which would explain why his mother's voice, with its legacy of suicide, stays "far, far away" (p. 294), he also comes to see the limitations of art. He can point to the values he sees in life, "the band of unwavering light" in every human being; he can state the purpose of

his writing, "to bring chaos to order"; and he even can draw attention to the faults of American society: "Most of all we hunger for symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins our nation has committed, such as slavery and genocide and criminal neglect, or by tinhorn commercial greed and cunning" (p. 293). But literature stops where life begins, and unlike his characters, whom he can manipulate and control, he cannot create or control the people who read his works. This becomes apparent in Trout's final request, "Make me young, make me young, make me young" (p. 295). Vonnegut can give Trout his freedom, but he cannot change his life. So Vonnegut ends with a big ETC. for the novel may end, but his life and the life of the readers will go on and on and on.

Because the subject of Breakfast of Champions is the madness of everyday American life, and because Vonnegut uses a variation of the insane narrator to draw attention to the nature of his fiction, the novel best illustrates the relationship between literature and life and the relation between the insane point of view and insanity--relationships which are very similar to each other. Vonnegut's novel does more than just attack realism's claim of best describing life or acknowledge the limitation of art, that art can point to values but not change life; it suggests the relation of the artist to the work

he creates and the relation of that work to life itself. Vonnegut elaborates on this relation in "An Address to P.E.N. Conference in Stockholm, 1973," after he has already pointed out, as he does in the novel, that "fiction is harmless":

. . . Our purpose is to make mankind aware of itself, in all its complexity, and to dream its dreams. We have no choice in the matter.

And there is more to our situation than that. In privacy here, I think we can acknowledge to one another that we don't really write what we write. We don't write the best of what we write, at any rate. The best of our stuff draws information and energy and wholeness from outside ourselves. Sculptors feel more strongly than we do incidentally. Every sculptor I ever knew felt that some spook had taken possession of his hands.⁷

Ultimately what Vonnegut is acknowledging is that the writer's vision is grounded in life itself, and that art has meaning only in the context of what it says about life; but at the same time, Vonnegut's fiction also suggests that what the artist puts down is not life, nor does it have to be lifelike. René Wellek and Austin Warren, in Theory of Literature, expound on this idea, by noting, like Vonnegut, that the novel form cannot be taken seriously.

There is the opposite danger, however, of taking the novel seriously in the wrong way, that is, as a document or case history, as--what for its own purposes of illusion it sometimes professes to be--a confession, a true story, a

⁷Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon (New York: Delacorte Press, 1974), p. 228.

history of life and its times. Literature must always be interesting; it must always have a structure and an aesthetic purpose, a total coherence and effect. It must, of course, stand in recognizable relation to life, but the relations are very various: the life can be heightened or burlesqued or antithesized; it is in any case a selection, of a specifically purposive sort, from life. We have to have a knowledge independent of literature in order to know what the relation of a specific work to "life" may be.⁸

The novel with an insane narrator is a romance, addressing itself "to a higher reality, a deeper psychology,"⁹ and therefore, the way the story purports to exist, as the hallucination of a madman, and more importantly, the way the story ends, where it begins--with the narrator withdrawing from life--are secondary to the truth which the novel reveals about the modern condition by using these devices. But Raymond Olderman in Beyond the Wasteland has stated, ". . . part of the frightening impact of the recent novel is the suggestion that its fantastic events may not just be capturing the truths of the human heart; they may be truly rendering the actual texture of human experience."¹⁰ And in fact, the vision of the madman, because it is lifelike, but not life, only reinforces the vacuity of fact and the mystery beyond it. Also, the unresolved ending in the novel with the insane narrator

⁸Wellek and Warren, p. 212.

⁹Ibid., p. 216.

