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NOVEL INCEST: NEGOTIATING NARRATIVE PARADOX

by

Thomas Grant Olsen

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SIGNED: Thomas G. Ober

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ABSTRACT

"Novel Incest: Negotiating Narrative Paradox," investigates how representations of incest disrupt not only family relationships but narrative conventions as well. The conventions governing a narrative's structural movement from beginning to end are upset in ways that often mimic the destruction of family lineage that incest causes. Each narrative instance of incest marks reconsideration not only of Western kinship systems and, more recently, the discourse of bourgeois family structures, but also of specific aspects of the rhetoric of fiction. This history of family and narrative disruption is sketched in my analysis of such seemingly disparate texts as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*; Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*; John Barth's novels and non-fiction, including *The End of the Road*, *The Floating Opera*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy*, *Lost in the Funhouse*, *The Friday Book*, *Further Fridays*, *LETTERS*, *Sabbatical*, *The Tidewater Tales*, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, and *Once Upon a Time*; David Lynch's films, including *The Alphabet*, *The Grandmother*, *Eraserhead*, *The Elephant Man*, *Dune*, *Blue Velvet*, and *Wild at Heart*; and the pornographic film series *Taboo I - XVIII*. My analysis focuses on author- and reader-centered interpretations and includes both formal and thematic analysis. Psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading strategies are employed to investigate the intersections formed between narrative, rhetoric, and desire. The common thread connecting these texts is their unraveling of conventions in order to restructure the possibilities for narrative fiction.

Introduction

The premise of Will Self's 1997 satiric novel, *Great Apes*, is that the world is "peopled" by apes who have aped human society; humans are understood and treated by the apes as apes are now treated by people. The inversions, reversals, and irony that results functions as biting social criticism, particularly--for the purposes of this introduction--of family and kinship structures. The story follows Simon Dykes, an artist who, as the novel begins, believes he lives a comparatively normal life in a London inhabited entirely by humans. He awakens from this hallucination to discover he is an ape, and the rest of the narrative is concerned with his recovery from the painful and anxiety-ridden delusion that he is human. Simon frequently suffers from his felt "human" differences regarding sexual behavior, prohibitions, and desire. He is disturbed by vague "memories" of his perhaps incest-laden relations with his human children, but the text is much more explicit about the apes' negotiation of incestuous desire. Simon's girlfriend, Sarah Peasenhulme, experiences sexual and emotional dysfunction because of the *absence* of incest rather than its presence: "It's rumored [her father] abuses his daughters--doesn't mate them enough--or at all!"(376). This passage is a great ironic punchline if the reader considers the traumatic and tagedic history that representations of incest form. As all good jokes will, this one reveals in shorthand what is at stake in the more serious approaches to the subject of the joke.

What is at stake in most representations of incest is narrative itself because incest instigates certain paradoxes which disrupt family structures that, in turn, threaten the ways in which narrative forms are structured. Representations of incest often operate as metaphorical shorthand for perceived social chaos. Incest as disruptive force is often employed by authors in series of related tropes about life, death, and other conventional binary oppositions that are understood to be constitutive of Western culture. This tropological short-cut is belied, however, by the complexity of the cultural work that (the

prohibition of) incest performs. That (the prohibition of) incest even performs "cultural" work is tenuous because, as Claude Levi-Strauss observes, incest is the one thing that, paradoxically, appears to be *both* natural *and* cultural. In complex and fantastic ways, the conceit in *Great Apes* takes advantage of this classic paradox and posits the prohibition of incest as neither natural nor cultural. Jacques Derrida, re-examining the kinship studies of Levi-Strauss, claims the incest prohibition as a philosophical place of "rupture"(249). The incest prohibition is a "scandal" for Levi-Strauss because it does not tolerate the nature/culture opposition and requires "*at one and the same time* the predicates of nature and those of culture"(Derrida 253). The prohibition is universal, and therefore "natural," but it is also a system of norms, and therefore cultural. Derrida argues that the incest prohibition "is no longer a scandal one meets up with or comes up against in the domain of traditional concepts; it is something which escapes these concepts and certainly precedes them--probably as the condition of their possibility"(253-4). *Great Apes* pushes the nature/culture opposition--and the incestuous condition of its possibility--to the forefront by so consistently confusing the boundary between opposing forces.

