Literary Bodies: The Novel As Experience

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Literary Bodies: The Novel As Experience

by

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ABSTRACT

For my MA thesis I propose to examine a series of novels that combine motifs of
the body with structural and linguistic experimentation that parallels the state of the
bodies within the text. Using Tsitsi Dangarembga’s 1988 “bodybildungsroman” Nervous
Conditions, Sherley Anne Williams’ 1986 neo–slave narrative Dessa Rose, Samuel
Beckett’s 1938 existential novel Murphy, Vikram Seth’s 1986 poetic novel Golden Gate,
and Vladimir Nabokov’s 1962 poetic novel Pale Fire, I will argue that these texts portray
the body as a readable space of culture, a legible site of conflict or creation.

I contend that these novels depict the body as either open or contained:
osmotically interacting with and creatively responding to its environment, or recursively
closed, interacting cancerously only with itself. In addition, using the words of the
respective author when available, I will examine the form around the human form—the
osmotic openness or recursiveness of the text itself: its structure, genre, and handling of
language, as well as the author’s deliberate unsettling of reader expectation and conscious
cultivation of physical response from the audience.
Chapter One

Introduction: The Science of Art

Recent research suggests that the experience of art is not all that different from the experience of life itself—when interacting with the visual arts or the real world, the brain recreates the object of the gaze. Our eyes, “largely engaged in a continual point-to-point staccato sampling of small sections of the visual world,” gather information for the brain, which then “constructs the consistent, smooth and continuous high-resolution visual image that we seem to experience” (Hawes 180). Creating “an internal ‘hypothesis’ of what lies outside of us,” our brain acts as “an aggressively active participant in generating our experiences—in creating reality”: “In essence, each time someone contemplates a work of art, the work of art is reconstructed ‘internally’” (Hawes 180, 179, 177). Thus our perception of art and reality are equally subjective. Cognitive science also recognizes that the emotional centers of the brain make no distinction of difference between emotions evoked by art or reality:

Our emotional response is a matter of trigger perception, concrete imagination, and emotional memory. The issue of fictionality just does not enter. To know something is fictional is to make a judgment that it does not exist. But existence judgments are cortical. They have relatively little to do with our emotional response to anything. (Hogan 185)
In effect, “understanding the postmodern novel is an exercise of the same order as interpreting life itself“ (Hogan 87). In addition, psychological studies of the nature of consciousness suggest that our reality is structured by the stories we tell about and to ourselves: “Narrative does not merely capture aspects of the self for description, communication, and examination; narrative constructs the self” (Fireman 5). By highlighting important memories or experiences, narrative shapes memory and the brain: “The stories people use to tell about their lives in turn shape the memories that are encoded as significant . . . and thus the very materiality of our bodies. Thus narrative is identity is embodiment is narrative” (Smith 94). Discussing the habit among children of “appropriating” stories, Nelson suggests that narrative forms a very real part of a child’s life experiences, no matter the source of the story:

These cases provide suggestive evidence that children’s stories may be undifferentiated as to whose stories they are, that is, whose experiences they are. The conclusion follows that these verbal retellings are not personal or biographical, because they are not differentiated from a nonspecific past and a social generalized world. They are stories based on the child’s life experiences, but they are no more personal than are any other stories. (31)

Narrative and more basically, speech, distinguish humans in our ability to communicate for reasons beyond immediate sustenance; we speak “merely to share the world together” (Hardcastle 41). In this paper I propose to examine a selection of authors who attempt to communicate the experience of the body in the world, focusing on a series of novels that combine motifs of the body with structural and linguistic experimentation that parallels the state of the bodies within the text. Using Tsitsi Dangarembga’s “bodybildungsroman”
Nervous Conditions, Sherley Anne Williams’ neo-slave narrative Dessa Rose, Samuel Beckett’s existential novel Murphy, Vikram Seth’s poetic novel The Golden Gate, and Vladimir Nabokov’s poetic novel Pale Fire, I will argue that these texts portray the body as a readable space of culture, a legible site of conflict or creation. I contend that these novels depict the body as either open or contained: osmotically interacting with and creatively responding to its environment, or recursively closed, interacting cancerously or generatively only with itself. In addition, using the words of the respective author when available, I will examine the form around the human form—the osmotic openness or recursiveness of the text itself: its structure, genre, and handling of language, as well as the author’s deliberate unsettling of reader expectation and conscious cultivation of physical response from the audience.

These texts, while presenting narrators and characters as readers, writers or artists, highlight the reading process through various levels of self-reflectivity, drawing thematic and reader attention to the inescapability of embodiment—to the sensations of a body occupying space to which it is physically and psychologically open or closed. Using an approach informed by the recent research in neuroscience, psychology, and cognitive science that attempts to analyze the physiological effects of art, I will discuss the novels in order of increasing structural, linguistic, and metatextual intricacy, with an overall focus on the many ways in which the authors attempt to convey and emphasize the nature of embodiment. In my discussion of the first two novels, Nervous Conditions and Dessa Rose, I commence each chapter by examining motifs of the body, firstly the way it can become, be taken over by, or produce a text, and secondly the author’s focus on the sensation of space. I then turn to an analysis of the structures of influence or enclosure,
discussing orality, language, and ending. Analyzing the final three novels, *Murphy, The Golden Gate*, and *Pale Fire*, I open each chapter by discussing language and/or meter to frame my later examination of motifs of the body, thus concentrating throughout upon the techniques and effects of meter and language upon content and reader. These three texts, I contend, increasingly attempt to physically involve readers, either by demanding constant deciphering, as in *Murphy*, or in dictating reader pace through meter, as in *The Golden Gate* and *Pale Fire*. I then turn to the motifs of the body, discussing the various ways in which these novels depict the body’s interaction with the world, spatiality, and art, concluding each chapter with a final glance at several other notable structural choices.
Chapter Two

*Nervous Conditions: Hungry Readers*

*Nervous Conditions*, a text that privileges the body, can be read as a treatise on the need for creation to arise from consumption: in the pairing of the outwardly-focused, artistic Tamba and her recursively-inward cousin Nyasha, we see the dangers of facing a chaotic world without the balancing effects of aesthetic creation. The novel is both a celebration of the body and its possibilities and a documentation of the dangers of the mind; while reading the osmotic body of Tamba as she struggles to define herself in a divisive post-colonial milieu, we watch Nyasha gradually wane away, her body becoming a space of contest for battling ideologies, a text of repression and rebellion. Dangarembga’s stylistic and structural choices emphasize this bodily reactivity as she draws the reader deeply into the space of the narration, adopting and adapting African and Western modes, languages and forms to create a text that interacts knowingly with both the reader and the vast lineage of textual production.

The bodies of Nyasha and Tamba perform differing methods of resistance to the disjunctive effect of patriarchal structures, British colonialism and its departure: although both girls embrace education as a form of rebirth, a gateway to “limitless horizons,” their differing responses to the “weight” of history and knowledge demonstrates the necessity of interacting creatively with one’s environment in a world where “identity is naturalized onto the body’s surface” (NC 58, Young 5). While penning Nyasha attempts to starve her
discontented body into silence, Tambu retrospectively charts her own progress into self-effacement, using language that emphasizes space, connection, distance, and isolation.

The textuality of Nyasha’s body has received considerable critical attention, with eager readers deciphering her eating disorder in terms of the oppressive patriarchy, the unsettling cultural memory of colonization, her burgeoning sexuality and marriageability, and the conflicting messages of her exposure to Western ideals of gender and beauty. Supriya Nair concisely discusses Nyasha’s eating disorder in the context of colonialism and the patriarchy: “Even as Nyasha manifests the ills of colonialism, her gendered identity is also constantly in torment . . . Her sharp insights into their collective devaluation and her discursive eloquence come at a high cost” (137). No matter the reading, Nyasha’s bodily response to patriarchal or racial pressures demonstrates the dangers of turning inward: “Nyasha . . . seems to internalize these conflicts posed by her surroundings till her tongue, body and mind seem together to want to carry the struggle to a dramatic conclusion” (Bahri 17). Early in the novel, Tambu notes Nyasha’s dangerous predilection towards isolation while emphasizing her own highly-physical connection to the world and her adored cousin: “Any attention from Nyasha, who did not often attend to things other than the excursions and forays of her unpeaceful mind, was enough to make me tingle with pleasure” (92). History and knowledge, for Nyasha, take the place of nourishment, which in the novel functions as “the metonymic representation of all that Nyasha cannot accept and understand”: “So I have to keep reading and memorizing, reading and memorizing all the time. To make sure I get it all in” (Bahri 23, NC 110). Paraphrasing Freud, Young reads Nyasha’s grief as dually functioning as both provender and absence, a “devouring of the lost object” that “both nourishes the ego in its voracious
feeding on the lost object and simultaneously starves it, in its refusal to let go of the loss” (33). Starved and surfeited by her vision of history and herself, Nyasha flees inward, winnowing her frame to occupy less and less of this culturally contested space, “retreating into some private world”: “Sometimes, when I talked to her, quite apart from preferring not to answer, she simply did not hear me. Once, when I passed my hand in front of her eyes, she did not see me either and I had to shout very loudly to bring her back” (120). This parallel progress from rage to silence and from bulimia to anorexia is also significant, suggesting the open-endedness of all self-induced physical punishment; the purging process of bulimia echoes Nyasha’s emotional explosions, while the withholding inherent in anorexia mirrors the gradual curbing of her voice.

Tambu’s retrospective narration enables her to chart both her journey into a dangerously recursive silence like her cousin’s and her later illumination as un”brainwashed” artist who uses the weight of history to create (208). Tambu’s initial descriptions of her younger self stress her level-headed responses to stimuli and her inability to detach from her own body: “I was not like Nyasha, who could forget where she was so entirely that she could do whatever she fancied and as a result usually did it well. I was always aware of my surroundings” (112). In refusing to turn her doubts upon herself, Tambu demonstrates her youthful mechanisms designed to avoid stasis and maintain intellectual space: “With a sigh I slid into a swamp of self-pity. My finely tuned survival system set off its alarm at once, warning me to avoid that trap, but I was lost . . . I did make an effort to improve my state of mind” (65). Her initial outward-looking rationality contrasts sharply with the passivity she later adopts in mission school: “I
became embarrassed by my acquired insipidity, but I did not allow myself to agonise over it, nor did I insist on any immediate conclusions” (119).