¹⁰Olderman, p. 6.

is typical of modern fiction. As Olderman points out, "There is only one essential resolution, and it is not even escape or even 'accommodation'; it is the bare, necessary, and simple affirmation of life over death."¹¹ Thus, the novel with an insane narrator ends with the narrator in the asylum or hospital (the exception is Frederick Exley in A Fan's Notes, but he is in a wasteland, running, in no real direction, never quite sure what he is running from), withdrawing from life. The irony of the narrator's situation is that although his story has described his condition and explained the causes for his insanity, the story has offered no solutions to his problems, at least none which he can act upon. The novel becomes static because the narrator cannot verify "the facts" of his story and because he cannot act on the truth of his story. The movement and development and resolution of the realistic novel are replaced by a point of view, a distorted perspective, which nonetheless describes the modern condition as the narrator creates a world which is fantastic yet familiar, but a world which constantly draws attention to its contrived form because the narrator cannot distinguish life from illusion, fact from fiction.

Insanity then is a point of view of the novel and it also becomes the metaphor for the space that the

¹¹Olderman, p. 7.

narrator occupies as he tells his story--the never-never land where "the blurring of fact and fiction with its resulting confusion over the nature of reality"¹² is such that he can describe life and yet not be affected by it. Regardless, insanity as a point of view or a metaphor for the static condition of contemporary man is a narrative technique which allows the writer to describe life, and it cannot be compared to or assumed to be the same as the experience of insanity; for like literature, insanity begins where life ends. Michel Foucault elaborates on this in his discussion of the artist in Madness and Civilization:

. . . the number of writers, painters and musicians who have "succumbed" to madness has increased; but let us make no mistake here; between madness and work of art, there has been an accommodation, no more constant exchange, no communication or languages; their opposition is much more dangerous than formerly; and their competition allows no quarter; theirs is a game of life and death. . . . madness is precisely the absence of the work of art.¹³

He adds, "Madness is the absolute break with the work of art, . . . the line of dissolution, the contour against the void."¹⁴ Madness is the limit of meaningful human experience, and because literature can only be understood in terms of life, madness and the creation of literature

¹²Olderman, p. 18.

¹³Foucault, pp. 286-87.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 287.

or the interpretation of literature are mutually exclusive elements. Foucault concludes,

A work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without an answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself. . . . There is no madness except as the final instant of the work of art--the work endlessly drives madness to its limits; where there is a work of art, there is no madness.¹⁵

Beyond madness one can neither interpret nor create art, but because madness is contemporary with life, one element in the spectrum of human experience, it justly is the subject of art.

The insane narrator, then, is an "illusion," a pretense, because it mixes the facts of insanity with one narrative technique which allows the writer to describe the insanity of modern life and at the same time capture the texture of this experience. Vonnegut perhaps summarizes it best when he addresses Kilgore Trout at the end of Breakfast of Champions.

I had nothing in my hand, but such was my power over Trout that he would see in it whatever I wished him to see. I might have shown him a Helen of Troy, for instance, only six inches tall.

"Mr. Trout--Kilgore--" I said, "I hold in my hand a symbol of the wholeness and harmony and nourishment. It is Oriental in its simplicity, but we are Americans, Kilgore, not Chinamen. We Americans require symbols which are richly colored and three-dimensional and juicy. Most of all, we hunger for symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins our nation has committed, such as slavery and genocide and criminal neglect, or by tinhorn commercial greed and cunning.

¹⁵Foucault, pp. 288-89.

"Look up, Mr. Trout," I said, and I waited patiently. "Kilgore--?"

The old man looked up, and he had my father's wasted face when my father was a widower--when my father was an old man.

He saw that I held an apple in my hand.

(p. 293)

Like Vonnegut's apple, the insane narrator is an illusion of the writer, and like all symbols, a unique representation. The insane narrator not only points to the absurdity of the contemporary scene, but recreates this absurdity in a confusing, disjointed view of reality as he escapes the madness of his time and becomes engulfed in the darkness of his own personal schizophrenia. He comes to represent the contemporary man who rejects suicide and death but who finds himself alienated from human love and understanding. In his insanity, his story becomes his act of faith, his commitment to human growth, his bridge to the world of the living, but while his story is an affirmation of life over death and of life, whatever its condition, over madness, it is also an illusion, and it will not enable him to move from the darkness of madness to the light of reason. The illusion cannot change his life, but it can, like literature itself, describe the human condition, and perhaps very quietly and subtly affirm the value of life through the illusion of fiction.

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