Because all philosophical conceptualizations are related to the nature/culture split, they are designed "to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing which makes this conceptualization possible: the origin of the prohibition of incest"(Derrida 254). This always already origin-less "origin" manifests itself in narratives as desires that drive the very movement of the narrative. Roland Barthes suggests that the movement of most narrative, its structural desire, is an "Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end), if it is true that every narrative (every unveiling of the truth) is a staging of the (absent, hidden, or hypostatized) father--which would explain the solidarity of narrative forms, of family structures . . . "(10). Barthes locates the Oedipal drive in the text and its source as the figurative father. Teresa de Lauretis builds upon and alters Barthes's argument by locating the Oedipal drive in the text and the viewer-reader: "any imagistic identification and any reading of the image, including its rhetoric, are inflected

or overlaid by the Oedipal logic of narrativity; they are implicated with it through the inscription of desire in the very *movement* of narrative, the unfolding of the Oedipal scenario as *drama* "(79). She identifies the source of the Oedipal drive of narrative as figurative "woman": "If narrative is governed by an Oedipal logic, it is because it is situated within the system of exchange instituted by the incest prohibition, where woman functions as both a sign (representation) and a value (object) for that exchange"(140). Taken together, Barthes's and de Lauretis's theorization situates the reader, text and author within a narrative nexus tightly bound by dominant fictions about sex, gender, desire, and (the prohibition of) incest.

At the same time, for both Barthes and de Lauretis there are always moments where one can read "against" the Oedipal narrative current. Barthes states that Oedipal forms and structures constitute a "Text of pleasure," or a "text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading"(14). A "Text of bliss," however, is one that "imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts . . . , unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to crisis his relation with language"(14). For Barthes, it is possible for a reader to maintain both kinds of texts "in his field" so that "he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse"(14). De Lauretis posits that readers and narrative producers must be "Oedipal and narrative with a vengeance"(157) in order to produce readings and texts that exist "at the borders of the Oedipal stage"*83). I contend that a text which features representations of incest positions its reader at "the seam . . . , the fault, the flaw"(Barthes 7) between texts of pleasure and texts of bliss because of the cultural, psychological, and narrative paradoxes that incest consistently inspires. Representations of incest are narrative shortcuts to places of philosophical and cultural rupture because they symptomatically mark a paradoxical place, moment, or generative instance that is present

only as absence. In this way they exist at the borders of the Oedipal structure of narrative and become both Oedipal and narrative with a vengeance. Žilavoj Žizek, building upon the theories of Jacques Lacan and, thus, of Freud, refers to this place of "origin," or "center," that really is not either thing, as a "psychotic kernel"--*Das Ding*, or The Thing, in psychoanalytic terms--around which a subject (an author, reader, or the community of "readers" that make up a culture) endlessly and symptomatically circulates. This (narrative) movement is (incestuous) desire at its most paradoxically productive and destructive.

No less abstractly, storytellers construct texts that feature incest in order to underscore, explore, describe, manipulate, and critique one of the most basic social conundrums. This problem is often what initiates an "anti-Oedipal" movement in narrative. As Kaja Silverman articulates it, an impasse exists between kinship and family structures: "These categories cannot be conflated because kinship maps relations between rather than within families"(39). While family structure often informs kinship structure in a system of mutual reliance (40), the "ideology of the family defines the parents as privileged objects for desire and identification, and so works to eroticize precisely those relationships which kinship, in the guise of the incest prohibition, forbids"(39). Like the reader who finds themselves at the seam between kinds of texts and, thus, diametrically opposed cultural purposes, the individual subject finds him- or herself amidst opposed structural forces that he or she must navigate. According to Barthes, de Lauretis, Leo Bersani, and others, this rift is only traversed by the "artificial" imposition of the "master" Oedipal narrative upon the subject and its constant repetition and reworking in the narratives produced by a culture.