Tambu’s self-imposed immobility culminates in her own moment of bodily absence in which her form, like Nyasha’s, becomes a text portraying a ‘nervous condition’ resultant from her divisive opinions upon her parents’ upcoming belated marriage and her technically out-of-wedlock state: “Nyasha talked to me. She tried hard to coax me out of bed, but I was slipping further and further away from her, until in the end I appeared to have slipped out of my body and was standing somewhere near the foot of the bed, watching her efforts to persuade me to get up and myself ignoring her” (168). Young reads Tambu as using “her body as a sign of resistance” against mental dissolution: “Her body, left behind on the bed, enacts a resistance in its passivity, in its refusal to anticipate in a ritual that would negate it” (145). Tambu’s self-reflexive narration and “looking back” allows her to reflectively detail this progress into the silence that spurred her eventual metamorphoses into an artist: “Something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion” (208). Reading Tambu’s “expansion” as an echo of the various enclosed structures within the text and of the structures of the text itself, Okonkwo emphasizes Tambu’s physical balance as an osmotic flow of inspiration and emotion:

Tambu means her overall growth, a continuing maturation she achieves through her long and difficult effort to make sense of, adjust to, and carefully mediate the paradoxes of tradition and change. She attains this growth as
she navigates through various spatial structures in the novel, all of which shape her life and also impinge on that of the other female characters, especially. (56)

The room Tambu creates for herself within the narrational space counters her voluntary progress into tighter and tighter spaces as she moves from the vastness of the homestead to the confines of a cell-like dorm at Sacred Heart. Her ability to pen the tale is directly tied to the sentience of her older body: “I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died” (1). Young’s view of art, in which its primary function is to connect the body to its surroundings while healing cultural and physical injuries, echoes Tambu’s focus on the physical: “This body, overburdened by the discourses of race and representation that created its blackness in the first place, can survive only by acts of (aesthetic) identification that create community” (6).

Dangarembga parallels these varied motifs of the body with innovative structural choices that echo the novel’s images of recursion and osmosis. Tambu’s insistently oral-sounding yet defiantly scripted narration conflates African and Western traditions of storytelling and novelistic construction, while Dangarembga’s choice of using undefined, intermittently italicized Shona decenters the primacy of English, undercutting the possibility of absolute knowing for non-Shona speaking audiences. The decidedly corporeal tales of Tambu’s grandmother offer perhaps the best model of the physicality of storytelling while underlining the differences between Western and African styles of narration; her gradnmother’s tales are meandering, circular, told above the rhythms of the working body: “She gave me history lessons as well. History that could not be found in the textbooks; a stint in the field and a rest, the beginning of the story, a pause. ‘What
happened after, Mbuya, what happened?’ ‘More work, my child, before you hear more story’” (17). The novel becomes a nontraditional text written in a defiantly oral voice, an intercontinental interchange of differing images of the shape of a story: ”She makes the narrative a collaboration or dialogue of modes: orality/”the novel,” the told/the written, the resiliently African/ the imported Western. . . Dangarembga makes both modes function cooperatively under the same narrative roof” (Okonkwo 68).

Dangarembga’s handing of language also stresses connection and osmosis while inherently acknowledging distance and difference. Upon discovering her cousin’s acquired aphasia upon her return from England, Tambu opines that dance will connect Nyasha back to her natal language: “Things like that,’ I continued vaguely but earnestly, ‘would bring their speech back more quickly’” (43). Tambu views Nyasha’s stilted Shona as a bodily symptom of distance traversed, a spatial construct that Dangarembga thematically and structurally juggles through varied uses of English and Shona. Tambu’s description of cooking *sadza* emphasizes what Ashcroft terms the insertion of cultural difference while placing the weight of meaning onto the occasion of iteration: “This new me would not be frustrated by wood fires that either flamed so furiously that the *sadza* burned, or so indifferently that it became *mbodza*” (59). While the unglossed Shona “remains metonymic and thus emphasizes the (posited) experiential gap which lies at the heart of any cross-cultural text, it also demonstrates quite clearly that the use of the word, even in an english-language context, confers the meaning” (65). This dual-edged use of language is echoed by Dangarembga’s continued allusion to British texts, which emphasizes this novel’s own connection to and difference from Western literatures while underlining the orientation of Tambu’s quest for knowledge: “I read everything from
Enid Blyton to the Bronte sisters, and responded to them all. Plunging into these books I knew I was being educated and I was filled with gratitude to the authors for introducing me to places where reason and inclination were not at odds” (94). Discussing the postmodern habit of allusion, adaptation and rewriting, Barilli uses terms that echo this novel’s focus on physical space, growth, and consumption, while paralleling Tambu’s narrative process:

On the whole it can be said of a poetics of rewriting that it is precisely the recognition that there is no more space to consume, that progress (literally, going forward) is not, then, as infinite as once was though; space-time is, almost in an Einsteinian sense, curved, and at certain moments nothing remains but to visit the places already traversed: a revisiting that, in terms of narrative operation, is obviously a rewriting. (qtd in Cowart 14)

Tambu’s narration becomes precisely a process of rewriting the effects of colonialism as she returns again and again to the complexities of her tale, slowly revealing pertinent details and revisiting her history.

The conclusion of the novel, with its promise of further texts and elision of Nyasha’s and Tambu’s fates, echoes Tambu’s process of expansion and osmosis: “I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow . . . It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume” (208). Reading the novel as a depiction of “an open, expanding or ongoing human-journey,” Okonkwo argues that its relatively indefinite ending reveals Dangarembga’s underlying argument against closure, stasis, and immobility: “Yet the novel’s inconclusiveness is actually its
“conclusion”... Closure/conclusion, with its meanings of cessation, complete, stop, end, final, authority, inexpansion, neatness and order would be inconsistent not only with the chaos of decolonization but also Dangarembga’s thematic “battle” against fixity ” (69). Okonkwo’s reading stresses physical and emotional balance as process while viewing the novel itself as a balancing act between history, memory, and self-fashioning.

Dangarembga’s focus on corporeality has raised the attention of several critics who choose to explore the physical effect of the text upon the reader; Dangarembga’s privileging of the senses through descriptive language has received particular attention, as it establishes the primacy of the body in life and in responding to art. Tambu’s narration continually emphasizes her body’s reactions: “I had never ridden in a motor vehicle before. I was inundated by new sensations: the soft plastic seat that made me sweat, sticking my dress to my buttocks; the bumps in the road that were worse than they were when Nyari’s father’s ox-cart rolled over them” (25). Okonkwo reads the novel as a celebration and titillation of both fictional and readerly bodies by “the declarative, intimate, unruly, and immediate voice of Tambu, the artist-storyteller” (68). To Young, the novel functions as a narrative of collective physical trauma designed “to give the reader a visceral experience of what it means for this collective body to be injured,” while allowing “the ghostly autonomy of flash and blood characters who, to tell their own story, consume both the “author” and the reader” (2, 8). The bodies of reader and author devour and are devoured as “the characters, like horseman who mount the body, ride the body of the author and reader and become real in ways that transcend traditional ways of understanding the act of writing and reading” (Young 8). Overtaken by story, the bodies of author and reader enter into the space of the text, subversively invited in by Tambu’s
startling opening line, “I was not sorry when my brother died” (1); a tactic viewed by Okonkwo as demanding audience response: “Most of all, by startling the audience immediately and also leaving holes in her story through suspense, she invites the audience’s participation and deferred response to her storyteller’s prefatory and performative comment/”call” in which is also revealed the occasion for the story” (68). Tambu’s description of the space of her much-loved books would have emphasized what Young sees as the very real life of a text and its characters: “At Babamukuru’s I would have a bookcase. My books would live in a bookcase” (60).

In Nervous Conditions the human form functions as a canvas bearing the problems of national culture; the body becomes a text, expressing anxieties about changing imperatives of gender, class and race. The focus on bodies reveals ambivalence about the expressive qualities of the human form; stresses of culture, class, gender and race can manifest in ways as dangerous or destructive as the original stressor. The bodies of Tambu and Nyasha manifest different modes of resistance to oppression, demonstrating the necessity of a constructive and aesthetic response to societal or personal pressure. Tambu’s journey from endothermic “sublimate” to osmotic exotherm, student to artist, is echoed by the numerous closed and open physical structures within the text as well as by the structure of the text itself (94). Dangarembga’s often-surprising, variously subversive uses of language and mode both inscribe distance while bridging cultural divides, drawing the alert reader into a conscious engagement with the structure of the text as their bodies respond to the texture of her rich language. This thematic focus on the human form and the importance of art to physical and mental balance, echoed by the text’s structure and style, results in a novel that literally demands a physical,
emotional, and intellectual response. The novel, Dangarembga seems to suggest, is as alive and fleshed as the reader.
Chapter Three

*Dessa Rose*: Narrating Trauma

Sherley Anne Williams’s neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* wrenchingly illustrates the complexity of healing of physical and emotional scars: in narrating the life of escaped slave Dessa, Williams depicts the importance of artistic creation, motherhood, and touch to the process of seizing agency, while portraying the inescapability of physical and psychological mechanisms of repression and domination. Pairing Dessa’s journey to voice against the descent of her failed chronicler Nemi into obsession and madness, Williams offers a thematic engagement with the concerns that physically structure her text: the osmosis or recursion of bodies and textual bodies, the place of spatiality within and composing narration, and the ultimately empathetic purpose of art and human existence.