Great Apes exemplifies both the Oedipal drive of narrative and its interruption, the text of pleasure and the text of bliss, and, through satire, the conundrum of the social structure that at once eroticizes incest and prohibits it. The structural movement of the narrative in *Great Apes* deconstructs the conventional Oedipal drive of narrative but,

paradoxically, it does so by employing the most conventional of means. Sarah suffers from a "deep trauma about mating"(140) that is the result of her inattentive mother and father. Her problems manifest themselves during college and she begins to see a "reassuringly straightforward"(141) school counselor. Sarah's reservations regarding "a lot of psychofiddle, a damning diagnosis, kinky therapies and the mapping of her dreamscape"(141)--fears stereotypically associated with a "human" understanding of psychoanalytic practice--are allayed when the counselor "showed her about Freud, the founding alpha of psychoanalysis, and how he had been the first chimp to recognize the destructive emotional effect of a biological alpha not mating his daughter"(142). The ironic inversion is the crux of the joke, and this satire has the effect of rewriting conventional expectations about family, kinship, and narrative structures. Sarah does not want to accept the characterization of "'an abused infant'"(142), but her father's refusal to "give her the good mating every female requires from an alpha if she is going to grow up happy, well adjusted, [and] comfortable with her sense of femininity and seriousness"(142) threatens to place her in a state similar to that of the paradox that Silverman describes.

What's worse for Sarah, and in another broadside of contemporary psychological beliefs, the pattern of abuse may spread from one generation to the next. The counselor wonders whether Sarah's parents were similarly abused, and warns that this kind of "abuse tends to run in groups, Sarah. It may well be that if you have the courage to work on this thing with me, and work at the same time to form a better relationship to your parents, that you can stop the rot, stop it going on down through the generations"(142). What is set up in this combined series of passages is analogous to the Oedipal narrative desire to "know" the "origin" or "end" of the story, but with all the terms typically associated with this drive inverted. Ironically, the "pro-incest" narrative of *Great Apes* fulfills the narrative desire that defines a "text of pleasure" and a "text of bliss"; at the end of the novel, Sarah does stop the rot: "Sarah got all the mating she needed--all the firm

fast penetration that she'd so missed out on as a sub adult. And years later, when her daughters were only just beginning their own small swellings, Sarah rejoiced in the sight of them getting a good solid fucking from all their loving male parents"(382).

What all the primary texts that follow in this dissertation share with *Great Apes* is incest, irony, and an interest in reconfiguring the Oedipal drive of narrative. None fully "escape" the presence of the "master" narrative pattern, but all maintain a "doubly perverse," often ironic approach that decenters and, thus, speaks from the "borders" with an Oedipal "vengeance." About *Moll Flanders*, I argue that the narrative is not Moll's story at all; instead, it is the story of the Editor's struggle to reconfigure and recuperate her unruly, dangerous, and incestuous narrative within a normative figural family structure, of which he takes the position of paternal head. For this figural family structure to work, the Editor situates his reader as "female." The recuperative project is doomed to fail for two reasons: the Editor distrusts his feminized reader just as he distrusts Moll, and incest is an act and desire in excess of the power the Editor has to contain it. As Silverman suggests, the very structure the Editor imposes upon Moll's story itself promotes incestuous desire.

While *Moll Flanders* is a novel about an author-character's attempts at social mastery of his subject and reader through rhetoric, in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, the narrator, John Dowell, self-consciously writes to a "silent listener" he can barely imagine, much less control. Because his narrative takes a quasi-confessional form, the absence of anyone to provide absolution aggravates the problems that the main subject of his narrative--incestuous desire--causes. Whereas *The Good Soldier* is a notoriously convoluted and ambiguous narrative that explicitly calls for "conjecture," one desire remains consistent throughout: reversion. Dowell expands and elevates a word usually associated with property to an overwhelming psychological desire that always manifests itself incestuously. Reversion characterizes all the many relationships of the four main characters, both figuratively incestuous and literally, but it especially

characterizes Dowell's writing of the story itself. His desire to return to and relive each incestuous moment marks not the "resolution" of the Oedipal drive of narrative, but his desire to repeat its process.

The prefix "re-" is just as important in John Barth's novels. Through very complex and sophisticated means--usually referred to as "postmodern"--John Barth's writings (both fiction and non-fiction) are always about the act of returning. Often simultaneously, his writings return to a variety of past narrative forms, to his own previous texts, and to his own experiences as an opposite-sex twin, an experience which he frequently remarks has had an indelible effect upon the way he perceives the world. The incest between opposite-sex twins in his novels--what I call "twincest" for short--is self-consciously used to "try whether different kinds of artistical felt ultimacies and cul-de-sacs can be employed against themselves to do valid new work; whether disabling contradictions, for example, can be escalated or exacerbated into enabling paradoxes" (*Friday Book* 78-9). In other words, Barth attempts to disrupt the "felt ultimacy" of the Oedipal drive of narrative by strategically deploying incest and exploring the ramifications of the various (narrative) paradoxes that incest represents. I show that Barth uses metaphorical figures that employ language associated with journeys "backwards" towards a "center," or origin, but that his novels reveal this "center" as an ultimately chaotic, unapproachable absence. Not without ironic intent is the chapter about Barth placed equidistant from the ends of this dissertation.

The final two chapters are both explicitly about the narrative movement within specific film texts, but they are also about the narrative movement over an entire body of work. The chapter about David Lynch begins with a brief series of moments from *Wild at Heart* that are explicitly about incest but implicitly reference something I have termed a "white tube," which both is and is not a signifier of the penis. To explain the white tube's presence in *Wild at Heart*, I chronologically work backwards through Lynch's oeuvre, tracing the appearance and disappearance of the white tube. The white tube is

always related to primal scene fantasies, and each primal scene fantasy seems to point back to a previous film. Where this journey ends is the 1967 film, *The Alphabet*. This film is a four minute primal scene fantasy that explores the relationship between sexuality and language. This point of origin, however, is just as elusive as the others mentioned so far; as with Barth, we are left with an ambiguous trace of a structuring action rather than *Das Ding* itself.

The final chapter takes as its subject a series of films from the borders of popular culture. With the original *Taboo* film and its seventeen sequels (so far), I trail the forward movement of the narrative that the combined films create. At issue in these very explicit and sometimes unambiguously pro-incest films is the sustainability of an extended narrative that explicitly engages with incest. Problems I address deal with the reasons that the series repeatedly reaches a point where it must attempt to move away from the basic incest storyline, but always ends up returning to its original plot. This problem of repetition leads to problems with the nature of sequels themselves, and I investigate whether a sequel is not always already incestuously structured by its antecedent(s). With the conclusion I do not intend to close off the issues that the chapters taken together raise; instead, I address the seemingly unanswerable problem that representations of incest have posed for critics and I speculate about which directions further analysis must take.

Kin (Un)doing "the amorous Chain of Story": Reading and Righting *Moll Flanders*

The preface to *Moll Flanders* is the key to understanding the troubling presence of incest in the novel because it attempts to situate the characters, readers, and text itself in a recuperative family dynamic. The character of the Editor, who should not be mistaken for Daniel Defoe himself, rewrites Moll's "own memorandums"(1) and has "had no little difficulty to put it into a Dress fit to be seen, and to make it speak language fit to be read"(3). The "moral laundering"(Langford 165) Moll's story undergoes through a process of censorship and "finishing"(3) is clear in the preface, but what is not so clear is the Editor's motive in performing this laundering.¹ While he emphasizes the reader's "Instruction"(5), not every episode neatly fits this purpose. Almost every critical interpretation of the novel, whether it addresses the preface specifically or not, has dealt with the many kinds of irony that the often ambiguous and ambivalent language of the novel produces, and the preface exemplifies the text's interpretive difficulties. The ironies of the preface are irresolvable conundrums unless read together with the rest of the narrative, and vice versa.² When read together, the Editor's act of making Moll "tell her own tale in modester Words than she told it at first"(3) obliterates the notion that the narrative is Moll's at all; instead, the narrative reveals itself as a tale of figurative and recuperative paternalism over an unruly narrative child.