Dessa’s delicate body serves within the text as a site of healing, growth and expansion; fully commodified, repeatedly textualized, and variously enclosed, Dessa’s form demonstrates the necessity of examining and creatively utilizing personal and historical pain. Much critical discussion centers around the legibility of Dessa’s body as a text to be marked and re-marked, with the signifying nature of her scars garnering the most attention: “But I wasn’t blind and I could feel every one of them scars, the one roped partway to my navel that the waist of my draws itched, the corduroyed welts cross my hips. And R on my thighs” (223). Beyond immediately identifying Dessa as an
escaped and recalcitrant slave, the scars have been etched over her most precious feminine parts and mark her in turn as a childbearing commodity:

The effect is to attempt to deprive the slave woman of her femininity and render the surface of her skin a parchment upon which meaning is etched by the whip (pen) of white patriarchal authority and sealed by the firebrand. Together, these inscriptions produce the meaning of black female subjectivity in the discursive domain of slavery. (Henderson 8)

Both Dessa and Rufel describe the scars in sartorial language—“corduroyed”—underlining their exteriority while hinting at the possibility of their eventual physical healing and removal: “Only then did Rufel realize that the wench was naked; her bottom was so scarred that Rufel had thought she must be wearing some kind of garment” (154). The textuality of Dessa’s body, combined with Dessa’s eventual first-person seizing of the narration in the “Negress” chapter, allows the text to perform what Griffin refers to as a “textual healing”: “In this way, the author’s storytelling, like the character’s remembering, acts as a means of confronting the legacy of slavery and re-imagining a different future for their characters and for the readers as well” (527). Dessa’s process of healing, composed of various psychic and physical surrenders—sensuality, play, storytelling— is within the text understatedly balanced by the suggestion of her only other option for facing the horrors of slavery—a self-consuming recursion and suicide to avoid captivity: “She would swallow her tongue; that what Mamma Hattie said the first women had done, strangling on their own flesh rather than be wrenched from their homes” (63).
The subversive self-commodification performed by Dessa and her friends near the end of the text, possibly the most critically cited instance of Dessa’s physical and emotional recuperation, reveals an undertone of doubt at the wisdom of perpetuating an imbalance of power: “What we used to do with fear and trembling, we now did for fun. I told myself that this was good, that it showed slavery didn’t have no hold on us no more” (213). Rather than as a final step in emotional liberation from slavery, Basu reads the voluntary self-vending of Dessa and her friends as a masochistic act, which though allowing them some measure of control over their pain, still underlines the reality of their previous suffering while placing them in very real danger: “The masochistic fetish, and more generally, the performance of discipline, invokes and contains the memory of punishment” (Basu 396). The re-enactment of her commodification allowing her some measure of authorship, Dessa finds agency in the natural coping mechanisms of the body; her dreams serve as a master-text of her past and present, an opportunity for communal discussion and the implementation of the arcane knowledge of her mother: “Dessa’s mind raced; she could not put two thoughts together. Oh, why was this dream so hard? Mammy would have a time trying to explain this dream. A white woman—Is that your enemies?” (83).

Dessa’s dreams could also be interpreted figuratively as representations of the present state of her body and an attempt to adjust to physical changes. Anthropologist Douglas Hollen describes “selfscape dreams,” as those which provide the dreamer with a map of their body’s present physical state and thus enable psychological adaptation: “Dreams may provide a current map or update of the self’s contours and affective resonances relative to its own body, as well as to other objects and people in the world. . .
self-processes emerge and maintain themselves in the biological and imaginal space between body and world” (174). Dessa’s second dream, begat in prison after a bath leaves her ill, reveals bodily “resonances” such as a concern with her unborn baby and a focus on heat; Nemi records Dessa’s “chills and sweats” right before she enters into a dream associated with warmth: “The day’s heat hung in the air; dust clung to her sweaty skin” (32). The undercurrent of fever drives her dream as she amalgamates her present fear of the repercussions of giving birth and her past anxiety about Kaine’s position as gardener: “Aunt Lefonia said Master was always complaining about how they couldn’t afford to have a nigga sitting around eating his head off while he waited for some flowers to grow” (34). Dessa, waiting in prison while her baby incubates, dreams of waiting for flowers to grow to contextualize and allay her apprehensions of giving birth and her subsequent punishment, while her reference to Mammy’s imitation of Master reveals an anxiety about her now-constant proximity to whiteness: “When had she heard him speak? (that question wild within her, making her cold all the way through” (35).

Dessa’s dreams, whether representative of physical or emotional concerns, provide a therapeutic space to examine the past and the present, enabling her to heal even as she undergoes further stress.

Dessa’s body is continually associated with expanding and contracting images of space; much like Tambu, her journey to emotional freedom relies upon physical liberation. Life in the Manichean world of the plantation, with its highly spatial organization, depends upon a non-geographical but communally-accepted concept of vertical order: One is either “down the Quarters” (1) or “up at the house” (37). The Quarters themselves, at the Smith plantation, Hughes’s farm, and Sutton Glen, are highly
self-contained: “She never heard more than fragments of these songs; whatever commentary they contained did not carry beyond the Quarters” (63). The subversive and highly-referential symbolism of the slaves’ songs alternately illustrates Ashcroft’s concept of context conferring meaning, while the impermeability of the sung language to outside ears reveals the manner in which language can become a safe or private space; to Nemi, the melodies are simply bastardized hymns: “It is, of course, only a quaint piece of doggerel which the darkies cunningly adapt from the scraps of Scripture they are taught” (Ashcroft 65, DR 52). The farm at Sutton Glen, although maintaining its Manichean divide between Quarters and House, adapts the rigidly spatialized organization typical to plantations, allowing, through a few key architectural omissions, the gradually growing intimacy between Dessa and the white mistress Rufel: “Them rooms was big all right, but it was only two of them, same as any poor buckra; and that stairway didn’t lead to no other story” (164). The missing second floor, symbolic of both Rufel’s initial voluntary blindness to the violence of slavery and her later rejection of society’s racism, enables Dessa to understand Rufel’s relative poverty and lack of power: “This spatial configuration is used to abrogate the hierarchies of place, the divisions in the social order that place Rufel on top and Dessa below” (McDowell 150).

The multiple cells in which Dessa is incarcerated through the course of the novel, from Hughes’s root cellar to the Arcopolis city jail, spatially parallel her growing self-awareness and personal power; her initial imprisonment in the root cellar underlines her status as fractious commodity to be consumed by the process of farm-labor and portrayed only by whites: “The darky had sat on the floor of the root cellar, barely visible in its shadow. Occasionally her head moved toward the block of light from the open door or
her chains rattled in the darkness” (18). Her later stint in the Arcopolis jail, while underlining her improved status as faux “house” slave rather than farm laborer, emphasizes her right to testimony and privacy: “She had some cloth folded over her arms, and she put this up round the cell mumbling the whole time” (230). The shrouding of the cell emphasizes the historical lack of privacy endured by black women characterized by what Guy-Sheftall terms “the private being made public,” while Dessa’s eventual refusal to display her scars grants her a privacy and agency denied to her factual predecessors while underlining the massive change in her circumstances (18).

Throughout the novel, Dessa’s growing concept of geography echoes her physical and emotional liberation; to enslaved Dessa, the world is simply a site of mass exploitation: “I’d traveled so far from my own home and still hadn’t come to the end of slavery; Harker said we could travel that far and farther and still not come to the place where our peoples could live free. It scared me to think how much of the world was slaved” (171).

This earlier image of the globality of enslavement is later countered by her comforting view of the proximity of neighboring “good white men” in the free West: “And Brim live down the road; the Steeles down to the Junction” (236).

Most of the critical focus on Dessa Rose overlooks the importance of Nemi as a counterpoint to Dessa’s process of healing; while Dessa overcomes massive physical and emotional injuries to fully actualize herself after enslavement, Nemi descends into a recursive madness, rejecting his potential as an artist and ending the novel as a purveyor of blank pages. Images of the textuality of Nemi’s body overwhelmingly involve blankness, blindness, or opacity; his eyes in particular identify him as holding the potential for both intellectual and empathetic re-writing or for continued sightlessness:
“The white man looked up at her even as the pen continued across the pad and she recoiled, thinking in the first instance of seeing that his eyes were covered by some film, milky and blank” (49). In addition, his refusal to truly see Dessa must be continually consciously reinforced, inwardly maintained: “I must constantly remind myself that she is but a darky and a female at that” (23). The blindness with which he voluntarily views Dessa, however, is countered by the lyrical and highly-physical manner in which he approaches the physical an aesthetic aspects of life:

“But what delighted, even inspired Nehemiah was not the quantity, but the quality, the subtle piquancy of the red-eye gravy or the feather lightness of a biscuit, sunlight falling across a Brussels carpet, the scrollwork on a ladder-back chair. The planters had wrought immense beauty in the wilderness that still dwarfed the nation and Nehemiah felt privileged to rub shoulders with its creators.” (28)

In enumerating the reactivity of Nemi’s artistic body, Williams powerfully evokes both the motivations behind Dessa’s scarring and the scars themselves: the “wrought” beauty, the deeply-etched “scrollwork” that climbs vertically up the “ladder-back” chair, all serve to suggest the image of a human “wilderness” that necessitates taming and carving, while the transcontinental Brussels carpet suggests that the responsibility for slavery is global, rooted in an ever-burgeoning desire for commodities. By the end of the novel, Nemi’s sight has become determinedly inward, “empty as a unclouded sky”; he recognizes Dessa’s form but not his own complicity in her physical torture: “His eyes made me know him; when I looked into them I didn’t see no reflection of myself” (220). His body, a clearly-penned text of insanity, reveals through the medium of cleanliness and linen the
magnitude of his disjunction from his earlier dandy self: “Now, I thought, now his shirt
don’t even have no collar; his ankles dirty. My eyes filled with tears then. To be brought
so low by such a trifling little white man. This is what chance will do, children, trample
all over your dreams, swing a bony ankle in front of you” (225). The prerogatives of
cleanliness, nutrition, and propriety, once denied to enslaved Dessa, are here voluntarily
eschewed by Nemi as he becomes enslaved by his obsession with capturing Dessa:
“Some bloodhound was turning him any way but loose” (232).

Nemi is also associated with images of enclosure; while Dessa’s body is variously
confined, Nemi’s body remains tangential to this enclosure, either above or outside the
space of confinement. During Dessa’s initial confinement in the root cellar, Nemi situates
himself on a pinnacle to indicate his physical and intellectual superiority: “Held
spellbound by that very discrepancy, Adam Nehemiah had leaned forward from his perch
on the cellar steps the better to hear the quiet rasp of her voice” (18). Reading this focus
on vertical spatiality as emphasizing physical and emotional detachment, McDowell sees
this spatiality as distinguishing the Nemi section from later chapters: “Whereas
Nehemiah’s section employs images of vertical space to underscore the distance between
him and Dessa, Rufel’s uses images of horizontal space to figure the possibility of
closeness between the two women” (McDowell 6). Unnerved by his proximity to Dessa,
Nemi demands the use of the yard for his interviews; however Dessa’s increased
shackling counters this expansion of space:

    He sat now on a crude chair in the shade of the big elm in the side yard, pen and
    pad on his knee. The darky sat near him on the ground, knees drawn up to her
    chest, manacled hands clasped about them; her dress covered the leg irons that
hobbled her feet. A chain attached to her ankle bead was wound around the trunk of the elm. (35)

Still physically situated above Dessa, Nemi’s position nonetheless appears precarious; while he sits tenuously in a “crude” chair, Dessa’s body conveys power and patience: with her feet flat on the bare earth, her body supported by the cold strength of her manacles, and the chains that commodify her veiled by her feminine dress, Dessa conveys an image of the fruitlessness of domination—to manacle a body appears as ultimately pointless as shackling an ancient elm. Nemi’s attempt to imprison Dessa in the Arcopolis jail at the end of the novel reveals the end result of this precariousness; rife with horizontal and tactile imagery, the scene emphasizes the dissolution of Nemi’s self-control while underlining Dessa’s empathic nature: “When I come to myself, I was standing with my arms held tight behind me, heavy breathing rasping in my ear. I looked into the face of another white man and the floor about reach up and grab me; hadn’t been for my arms being held, I would’ve fell ” (221). Notable is Dessa’s momentary physical preservation in Nemi’s grasp; despite himself, his touch grants Dessa a brief balance. Contrasted with Nemi’s earlier philosophy on touching “darkies,” the scene highlights his gradually-growing physical proximity to the bodies of the enslaved, suggesting that his madness is both instigated by and manifested in touch: “It was seldom necessary to strike a darky with one’s hand” (30).