¹ For the general function and importance of the preface see Larry L. Langford's essay, which argues that the preface must be recognized "as another aspect of the novel's fiction rather than as an authorial introduction to the work"(164). Langford argues that there are two voices in the text, Moll's and the Editor's, and that the Editor's is at odds with Moll's (165). Michael M. Boardman (111) and William J. Krier (400) also argue that a narrative voice other than Moll's appears throughout her memorandums. Ultimately, Langford argues "the editor wishes to protect those who own property and to admonish those who do not, and his means of doing so is a usurpation of Moll's autobiography in order to make it say the opposite of what it manifestly means"(175). Where my analysis of the preface differs from Langford's is my emphasis upon incest and understanding of the editor's and reader's figurative roles.

² I am not the first, and certainly will not be the last, to suggest irresolvability in *Moll Flanders*. Homer O. Brown calls Defoe's novels books "whose ambiguity is deep, thorough, and finally unresolvable"("The Displaced Self in the Novels of Daniel Defoe" 584). See Michael M. Boardman (102, 110) and Ian Watt (qtd. in Norton 360) for grammatical explanations of this irresolvability, and see Maximillian E. Novak (354) and G. A. Starr (163) for diction.

The Editor positions himself as the figurative father who "dresses up" his narrative daughter, but he is no single parent: his rhetorically savvy construction of his reader as figurative mother shackles both the reader and Moll to a recuperative fiction of bourgeois family norms intended to rework the original and disruptive "amorous Chain of story"(4). What is at stake in this creation of a normative family structure is only revealed during the narrative's descriptions of figurative and literal incest. For the critical reader who finishes the novel and then turns back to the beginning, the discovery of incest by Moll is arguably the most pivotal revelation in the text: "the kinship drama staged in *Moll Flanders*--the heroine's incest--seems on the surface utterly incidental, while in fact it functions as the ideological and structural fulcrum of the text"(Pollak 9).³ The passages about incest allow the critical reader to return to the preface and detect the paternalistic intent of the Editor. The practice of incest threatens social structures and, by extension, the very practice of narrative that contributes to the cultural work of this society. Because Moll discovers maternal and economic fecundity through incest without punishment (Kibbie 1028), and because she "was not so extraordinary a Penitent as she was"(6) at the time she wrote her memorandums, the Editor demonstrates the necessity of recouping her narrative for a vastly different purpose than what Moll's "original" narrative teaches: the reconstruction of the bourgeois family structure in order to perpetuate it.

Establishing the Editor's desired paternal role over Moll's narrative is a process that builds progressively over the course of the novel, but the groundwork is set as early as the title page: Moll was "five times a *Wife* (whereof once to her own Brother)"(1). As a parenthetical statement, the act of incest is both subordinate because it appears as an aside to the information that she was married five times and, at the same time, the

³ There is a short list of critics who share the view that the incest in the novel is an important episode. See Douglas Brooks, Ellen Pollak, and Ann Louise Kibbie. I use the term "critical reader" to distinguish from the Editor's constructed reader.

parenthetical holds the privileged position as the most noteworthy of her marriages, deserving its own clause. The aside acts as a lure for the yet-to-be-constructed reader; it tantalizes because it announces transgression and begs for explication, but no further explanation is found in the preface. Instead, what the critical reader finds is the Editor's construction of an ideal reader who "know[s] how to read" the text "and how to make the good Uses of it"(4). Without specifically naming them, the Editor appeals to his assumed reader's awareness of and agreement with masculine-centered dominant fictions regarding morality, the law, and normative family structures. The absence of any discussion of incest in a preface that explicitly addresses many of Moll's other crimes and misadventures marks the incest as an ideological battlefield because it, more than anything else, threatens the dominant fictions that rely upon stable familial relationships and, thus, of gender as well: a male "Author [is] hard put to it to wrap it up so clean" when a "Woman debauch'd . . . comes to give an Account of all her vicious Practices"(3). Both the explicit and implicit lines drawn in the preface pit male against female and, more specifically, figurative father against daughter and Editor-"husband" over reader-"wife."

The Editor's pen "fathers" the narrative through the process of editing and publication, but destruction is the prerequisite for his (re)production. The Editor kills off the "real" Moll of the original memorandums in order to create a reconfigured representation of her, and the preface attempts to authorize this transformation. The original Moll subverts masculine power and cultural order and, thus, signifies a power akin to death. Ironically, Moll's transformation does not cancel the threat the story of her life poses, and this irony has proven to be one of the more elusive and frustrating aspects of the text in criticism of the novel. Her otherness persists in the potential for even her altered "autobiography" to be misread, and so the Editor must enlist his ideal, feminized reader. Referring to himself as "The Pen"(3)--short for "penis"--the Editor explains that the motivation for changing the language results from his assumptions about his reading audience; he fears that

"vicious Readers" will "turn it to his disadvantage"(3) if the language were to remain genuine.⁴ The Editor's construction of his reader is a simultaneously ambivalent, ambiguous, gendered, and deft rhetorical manipulation.

The first lines of the preface acknowledge that the truth of Moll's story will be questioned because of her need to maintain anonymity, and "on this Account we must be content to leave the Reader to pass his own Opinion upon the ensuing Sheets, and take it just as he pleases"(3). What is desired of the reader is not, however, equivalent to ethical relativism. The preface consistently stresses the moral instruction the narrative provides (4), yet the censorship that the Editor commits reveals a contradiction. While the Editor appears to grant the "moral" rather than "vicious" reader the freedom to interpret, he does not grant either reader the freedom to hear the unexpurgated story, thus betraying the Editor's "true and overriding fear that the reader is no more to be trusted than Moll"(Langford 171). The threat that the publication of Moll's memorandums poses is that her attitudes and behaviors will influence the readers; as a result, the reader "comes under the editor's critical scrutiny and becomes the source of his greatest suspicions and anxieties"(Langford 171). The Editor's concerns about Moll's unruly femininity are transferred to the reader. The Editor needs his ideal readers to complete the figurative family triangle, but because they are positioned as female--in spite of his use of the "universal" personal male pronoun--they are as suspect of straying from the moral path as Moll. As a way to control readers, the Editor rhetorically constructs them as partners in an interpretive "marriage" contract intended for the correction and correct use of Moll's narrative. The responsibility for "moral" reading--the "righting" of Moll's narrative--shifts between the Pen's writing to the reader's readings. While so much care has been taken to "give no lewd Ideas, no immodest Turns in the new dressing up of this Story"(3),

⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar ask: "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?"(3). They conclude that "Male sexuality . . . is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis"(4).

the Editor can only "hop[e]" that the moral message that he both can and cannot define will keep the "Reader serious even where the Story might incline him to be otherwise"(3).

The invitation to do otherwise suggests desire, seduction, and rhetorical mastery. Whenever the content of the narrative appears to transgress the bounds of the "chastest Reader or the modestest Hearer"(3), the Pen, in the guise of Moll, will insert himself into the text and directly address the readers to inform them that only they can turn the content to the right moral purpose. They are where meaning resides and they are to resolve paradoxes and dichotomies. The mastery present in the phallic over-writing of Moll's narrative by the Editor and, coercively, by the fictional reader operates as a recuperative device for familial desire gone awry. Part of this mastery is found in the models of narration and reading that various characters provide. Moll and, in turn, the Editor and reader learn narrative techniques through observation, and models of good and bad reading are produced as a result of these observations. Certain terrible circumstances follow when a character performs a "bad reading" of an event that provide moral directives and models of interpretation. At the same time, the ambiguous statement of moral purpose that under-girds everything that is represented in the work is unsettling because not every adversity that Moll encounters is conscious: what moral is to be gained from those events of Moll's life that seem accidental? The Editor makes a lengthy promise to his readers that every aspect of the story carries with it a moral lesson (5), but the Editor does not explicitly mention the episodes of incest, nor does he deliver on his promise where incest is concerned. Is the moral lesson to be learned from Moll's incestuous relationship with her brother: "don't marry your brother?" The lesson seems so obvious that it is not worth mentioning, so to what end is this "accidental" element of the novel present: if not to teach an obvious moral lesson about sexual and familial relationships, then what lesson does it teach? What it shows the critical reader is that incest is an act *in excess* of the power and mastery of language and interpretation that