The ultimate image of spatial enclosure associated with Nemi is his attempt to contain Dessa’s biography and body within his text, The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them: “On a happy impulse, he flipped back through the pages and showed her the notes he had made on some of their previous
sessions. “What that there . . . and there . . . and that, too?” He told her and even read a little to her, an innocuous line or two. She was entranced. “I really say that?” (45). Tying Dessa’s scars to the signifying function of language, Goldman views Nemi’s process as a re-writing: “. . . so Williams’s Nehemiah attempts to reinscribe the “marks” on Dessa’s hips and thighs as the “marks” of his own black page (that is, of his manuscript, which without Dessa’s words, is simply nothing—a white space)” (Goldman 9). Dessa’s own view of Nemi’s rewriting and his embryonic text underlines the power lost in biased transcription or translation: “I’d turned cold when I learned he’d tried to write down what I said” (231). The novel concludes with racial and spatial hierarchies decidedly reversed as Dessa muses on Nemi’s fate: “Nemi was low; and I was the cause of him being low” (232).

Williams carries her motifs of recursive and osmotic bodies and spaces into the structural and stylistic elements of the text; most overtly with a thematic and structural focus on braiding that both acknowledges alternate forms of textuality while moving beyond them: “The way the women in the quarters used to would braid hair. Mothers would braid children heads—boy and girl—until they went into the field or for as long as they had them. This was one way we told who they peoples was, by how they hair was combed” (234). Braiding functions within the text as a visual indicator of lineage, and at a structural level as metaphor for the symbiotic relationship between the novel, other forms of storytelling, and other versions of history. Williams weaves the narrative strands of three speakers—the failed author Nemi, escaped slave Dessa, and southern housewife Rufel-- to create an image of slavery that both underlines and contests previous versions of what is now a historical memory: “Through the multiple voices that
enunciate her complex subjectivity, the black woman writer not only speaks familiarly in the discourse of the other(s), but as Other she is in contestorial dialogue with the hegemonic dominant and subdominant or ‘ambiguously (non)hegemonic’ discourses” (Henderson 4).

Dessa’s fiercely oral narration, while removing her from what Williams terms being “at the mercy of literature and writing,” connects her to the tradition of spoken storytelling: “A writer draws upon a tradition of storytelling, of sounds, of words, and people playing with words, and all of that. That is still going on today, showing a continuity that in fact it’s a part of our lives, and it is so intrinsic that you can’t get away from it” (DR 1, Jordan 301). Dessa’s view of story stresses personal power, artistic independence, and the sheer force of personal remembrance: “This why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back. I will never forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands. Well, this the childrens have heard from out own lips” (236). The orality of Dessa’s narration enables Williams’s use of what she cautiously terms “dialect,” a technique she admits is fraught with difficulty on a commercial level: “I’m also aware of a lot of white critics’ impatience with the use of black speech” (291). While Williams’s words stress the differing pace of black speech, Dessa’s opinion of Nemi’s language could be read as a commentary upon the opacity or obscurity of much academic discourse: “Sometimes I don’t even be knowing what you be saying. You don’t talk like Masa and he a real uppity-up white man, but not like no po buckra neither. Kaine say its be’s white men what don’t talk white man talk. You one like that, huh?” (66).
Privileging tactility and corporeality, *Dessa Rose* uses a focus on the physical to profoundly depict the effects of enslavement, “replac[ing] the dominant discourse’s obsession with the visual black body with a perspective that privileges touch and other senses” (Griffin 521). Rufel’s visceral response to Dessa’s scarring underscores the primacy of touch while epitomizing the image of the osmotic, highly-tactile body: “She could almost feel the fire that must have lived in the wench’s thighs” (135). To psychiatrist Dori Laub, the sympathetic effects of art surpass mere emotional echoes and border on the physical: “By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner in the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to experience trauma in himself” (qtd in McWilliams 360). Notably, Williams’s own view of her created characters acknowledges their spiritual and physical independence from her pen: “You say I humanized her [Rufel], but it’s not the writer that does that. It is really her contact primarily with Dessa and the other runaways that does that. When she takes that baby in her arms, I mean, she is a person” (293). Williams’s philosophy echoes that of Young, in which characters function as “urgent beings with visceral power, as ghostly presences that wander through the landscape of the novel” (9). Thus artistic production, for Williams, becomes synonymous with the bearing of pain, that of the author and of the characters: “The writing in many ways was very difficult and very painful, and the process of copyediting I had some real thoughts and real feelings about” (289). Compellingly, the body of Nemi, as an example of the failed or misdirected artist, is associated repeatedly with causing pain rather than bearing it: “The memory of the gesture still had the power to outrage him; it had infuriated him then, and he had struck her in the face, soiling his hand and bloodying her nose” (30). The ultimate fate of his
text, on one level composed of equal parts scribbles and blank pages, and on another level tightly contained between Dessa’s opening dream and her final first-person narration, indicates the physical and spiritual fate of the artist-cum-“compiler or editor” (25).

_Dessa Rose_, in the words of the author, “pulls you along, pulls you along,” moving the reader into and out of tight spaces, into and out of pain and pleasure, thematically and structurally braiding history and fiction to portray the emotional aftereffects of slavery (Broken 291). Paralleling Dessa’s growth into narrator against Nemi’s rejection of art and descent into madness, _Dessa Rose_ is as much about healing as it is about the ultimate empathetic purpose of the human body and artistic production. Williams’s unflinching insistence on the reality of both the characters’ pain and the historical situation may help illuminate her paradoxical author’s note: “The novel then, is fiction; all the characters, even the country they travel through, while based on fact, are inventions. And what is here is as true as if I myself had lived it” (6). Authorship, to Williams, is ownership, agency, healing: “I now own a summer in the 19th century” (6).
Chapter Four

*Murphy*: Body as Bound(ed) Space

Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy* details the coping mechanisms of the body under capitalism: commodified and caged, societal outsider Murphy moves beyond the perception of a divided bodily existence into the life of his mind through masochistic meditation. Beckett, wielding his vast grasp of literary and philosophical traditions, experiments with language both open or referential, and self-referentially closed as he examines the mechanisms and inner spaces of the body as well as the structures and spaces that contain it. Paralleling the construction of his text to his examinations of language and bodily connectivity, Beckett uses pastiche to pay homage to the literary past while penning an ending that is both final and unremitting.

Though notoriously resistant to exegesis, Beckett seems aware of the responsiveness of his texts to deconstruction and the often -incongruous effect of his prose: “My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else” (qtd. in Cochran 94). Stressing the aural and oral nature of language, Beckett acknowledges that the difficulty of deciphering his literary convolutions can border on the physical: “If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them” (qtd. in Cochran 94). Beckett suggests metaphorically that the effects of music and language are similar, with language standing as a primal or “fundamental” method of communication comprised of endlessly interpretable
“overtones”; the goal of the writer is thus to remove “the veil” of an opaque language initially created in response to fear: “To bore hole after hole in it [language], until what cowers behind it begins to seep through—I can think of no higher goal for a contemporary writer” (qtd. in Cochran 92). Reaching for a “much desired wordless language” or Joyce’s “savage economy of hieroglyphics,” Beckett’s novel Murphy showcases a familiarly unfamiliar language whose effect is best described in the lament of his female protagonist Celia: “She felt, as she felt so often with Murphy, spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next; so that in the end she did not know what had been said. It was like difficult music heard for the first time” (Murphy 40, qtd. in Cochran 93, 91). Berensmeyer echoes Celia’s description of this cyclical obliteration of meaning, arguing that Beckett’s language “is to an unusual degree independent of the connotative dimensions of language, similar to a theorem”: “In terms of speech act theory, Beckett’s utterances can be described as self-destructive of their locutionary and illocutionary force, striving to deplete themselves of their semantic and referential dimensions” (Berensmeyer 466, 474). Though reading in Beckett’s prose the sterility of mathematics, Berensmeyer acknowledges the self-referentiality of Beckettian syntax; that “by commenting on itself, it strategically posits itself as absolute. Its form is also its content. . . In other words, it is a metalanguage that pretends to be (or masks itself as) ordinary language” (468). Other critics read Beckett’s language as both broadly referential and tightly closed, weighted with a poetic and literary past yet attempting to move beyond traditional meaning, “neither hermetic nor Orphic, but oscillatory, moving uneasily to and fro between these two views” (Murphy 19). Foster’s musical and aural reading offers
perhaps the most approachable assessment of Beckett’s language, arguing that “both
Beckett and Murphy are suggesting language as a “register” or registers, beyond the
denotative, linear connection between word and thing, signifier and signified” (11).

On a thematic level, Murphy focuses on the many actions done by and to the
body; in detailing Celia and Murphy’s love affair, the narrative moves through variously
enclosed settings that are themselves intimately tied to the body. The prevailing image
offered is one of containment: the body serves as a membrane or divider between the
world and the enclosed mind: “Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere,
hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it
excluded nothing that it did not itself contain” (107). Beckett’s use of reflexive verbiage
indicates the extent to which the world of Murphy’s mind is isolated yet generative, while
his choice of the word “hermetic,” which in medicine applies to a surgical method of
dressing wounds, underlines the novel’s trope of physical healing embodied in Murphy’s
highly sought after “surgical quality” (62). This image of the “alienating/alienated and
self-creating” “universe of mind” (Foster 9) finds echoes in Beckett’s description of the
nature of the artistic process: “The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction.
And art is the apotheosis of solitude. There is no communication because there are no
vehicles of communication” (qtd. in Cochran 92). P.J. Murphy reads the novel as a
budding artist’s meditation upon the difficulties of artistic and thus physical embodiment,
with Murphy seeking bodylessness as Beckett seeks genre by assuming “a critical attitude
towards his central characters and, implicitly, towards himself as a would-be artist, for,
by Beckett’s own very rigorous standards, he is essentially engaged in a series of
‘exercices de style’ in order to camouflage the fact that he too is only as yet ‘partly artist’” (18).

The nature of Murphy’s heart also occupies considerable space in the text, as subject of Beckett’s many forays into the paradoxical versatility of language; weaving imagery that demands etymological unraveling, Beckett ties Murphy’s body to mathematics and linguistics: “For Murphy had such an irrational heart that no physician could get to the root of it” (3). In mathematics, an irrational number cannot be expressed by a finite fraction or root but must instead be represented by a continuing series. The OED points out that an irrational number is also known as a surd, which can also refer to a consonant produced without vibration of the vocal cords, resonating with Beckett’s own description of language as “a matter of fundamental sounds”. The surd returns later in *Murphy* in the lyrical “justification of the expression “Murphy’s mind””: “He did not move, he was a point in the ceaseless unconditioned generation and passing away of line. Matrix of surds” (112). A commentary on both the nature of language and the possibility of an underlying mathematical structure to existence, Beckett’s “matrix of surds” can also be read as establishing ironic authorial distance from the elevated language preceding: “Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom” (112). Ellis reads Beckett’s text and use of “surd” as “a consistently anti-materialist project”:

To the narrator’s way of thinking, the roots of materialist ontology extend back to the Pythagoreans and their notion of mathematics as the repository of truth. Significantly, surds represented the central chink in the armor of the Pythagorean understanding of the universe as a rational numerical structure, an understanding
that from the novel’s opening pages the narrator seems determined to dismantle.

(Ellis 122)

Murphy’s incommensurable heart, that ungraphable figure in the oral-mathematical matrix of surds, thus demands the excision of a surgeon rather than the prescription of a physician, the same perforation Beckett feels necessary for language.

*Murphy* also details the body as text or performance; unavoidably visible, the body’s readability is both an opportunity for physical and emotional expression and an arena of repression by societal forces: “Murphy’s strategies for coping with regulatory social structures are often constructed in association with the body. The body, for Murphy, is an accomplice of the social” (Foster 7). Appeased by physical expression, the body finds balance in what Beckett calls “speaking even” (qtd. in Cochran 96): “It now seemed to Murphy that there were two equally legitimate ways in which the gesture might be concluded, and the sublation effected” (4). Celia and Murphy’s discussion over employment evinces this same concern with what and how the body performs; remodeling Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*, Murphy insists upon the precedence of character over achievements: “I am what I do,” said Celia. “No, “ said Murphy. “You do what you are, you do fraction of what you are, you suffer a dreary ooze of your being into doing”” (37). Arguing for the artistic integrity of Beckett’s numerous allusions, Worton suggests that he “alerts us to the power of the past”: “By alluding to, and rewriting clichés, he is underlining the fact that many statements have become part of common parlance precisely because they say something that is relevant to our individual and communal lives. We are thus propelled into a reevaluation of why these affirmations have become essential parts of modern thought” (82). Upon Murphy’s death, his body becomes fully
textualized, a birthmark on his crisped skin the only identifiable feature renamed by the presiding coroner: “‘birthmark deathmark, I mean, rounding off the life somehow, don’t you think, full circle’” (267). Ironically pointing to the duality of the word “birthmark,” Beckett underlines the lengths to which language can both embody and conceal our fear of death. The fate of Murphy’s ashes, fully dispersed around a tavern, could be read as his final immersion in the social milieu and the ultimate triumph of the materialist ontology as represented by the presence of soul and mind in his cremated remains: “By closing time the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon” (275).

The novel’s various settings are intimately tied to the body and its capacity for agency; in a rocking chair in a former prostitute’s quarters, in the attic of an mental hospital, Murphy seeks to pacify his physical and emotional longings: “The futility of acting out desire, which Wylie suggests through the exemplar of the always empty bucket, which negates the possibility of fulfillment, is articulated, textually, in *Murphy* through the spaces in which bodies are located” (Foster 5). Space within the text becomes an isolating force which must be counteracted by physical connection or methods of enclosure: “I can’t talk against space,” said Murphy” (39). Bondage, in decreasing available space and enabling “only the most local movements,” pacifies the body while freeing the mind, “for it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind, as described in section six. And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word” (2). Psychologist Baumeister argues similarly that “masochism is an escape from identity to body”:
Masochistic activity, in other words, is a concerted and multifaceted attack on the high-level aspects of the self. The self as symbolic entity, extended in time, capable of planning and executing high-level action, and sustaining a certain level of self-worth and dignity, is systematically denied. At the same time, awareness of self is focused on the lowest possible levels. Attention is drawn to the self as a body, as a locus of sensation. (42)

Murphy’s “appeasement” of the body thus relies upon a recognition of its limits and its potentialities, while the “life in his mind” results in a pleasure that both includes and moves beyond the physical. This dialectic process of physical and emotional equilibrium counterbalances the vast options offered by capitalist society and, more basically, by the perceived divisiveness of human embodiment: “‘But what is the good of going merely in the body?’” (35). The garret and the padded rooms at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, with their single windows and susceptibility to invasion and surveillance, “map out the spatial co-ordinates of Murphy’s desire” (Foster 11): “Within the narrow limits of domestic architecture he had never been able to imagine a more creditable representation of what he kept on calling, indefatigably, the little world” (Murphy 181). Noting the “romantic trope” of the garret, Foster argues for a metatextual reading of the attic as ”a space of creativity within which the artist-poet labours in isolation”: “Murphy is thus incorporated in the “literariness,” or “fictionality” of space as an Ideal” (Foster 9).

Structurally, the text echoes these tropes and images of inwardness and outwardness, space and enclosure; beginning with Murphy caged yet free, the novel demands immediate scrutiny into Beckett’s paradoxical, often self-destructive sentences, which often undo the very descriptions they highlight: “The sun shone, having no
alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free, in a mew in West Brompton” (1). Murphy, emotionally unfettered despite the physical containment of his body, displays a freedom denied to both the sun and the round of lives in the “nothing new” metropolis. Eyeing Beckett’s habitual unsettling of meaning in Assumption, Pilling notes a “typically disquieting and destabilizing stab at possibility and impossibility” neatly applicable to the opening lines of Murphy: “The sentence in question acts as a kind of call to attention, or as an invitation, not easily avoided, to the reader to re-read and unscramble it; its very brevity seems to conspire in this miniature drama of pre-emptive activity” (19). Inviting the reader to determine both the conditions of Murphy’s freedom and their own, Beckett presents an image of independence that is yet starkly reliant upon a situation of bondage at the fringes of society, “for the mew had been condemned” (1).

The text concludes with dueling images of both autonomy and oppression, with Celia’s entrapment into caring for her grandfather contrasted against the emancipation of his kite: “The end of the line skimmed the water, jerked upward in a wild whirl, vanished joyfully in the dusk” (282). The novel’s ending structure, this portrait of the liberated kite, the rapid “passing away of line,” (112) juxtaposed against Celia’s path “into the teeth of the wind” (282) — “no shorter way home” — exemplifies what Berensmeyer terms “a double recursion that envisages the unpresentable generativity of the literary text” (1): “This form of writing achieves formal (ie logically rigorous) closure and an unceasing dynamics of “going on” (469). Plotting Beckett’s text structurally as “a creative recursion,” (1) “dynamic circularity,” (468) “a feed-forward and feed-backward loop,” Berensmeyer argues for reading Murphy’s linguistic and structural self-referentiality,
allusive language, and manifold ending as products of a continuous process of self-reflective generation.

Beckett also toys with the traditions of narrative interruption and pastiche with the inclusion of Celia’s physical statistics, which Pilling reads as “priceless relics” (30) providing “a window of ventilation,” (31) which “work much like the interpolated episode or moral essay which proved so useful to eighteenth-century novelists; the suspension of narrative momentum unexpectedly promotes narrative continuity, and at the same time offers forum in which discursive, or even specifically dogmatic issues can be raised” (30). Critics have traditionally discussed Celia’s statistics in terms of bodily commodification and “the contraction of self,” “the descriptive assessment of which is ultimately rendered meaningless” (Foster 3). However, the anatomist’s attention to detail found in the list of Celia’s measurements, in a text highly concerned with the medical and psychiatric, suggests rather the chart of a patient, or even a “tab,” “a patient “on parchment””: “A patient was put on parchment (or on caution) whenever there was occasion to suspect him of serious suicidal leanings” (184). Repeated though vague references to Celia’s fantasies of aquatic suicide underline the image of psychological instability while gently prodding the reader to uncover her ultimate “course”: “Celia’s course was clear: the water. The temptation to enter it was strong, but she set it aside” (14). The position of tabbed patient to Mercyseat nurse, “who having endorsed it [the tab] was from that time forward responsible for the natural death of the bastard in question,” seems to parallel the relationship between Celia and reader; asked first to decode her suicidal inclinations, the reader is then led to a larger examination of her motives and those of the society that shapes her.
Beckett’s view of art configures the body of the artist as prism, absorbing and reflecting the independent force that is art, while underlining the relative unimportance of both artist and created characters: “For what I was doing was neither for Molloy, who mattered nothing to me, not for myself, of whom I despaired, but on behalf of a cause which, having need of us to be accomplished, was in its essence anonymous, haunting the minds of men, when its miserable artisans should be no more” (qtd. in Cochran 93). Deemphasizing the predominance of the artist while stressing the intricacy of art as a craft, Beckett suggests that art has an agency beyond the human. The difficulty of transcribing or translating the art that “haunts” thus stems from the body’s potential for imbalance: “I can’t let my left hand know what my right hand is doing. There is a danger of rising up into rhetoric. Speak it even and pride comes. Words are a form of complacency” (qtd. in Cochran 96). In underlining the relative peace required to weave a language, Beckett highlights the manner in which language embodies both our primal satisfaction at the domination of nature and our deeply-constructed fear of loss. “Speaking even,” in opposition to “rising up” into persuasive or bombastic language, suggests the possibility of a text or language concerned, like music, with the proper key or tonality. If evenly spoken, art can move those who consume it beyond the boundaries of their body and senses: “The reality of depth can be conquered” (qtd. in Kennedy 304). This destruction of the illusion of depth echoes Mr. Kelly’s delight at the disappearance of his still-leashed kite: “Now he could measure the distance from the unseen to the seen, now he was in a position to determine the point at which seen and unseen met” (280). Art and language seem to echo the role of the kite line, enabling reader and artist to connect with the ineffable, the reality beyond depth. The novel’s closing line, “All out,” (282)
emphasizes the cessation of words and literary space, while the progress of Mr. Kelly’s kite line stresses the psychological buoyancy needed to face the excruciatingly slow process of artistic creation: “The cord wormed slowly off the winch—out, back a little, stop; out, back a little, stop. The historical process of hardened optimists” (279).