either the Editor or his reader have to contain it. The *excess* of incest explains the Editor's extreme recuperative measures and their inevitable failure.

What Does a Reader Want?

The claims that I have made about the Editor's rhetorical mastery apply only to his approach to his constructed reader in the preface and the claims *he makes* about Moll. In fact, his relationship to the original memorandums is much more complex than simple dominance. It must be remembered that at one point the Editor himself played the role of reader to Moll's rhetorical authority and much of the ambiguity and irony of the text-- Roland Barthes would call it the pleasure and bliss of the text (14)-- is the result of the inability of the critical reader to determine where one voice is separate from another, where the lines of influence begin and end, or where control can be unquestioningly identified. Ultimately, whose words are whose is an irresolvable conundrum, but the state of confusion that results does explain why the Editor chooses *not* to censor the narrative of incest: the incestuous desires and their implications master him.

The Editor adopts a variety of narrative techniques from the memorandums that he employs *against* Moll and, in turn, the reader. Problems with the structures of narrative and models of reading are especially present in Moll's early years. Moll's early experience of language, the process of storytelling, and sexuality are important because what happens early in her life forms a template for her later experiences, especially in regard to incest.⁵ When a quasi-incestuous relationship forms with the two brothers, the narrative that represents this relationship is threatened; what is at stake is--in the language of the novel--being "undone"(76). The process of being personally undone is related to the undoing of narrative: "Kinship laws, which govern the system of combinations of words in mating, correspond to linguistic laws governing the combinations of words in a

⁵ Rosalind Coward and John Ellis theorize that "Because all the practices that make up a social totality take place in language, it becomes possible to consider language as the place in which the social individual is created"(1).

sentence or letters in a word [*l*]ncest is bad grammar" (Ellmann 16). During Moll's youth, she is frequently unable to differentiate between words and misuses terms of address, such as "Miss," "gentlewoman," and "Madam," that lead to sexual jokes and misunderstandings between herself and adults. The easy, innocent slippage between meanings is indicative of Moll's struggle to raise herself without parental guidance. The lineage represented by patronyms and structures attempts to limit and define the grammar of desire through taboo. What individual words attempt to restrict is countered by a narrative's complex seduction. The ambiguous grammar of subjectivity and narrative suggests the possibility for transgressive desire in the gaps between good and bad grammar.

Because the threat in this novel is "undoing"--akin to narrative death--it is necessary to explore how Moll learns to understand the value of language and the narratives of others. During her mid-teens she learns to tell a persuasive story by example, the same kind of story that "she" will eventually tell in her memorandums. A parallel develops between how Moll understands the story she is told by the elder brother regarding marriage and how the reader is to understand their position as coerced co-author of the Editor's version of Moll's story.⁶ Moll remarks that "Never poor vain Creature was so wrapt up in every part of the Story as I was, not considering what was before me, and how near my ruin was at the Door; indeed I think, I rather wish'd for that Ruin, than studied to avoid it"(22). This passage serves as a kind of warning to those readers of the novel who are, at this point, "so wrapt up" in the story that they are not able to see the "ruin" that awaits them if they get "seduced" by the narrative. In another way, this passage is a signal to those "vicious Readers" the Editor fears that Moll is about to be seduced: the moment they have been waiting for has arrived. Like Moll, those readers who are not moral, and

⁶ A number of critics see the episode with the elder and younger brother as prefiguring the episode with Moll's biological brother. See the studies by Douglas Brooks (48), David Blewett (61), and G. A. Starr (121).

even those who "are," are hoping for her ruin now rather than studying to avoid it. Moll is not able to discern the good from the bad, and so she believes "every part" that she hears without discriminating. The elder brother is aware of his audience's innocence--just as the Editor plays upon his constructed reader's assumed innocence--and he manipulates the elements of his narrative to produce the desired effect. The Editor learns from Moll this important narrative technique Moll learned from the elder brother, and both will use it in turn on the readers of their stories.