*Murphy*, a novel thematically concerned with the making of connections between body and mind, body and bodies, body and world, demands of the reader a willingness to trace the lacework of language and allusion to its source, while underlining the loss of agency inherent in such physical or intellectual connectivity: “Kites, . . . dog leashes—all these multiform threads linking bodies and minds—function in *Murphy* as reminders of the fact that the outer world to which one is bound by such ties, as Murphy is roped to his chair at the beginning of the novel, is a sort of prison for the spirit” (Farrow 4). Highlighting the paradoxical nature of the body as a vehicle of connection and a victim of various forms of bondage, the suicidal bodies of *Murphy*’s characters echo Beckett’s exploration of the possibility of exploding the reified nature of language, while inviting the bodymind of the reader into a re-examination of their own concepts of language, society, and the novel.
Chapter Five

Golden Gate: Spanning Distance

Woven around the central image of bridging, Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate* braids together the stories of those seeking connection; highlighting the role of the body and mind in spanning physical and emotional space, the novel stresses the ultimate necessity for both love and art in a commodified world. Constructed to both provoke and pacify the reader through the dual use of iambic tetramer and reader address, this highly metafictional and intertextual poem, while recalling the lineage of verse and the luminaries of literary history, challenges readers to reconsider genre and textuality.

Seth openly discusses his stance on using iambic tetramer, or eight -syllable verse lines, claiming ”those dusty bread molds of Onegin” enable syllabic rapidity; the iambic pattern unfolds the story quickly while spurring the reading pace:

Because it once was noble, yet

Capers before the proud pentameter,

Tyrant of English. I regret

to see this marvelous swift meter
demean its heritage. (101)
In resurrecting tetrameter and seeking to restore its glory, Seth underlines both its present fallen or “demeaned” status, as well as its possibility for future fruitfulness as a structural source of sustenance for poets and readers. His use of tetrameter, however, is not unweighted with sorrow about the international dominance of Western styles, which he indicates in an interview: “And we have a tremendous habit, sadly, in India of taking the fashion of the West that has already been discarded by the West and hanging on to it. Instead of that, we should just think for ourselves. . . to close your eyes to a poem just because it is written in a particular rhyme and meter is silly” (Seth 156). Touching upon the paradoxical nature of intertextuality and stylistic emulation, Seth envisions an art moving beyond the rigid categories of fashion or the constraints of an era. Tetrameter has the added effect of both encouraging reader progress through alternating verse and regularly halting narrative progress in order to provide space for reflection, a quality due to the brevity of the final couplet: “Even the crudest improvised ottava rima narrative will display some fluctuation between telling the story and reflecting upon the story as its unfolding discourse pulsates between alternate and couplet rhyme (Addison 134). A key instance of form directly affecting content, the couplet’s tight structure encourages both narrative and reader pause as well as heightened “narrative focus”: “Though it can be used simply for a change in voice, it favors an utterance that contracts and sharpens in narrative focus as well as style, lending itself to irony and judgment” (Addison 138). The speaker’s often- satirical stance towards the main characters thus emerges as one of several examples of the long-reaching effects of the dictates of form:

The loving pair has bit the apple

Of mortal knowledge. As we see
The rosy half-light of love’s chapel

Halo their ardent heads, should we

Hymn them in accents hushed and holy?

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Far better, since my life’s a mess,

To spray the mooncalfs with invective.

Why do they look so pleased, when I

Am loverless, and pine, and sigh? (51)

Establishing ironic distance through elevated, even Miltonic language while paradoxically revealing personal intimacies, the speaker cum author becomes yet another character in the novel, musing upon the paradoxical nature of his “mooncalf” creations as both fictional yet having agency enough to pen their own “fragile fictions” (52). Discussing Russian author Lyn Hejinian’s poetic novel Oxota, Mchale describes the effect of the nebulous position of the author on the multiple-voicedness of the postmodernist long poem: “The author here, as in Onegin, is an amphibious figure, sometimes outside and superior to the world she (or he) narrates, sometimes inside it and on the same plane, sometimes nowhere at all. Far from ‘mastering’ the poem’s polyphony, the author only contributes another voice to it” (259). The author thus becomes another character in his poem.
This presentation of the author as ironically distant speaker culminates in direct address to a “Dear Reader” constructed in response to the poet’s desires or fears: “(A safe bet: it you’ve read till here, /You must possess an iron ear)” (241). The poem’s unabashed metafictionality shifts reader focus to the process of reading, underlining its aurality and orality while widening the definition of poetry and text:

But the baring of the literary device in this bold manner challenges the reader, and that includes any actual reader not scared away immediately by the verse that meets the eye, to read and/or listen in a manner characterized by the attention to the verbal ‘materiality’ which rhyme and rhythm depends on and exploits, with enhancement of attention to the verbal . . . (Sauerberg 462)

The speaker’s parenthetical asides construct his audience as relatively sophisticated and demanding readers, skilled at recognizing allusions from all areas of culture; referencing both film technique and the history of poetry, Seth invites readers to judge the merit of his performance:

To link this chapter of the novel

To John’s departure, sketched before,

Requires a flashback. (I should grovel

At this cheap stratagem, and, more,

My bard card should be burned.) Dear Reader,

In mitigations, let me plead a
Drainage of brain. Perhaps you’ll wait

Till its recharged? . . . You indicate

I must continue with the story? (241)

This questionable humility, read as a deliberate insertion of narrative frailty or “weak narrativity,” emphasizes the multiplicity of voices present in the poem while avoiding what Mchale terms “the trap of master-narratives” (260). Using enjambment to emphasize the stanza’s slant rhymes rather than its pure rhymes, Seth suggests the patterns of everyday speech, underlining the status of speaker as amicable author.

Nestling the image of the Golden Gate Bridge into an account of a waterside ramble taken by Phil and Liz, Seth implies that physical and emotional connection can counter the unpredictability of life; bridging space emerges as one of humanity’s most valuable abilities and a dominating theme of the text:

the towers,

High built, red-gold, with their long span

—The most majestic spun by man—

Whose threads of steel through mists and showers,

Wind, spray, and the momentous roar

Of ocean storms, link shore to shore. (206)
Highlighting the illusory delicacy of the manmade web of steel, the speaker suggests that
the human frame has the potential to be uniquely impervious to turbulence, the potential
to create powerful and enduring connections. Reading the poem as rendering clear “the
essential oneness of all human existence,” Vijayasree contends that “the text is not so
much a celebration of yuppiesdom as a discerning analysis of the malaise of modern
times, for which Seth prescribes love as the only cure. The golden gate to happiness is
love, the genuine reaching out between individuals” (404, 403). Vijayasree’s image of
holistic oneness echoes Seth’s descriptions of the underlying mathematics of bodies and
relationships, while drawing attention to the body and mind’s potential for hermetic
isolation; in a lover main character Liz seeks not a missing piece with which to merge but
a reflection to contemplate: “She’d often pondered /Her own geometry, and
wondered/About a possible congruence” (41). The body and mind become not text but
equation, their materiality created and expressed by the mathematics of self-
consciousness.

Making love enables the ultimate bridging between bodies and minds, leading to
the near-amalgamation of lovers who “must shed more than their clothes. They need/To
shed their bodies. Flesh and fire/Can meet but can’t merge (182). The metaphorical
casting off of “the innocent bodies that express / So forthrightly such happiness”
transcends the “lust for flesh” as well as the idea of a love “whose chief projection/ is to
give life” (98): “Does earthly beauty just exist/For contemplation?” (186). In the heated
disputes of the lovers Phil and Ed, Seth paraphrases traditional debates about the
morality of sexuality and the predominance of will over flesh, suggesting that the body,
as “God’s instrument” (98) is blessed mainly in its ability for “forthright expression”.

44
Art also serves as a bridge between bodies and minds, connecting artists to both their inner and outer worlds while encouraging bonds between consumers, their own bodies, and the bodies of others. The Golden Gate itself functions as massive muse uniting viewers: “the golden span/Hangs for the world to hymn and scan” (208). In the character of the artist Janet, Seth depicts art’s ability to transcend boundaries and evade definition, emphasizing its non-utilitarian nature:

She is a sculptor. Stress and pleasure

For her thus perfectly combined,

The boundaries of toil and leisure

By definition ill-defined,

Her worktime doubles as her playtime. (9)

Lost the in the spell of the “artist’s daze,” (8) Janet shapes sculpture minimalist but referential, whose “classic leanness” (293) leaves viewers “unsettled,” (272) much like the physical effect of the juxtaposition of disparate eras of music: “Though you know darling, how disjointed/These jumbled periods make me feel” (67).

Seth also thematically touches upon the necessity of accessing and recycling the past; depicting John’s “creative dream” upon uncovering “the petals of a grand rosette/No longer choked and overset/ With plaster on the reborn ceiling,” (127) Seth suggests that an appreciation of the past is not just the province of the artist; history, tangible and valuable, is accessible to all. The house itself, as domestic space, “deftly mingle/ Three styles with ecumenic flair—/ A cuvee equable yet zestful (127). Using the language of
winemaking, Seth suggests that artistic “blending” requires a balanced touch rather than the fragmented approach of “ungovernable a-la-cartists” (6.8.12).

Human bodies and texts become commodified when subject to shallow contact or incomplete bridging; John’s “athletic masque of lust” through singles bars, his pretense “of trust or the demise of trust,” leaves him “free from danger” but “maimed,” without a “current countermanding/The icy flow of his closed pain” (249). Emphasizing the inherently performative nature of social behavior, Seth depicts the necessity for contact as “craved complementation” (8.20.9):

If lovers cannot cease caressing,

Isn’t it that they long to find

Their bodies’ unity expressing

A truer unison of mind? (8.20.1-4)

Art in a commodified world becomes simply a byproduct of the body, poetry an excrescence of impractical flesh: “Drivelling in rhyme’s all very well; the question is does spittle sell?” (101). Using oral and gustatory metaphor, Seth delineates the position of writer to critic:

A writer is a mere arthritic

Among these muscular Gods of Taste.

As for that sad blancmange, a poet—

The word is hard; he ought to know it. (101)
As embodied by Seth, the artist-writer suffers from the disruption or failure of an underlying structural system: the joints and bones cannot stand up against the “hardness” of the world and the “muscularity” of critics. The use of food-related metaphor as applied to the body of the poet invites discussion into the ultimate neurological function of metaphor; Hogan theorizes that metaphor “prime[s]” “procedural schemas,” which are used by the brain “to transfer procedural rather than representational information” (93):

Consider an image from the fifth century Sanskrit poet, Ghartrihari, who speaks of a girl with “honey in her lips” . . . I suggest that its effect is due to a priming of procedural schemas for tasting honey—licking off the thick coat of honey on the surface, then gently sucking out what remains in the recesses—here aimed metaphorically at a woman’s lips.” (94)

Thus Seth’s sugary metaphor functions on a neurological level as an invitation to literally “taste” the gelatinous body of the author, a notion underlined by the overt orality of the stanza and the focus on salivation.

*The Golden Gate* incorporates the motif of bridging and connection into its highly intertextual structure and style. Reading intertextuality as symbiosis, Cowart stresses the non-objective nature of all allusion: “. . . the guest author undertakes a conversation with the literary past, a one-sided epistemic dialogue that involves construing—or misconstruing—the position of the host author. The guest author, in other words “reads” the host text in the act of replicating it” (19). Seth, undertaking a conversation with the cultural present, constructs conversations as a series of rapid rejoinders, often unattributed, which Sauerberg notes echo the pace of “sitcom dialogue “(449):
Janet reads out her fortune, wryly:

“For better luck you have to wait

Til winter. What’s it now, September?

Come speedily, O numb November.

Congeal my fingers. Cigarette?”

“You know I don’t. Here’s mine: Forget

The entanglement of love; forget not

to practice charity. You see—

The cookie says love’s not for me. “(23)

Reading the configuration of Seth’s dialogue as a structural repercussion of the recursive final couplet, Sauerberg suggests the rapid-fire discussions will be familiar to readers immersed in pop culture or mass media: “My point here is that lay readers not initially scared by the ‘strange’ lay-out of the text will recognize both the world described (Californian rich and smart-set) and the anecdotal structure of the sitcom dialogue as a homology to the setting and the punch-line final-couplet structure of Seth’s sonnets respectively” (449).

Seth discusses the body of the artist at a literal as well as thematic level, using paratextual space to continue his dialogue with the literary past and reflect upon the physicality of composition:
So here they are, the chapters ready,

And, half against my will, I’m free

Of this warm enterprise, this heady

Labor that has exhausted me

Through thirteen months, swift and delightful. (Dedication)

Prefiguring his metaphor of baking with *Onegin*, Seth again suggests the nurturant properties of art and creation, its ability to “lend us wings” (67) and “stir” the brain (101). Perhaps his most vivid picture of art’s ability to weave visceral connection is the synesthetic image of Brahms’ A Minor:

The brisk allegro. Then a yearning

warm ductile length of lyric spins

Its lovely glimmering thread at leisure

Inveiglingly from measure to measure

With a continuous tenderness

So deep it smooths out all distress,

All sorrow; ravishing, beguiling . . . (71)

Using the alliteration of sonorant l’s to suggest liquidity, Seth creates a contrast between the long assonance of e and ei sounds and the vigorous assonance of short i sounds, using the juxtaposition of vowel pace to evoke the complimentary tones of the cello and violin
for which Brahms’ concerto is written. Suggesting the slow rise of a gentle motif in contrast with the “brisk allegro,” Seth scatters the stanza with voiceless sibilants to maintain the allegro rhythm behind the flow of continued assonance. Using the transmuted rhythms of Brahms to suggest the therapeutic and connective function of art, Seth inveigles the reader into “floating on a slow tide” of language (71).

Consciously engaging with the history and effects of iambic tetrameter, Vikram Seth shapes in The Golden Gate a meta- and inter-textual examination of modern malaise, tracing the effects of both art and culture upon the human body while suggesting the need for physical and emotional engagement with world and others. Drawing attention to the process and effects of reading while presenting the speaker as author as character, Seth invites discussion into the nature of textuality and thus embodiment in the modern world.
Chapter Six

*Pale Fire*: Meter Embodied

Nabokov’s words on literature provide a compelling image for an analysis of “Pale Fire”: Art is “that go-between, that prism,” providing “a merging of the precision of poetry and the intuition of science” while creating a “web of sense” that reflects on its surface the depths of its “inner weave” (Good 1-2). Nabokov’s view of both life and art stresses osmosis, interchange, recombination; a continual cycle of influence aptly termed “literary symbiosis,” which occurs in his fiction both at the level of imagery and theme and but also at the level of structure and language (Cowart 66). “Pale Fire” details the osmotic and recursive body in depicting the complex interactions between body and text, body and world, while highlighting our own ongoing engagement in the reading process.

In numerous playful ways Nabokov draws our attention to the act of reading and its effects. His “Notes on Prosody” provides a compelling model of the stimulating and complex interaction between meter and language; his description of the iambic meter emphasizes both reader expectation and the continuous process of metrical balance: “The beauty of tilt . . . lies in a certain teasing quality of rhythm, in the tentative emergence of an intonation that *seems* in total opposition to the dominant meter, but actually owes its subtle magic to the balance it tends to achieve between yielding and not yielding” (20). Nabokov is also ardently aware of poetry’s physical effect upon the body; in discussing the French Alexandrine he notes the concordance between breath and meter: “The
caesura is well adjusted to the rhythm of human breath in slow reading, while, on the other hand, secondary pauses owing to “shifts” allow for precipitated or delayed exhalations” (Notes 6). Shade’s poem, with its driving beat of iambic pentameter, thus imposes upon its reader a certain rhythm of breath which Nabokov knowingly disrupts through unexpected syntax: consider the frequency and effects of his implied and explicit parenthesis:

I was corrupted, terrified, allured,

and though old Doctor Colt pronounced me cured

of what, he said, were mainly growing pains,

the wonder lingers and the shame remains. (pg 38 line 163—6)

The mid-phrase breakdown of breath caused by the suggested parenthetical slows the pace of the reader, allowing (or forcing) a focus onto Shade’s unexpressed anxiety, while the rising cadence and trailing –er sounds of “wonder lingers” are balanced by the closed finality and falling cadence of “shame remains,” lending a note of recursive resolution to the end of the canto. In delineating the ideal qualities of good writers and readers, Nabokov touches directly upon the psychosomatic effects of art: “The mind, the brain, the top of the tingling spine is, or should be, the only instrument used upon a book” (3). Art is valued for its effect upon the body, both in consumption and creation, an influence concisely delineated by Boyd in his description of the process of reading “Pale Fire”: “Nabokov arranges that on a first encounter we sense the excitement much more than the effort of discovery as we unpack the successive surprises in Kinbote” (69). Nabokov’s ingenuity lies in his ability to anticipate and shape our emotional and physical responses
to a text; “Pale Fire” thus insists on a most basic level upon the reciprocative physicality of text and reader.

Thematically, Shade’s poem details the endless cycle of interchange between body and text, depicting the physical torment of composition, the visceral response of the nervous system (of reader and writer) to the aptly-chosen word, and the cyclical transmogrification of meter into flesh, text into anatomy. Shade’s process of composition is rooted in the physical: we as readers spy upon his liberation of the transcendent through the mechanisms of the ordinary, as his hands swoop through space, across paper and ink, and over brutal hairs and otherworldly lather. Composition, for Shade, is an “agon” powered by the body: “The hand supports the word . . . and thus it physically guides the phrase” (64 line 847—52). The image of the supporting hand, while echoing Nabokov’s lyrical description of meter as poetic scaffolding, underlines the manner in which language is a function of the body: embodiment here directly supports signification. Condren reads Shade’s artistic struggle as equally physical: “We see the disobedience of Shade’s body—the unsuccessful act of shaving becomes a picture of the despair following the poet’s repeated and futile coaxing of his physical self, and thus begins to unfold itself as a parodic analogy for his struggle with his creative self” (132). Physicality, as the enabler of artistic expression, is also its most powerful preventative; Shade even muses as to his need for greater corporal embodiment: “In penless work there is no pen-poised pause / And one must use three hands at the same time/ having to choose the necessary rhyme, / Hold the completed line before one’s eyes, /And keep in mind all the preceding tries” (65 line 862—6). Penless work, disconnected
from the rhythms of handwriting and without record of previous rhymes, transcribed only by the mind, demands of the writer more metaphorical and actual flesh.

Shade describes in electrifying and minute detail the effect of powerful imagery and felicitous phraseology on the artist: “The sudden image, the immediate phrase/ Over the skin a triple ripple send/ Making the little hairs all stand on end” (67 line 918-20). The syllabic brevity of the diction, combined with repeated S and I sounds, echoes the action of energy across the skin while Nabokov’s words dance from the page in flood of vitality. Discussing the physical effect of Shade’s illumination, Condren spins a truly Nabokovian word game in linguistically yoking the ideas of breath and inspiration: “The phenomenon always occurs at the exact moment of afflatus, when the word arrives at the consciousness of the poet/revelator, and, to continue the biblical idiom, the word is made flesh” (Condren 140). This use of the word afflatus, with its dual associations with both the communication of supernatural knowledge and with hissing breath, implies the necessity of breath and body to the translation of “fantastically planned, richly rhymed life” (pg 68 line 969-70). Nabokov often described life and reality as simply raw material for art, however, his emphasis on entropy implies the importance of human embodiment to filtering and re-composing reality: “The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says, “go!” (Good 6). Artist, as microscopic creator of texts and worlds, functions also as ultimate creator by interacting with and recomposing reality.

The body also enters into the weft and weave of the text; Shade portrays Sybil’s body as intricately involved in the structure of the poem, threaded under word and language:
And all the time, and all the time, my love,
you too are there, beneath the word, above
The syllable, to underscore and stress
The vital rhythm. One heard a woman’s dress
Rustle in days of yore.” (68 line 949-52)

The juxtaposition between Sybil-as-meter and the image of clothed femininity suggests the importance of her body to Shade’s process of composition but also her role as backbone to both his life and art; in addition, the unstated emphasis on the breath’s role in shaping syllables and rhythm is paralleled by Nabokov’s use of enjambment to slow the reader’s progress through the stanza. This supportive interweaving between body and text is also found in Nabokov’s anatomical descriptions of the source of artistic illusion: “The magic of art may be present in the very bones of the story, in the very marrow of thought” (Good 4). To Nabokov, art proceeds from the synthesis of the external and the internal, from the interplay of language and meter, body and psychology.

In addition to enacting and detailing the various mechanisms of psychosomatic textual symbiosis, Shade’s poem illustrates various models of the body’s interaction with the outside world. Configured most elementally as a prism, the body becomes subject to invasion and expansion through rhetorical dissection and mapping. The focus on transmigration echoes Nabokov’s view of art as prism; the body has become simply a disposable vessel for energy: “Precautions to be taken in case / Of freak re-incarnation: what to do/ On suddenly discovering that you/ Are now a young and vulnerable toad /
Plump in the middle of a busy road, / Or a bear cub beneath a burning pine, / Or a book mite in a revived divine” (54 line 560-6). The most visible image of the prism, however, is the subtly- emphasized narrative frame involving Shade’s photographic visual memory; the entire poem is envisioned as a series of quickly fading photographs painted upon Shade’s eyelids: “My eyes were such that literally they/ Took photographs . . . /An indoor scene, hickory leaves, the svelte/ Stilettos of a frozen stillicide/—Was printed on my eyelids nether side” (34 line 30—6). The continuous repetition of the word “retake” subtly underlines the depiction of poem as impression of outer word composed and contained within Shade’s head (50).

This interchange between the inner and outer world, microcosm and microcosm, finds echoes in Shade’s continual dissection and mapping of the human body. Zooming from a microscopic to a topographical focus, Nabokov interweaves anatomy and geography to emphasize the continuum between subject and environment: “But no aorta could report regret. / A sun of rubber was convulsed and set” (59 line 101). The voiceless artery and use of passive voice emphasize the effect of outside stimulus upon the body, while the dual etymology of aorta suggests both agency and helplessness, action and reaction: the word’s root contains both “that which is hung” and “to raise, lift up” (OED). Kinbote’s description of Shade’s poetic process underlines these images of internalization and interchange: “I am witnessing John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up” (27). Shade’s anxious vision of despondent widowhood parallels this osmotic motion of language, imagery, and inspiration through the human body: “Your widow lying prone on a dim bed, / Herself a blur in your dissolving head” (53 line 547-8). The image places the
reader both in the room with the grieving widow and in the dead man’s head as he experiences dissolution, giving us the sense that the widow exists only as her dying husband exists to witness her: as his brain slowly ticks to a stop, the outlines of her body dissolve into dimness.

Nabokov also provides an image of the anti-artist in the parasitic body of Kinbote, the critic who reacts recursively to his environment rather than osmotically, demonstrating the physical and psychological pitfalls of isolation, exile, and inattention. Kinbote occupies the uniquely dual position of critic, endowed with the ability to “pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation . . . see the web of the world, and the warp and weft of the web,” but unable to pen his insights and unwilling to commit to exactitude: “I must ask the reader to ignore those two lines, which, I am afraid, do not even scan properly. I could strike them out before publication but that would mean reworking the entire note, or at least a considerable part of it, and I have no time for such stupidities” (228). Instead of translating “the web of the world” himself he settles for soaking Shade in his vision, forcing his perspective on another: “I mesmerized him with it, I saturated him with my vision, I pressed upon him, with a drunkard’s wild generosity, all that I was helpless myself to put into verse” (80). Shade’s metaphorical opinion of this process of reverse osmosis both evokes and trivializes the violence of the roman coliseum, stressing the absurdity of domination in or through art: “‘Sure, sure,’” said Shade. “One can harness words like performing fleas and make them drive other fleas. Oh, sure’” (214). Hazel views this process as parasitic rather than symbiotic or osmotic, turning to entomology for carniverous images and metaphoric puns: “I was to learn later that when alluding to me in public she used to call me “an elephantine tick; a king-sized botfly; a macao worm;
the monstrous parasite of a genius’” (172). A large part of Kinbote’s failure as an artist is his habit of viewing others as mechanized or objectified; even Shade is rendered as a product of faulty physical construction: “It must have been with him a mild form of epilepsy, a derailment of the nerves at the same spot, on the same curve of the tracks, every day” (147). Kinbote’s perspective on Shade’s death emphasizes his view of the poet as unimportant compared to the poetic product: “but the poem was safe” (295). Ultimately deciding to love Shade’s poem despite its “polluted flesh,” Kinbote concludes the text by acknowledging that his influence will be denied and his touch spurned: “In other words, everything will be done to cut off my person completely from my dear friend’s fate” (297, 298).

Beyond his mischievous treatment of meter and syntax, Nabokov integrates the architecture of webbing, weaving, and interchange directly into the structure of the poem by incorporating obviously foreign bodies of text and juxtaposing disparate moments of time. I will use the loaded term pastiche in this case to mean simply Nabokov’s weaving of foreign content into the text—newspaper headlines, television chatter, unwitnessed dialogue—while establishing its distance and difference through italics. Cowart sees pastiche as structurally integral to the nature of literary symbiosis, necessary yet unavoidable: “All writing is “imprisoned within previous writing” and these insights are part of symbiotic meaning” (15). The most examples of embedded language in the poem are the two fortune-cookie-esque couplets dealing with the meaning and shape of life:

*Man’s life as commentary to abstruse

*unfinished poem*. Note for further use. (67 line 939-40)
Life is a message scribbled in the dark

Anonymous. (41 line 940)

Though Boyd suggests Shade’s authorship of the first snippet, the selective use of italics suggests otherwise—Shade’s unitalicized internal monologue directly follows the phrase, suggesting that this section of text comes from an alternate source. Though the first quote places emphasis on meaning over form and the possibly similar nature of poetic immortality and human death, the latter reflects Nabokov’s love of texture and structure: the body becomes the message, embodiment is meaning, and life and body function as art, penned luminously, anonymously and left to hang in darkness. Does Nabokov here touch upon the death of the author and the rise of the critic? Does he offer the reader an ideological, teleological choice that parallels the mindsets of Kinbote and Shade, or does he simply indicate the unavoidable influence of other texts upon his own process and art, the integrity of the cycle of poetic inspiration and composition?

In describing the end moments of his daughter’s life, Shade juxtaposes space within the poem to braid the account of his own anxious television- watching on the fated evening, the narration of the abortive date, and a generous helping of television chatter into a six-line temporal shift experienced by the reader as interruption and pause:

You scrutinized your wrist: “It’s eight fifteen.

[And here time forked.] I’ll turn it on.” The screen
In its blank broth evolved a lifelike blur,

And music welled.

_He took one look at her,_

_And shot a death ray at well-meaning Jane._ (47 line 403-8)

The shock of italics here serves to distinguish the language as both outside narration and heteroglossia, but also visibly indicates the unstated disappointments and underhanded actions of Pete Dean; the rightward lope of their slope prefigures his rapid departure from date and text, standing as a visible signifier of doubtful character. The brackets (whose angularity implies external influence rather than the inner processes suggested by the gentle cupping of parenthesis) force themselves between Sybil’s phrase while the typesetting creates a visual symmetry suggesting the four missing beats in line 407, allowing the reader an indrawn breath, a momentary break from the weight of meter as embodied by language.

Boyd once tangentially noted that John Shade is “stability itself”; however, an examination of the motifs and structures of weaving, reflection, and webbing throughout Shade’s poem indicates the extent to which his stability is the result of constant flux rather than stillness, action and reaction rather than stagnation (29). At the levels of meter, language, imagery, theme and physical configuration, Nabokov depicts the interchange between texts and bodies, bodies and environment, detailing the consequences of approaching life recursively versus osmotically while enabling the reader to choose their own physical and intellectual path through the novel. Boyd’s reading of the figure of the lemniscate as a toppled “symbol for infinity”
stands as a constructive stopping point for a discussion of Nabokov’s artistic process, method, and productions: the infinite interchange of impressions and language conducted by reader and text, artist and art, body and word/world assures a constant cycle of literary symbiosis in which structures, images and themes find their fullest outgrowth only in the enthused words of the thoughtfully engaged observer (186).
Chapter Seven

Conclusion: Experiencing Art

The novels I have examined share a discernible reaching-out towards the reader: through theme, language and structure these vastly diverse writers embrace the goal of fully conveying to the reader the experience of the lived-in body, the body in the world. With recent research into the neuroscience of cognition suggesting that our process of interacting with art is markedly similar to the manner in which we decode the world, a biological basis for the nature of the cathartic and empathic effects of art has been established. The affective web between writers, readers, texts, and bodies is perhaps best exemplified by the words of Romanian poet Nina Cassian in her poem “Ordeal,” translated by Michael Impey and Brian Swann:

I promise to make you more alive than you've ever been.

For the first time you'll see your pores opening
like the gills of fish and you'll hear
the noise of blood in galleries
and feel light gliding on your corneas
like the dragging of a dress across the floor.
For the first time, you'll note gravity's prick
like a thorn in your heel,
and your shoulder blades will hurt from the imperative of wings.
I promise to make you so alive that
the fall of dust on furniture will deafen you,
and you'll feel your eyebrows like two wounds forming
and your memories will seem to begin
with the creation of the world. (220)

Undertaking to focus the reader’s attention dually on the act of reading and the minute
everyday processes of the body, the speaker connects disparate images to situate the
reader’s present body in the context of its fetal development, its mythical and pre-historic
origins, and its daily surroundings. In demanding of the reader an examination of the
place of their body in relation to the universe and the passage of time, as well as a
reassessment of the nature of textuality, the poem suggests that full “alive[ness]” is a
matter of intense focus and the bearing of the pain of beauty and memory, with art
functioning as the ultimate conductor of energy. The authors I have discussed here
present similar images of the empathic capacity of art; bodies commodified, beaten,
bound, starved, and aged find balance through expression, artistic and/or physical.

Acknowledging the symbiotic nature of all creatures and objects, these meta- and
intertextual novels seek to express the many ways in which the individual and the text are
bound to the world.
Works Cited