This method of seduction by a story is similar to both Moll's and the Editor's writing of the narrative. Moll admits the elder brother makes his job of seduction harder than it actually has to be: "he made more circumlocution The work appearing Difficult to him, he really made it so"(22). The elder brother's sexual desire and enjoyment lies in delay: the more complicated stories he has to tell, the more his desire is heightened and ambiguity is created. Both the Editor and Moll seduce the reader by delaying her actual seduction: the act of telling about the elder brother telling stories is a repetition that in effect delays the telling of Moll's seduction even longer. In this sense, the elder brother's delay serves as a kind of synecdoche for the reworked narrative itself. The same kind of circumlocution the elder brother employs is used by the Editor in his preface; the Editor delays and extends the story of his intentions before revealing what many critics have taken as the crux of the preface, if not the entire novel: that Moll does not remain as penitent as she appears. In the body of the text, circumlocution postpones the death of narrative threatened by incest by evading and delaying its revelation.

The "long stor[ies]"(22) the elder brother tells are always ones of deception, concealment, and sexuality in the sense that it is necessary to spin a yarn in order to perform the act: he "made a thousand more Preambles than he need to have done"(23). The elder brother's prolongation is countered by Moll's ambiguous silences: "But --- and there I stopped *as if* I left him to guess the rest"(24 emphasis added). The elder brother fills in the gap, or suspension, in Moll's speech with 100 guineas now and to be paid

every year on into perpetuity if she gets pregnant. The "as if" in the passage is as ambiguous as her silence, and Moll never reveals what it is that she was pausing for, so the reader is left to guess along with the elder brother. The reader is invited again into the position of being interested in the process of Moll's seduction, but also into the position of being seduced by the Editor's *narrative* of Moll's seduction. The "gap" left to be filled in the narrative by the reader is perhaps meant to be filled with a question: is the deception being performed on Moll being performed on the reader even as the deception is revealed for what it is? Moll's ambiguously empty pause is like the absence that occurs between the parenthetical acknowledgement of incest in the title page and the end of the preface, as if the Editor expects the reader to fill this gap.

After Moll has sold her virtue to the elder brother, the younger brother begins to tell "a Story of the *same Kind* to me"(24 emphasis added) that the elder brother has told. That "kin" is the root word of "kind"(OED), and that the two words were, for a period of time, intertwined, is significant because the quasi-incestuous "same kind" mirrors Moll's quasi-incestuous relationship to the brothers. The characters not only share "kin," they share the same kinds of stories. Moll, in turn, begins to tell the younger brother a story structurally similar to the elder brother's seduction narrative about the various reasons why a match between them would be unacceptable: "I said everything to dissuade him from his design that I could imagine, except telling him the Truth, which would have indeed put an end to it all, but that I durst not think of mentioning"(25). Two conclusions need to be drawn here. First, the delay involved in making every argument except the one that would "work" shows Moll mimicking the elder brother's narrative patterns and the necessity and enjoyment in retelling--if not listening--to this pattern. More generally, circumventing the truth amounts to the production of more (seduction) stories. How Moll tells the elder brother about the younger's desires is, in many ways, a duplicate of the pattern of telling stories that the elder brother has used to seduce her and, of course, the Editor's reader, too.

This quasi-incestuous "amorous Chain of Story" is "begun at a distance"(27) and it reveals the links in the chain of storytelling that appear in the following order: the elder brother to Moll; Moll to the younger brother; Moll to the Editor through her memorandums; and the Editor to the reader in his rewriting. The frames of reference created by these retellings are structurally similar to the familial ordering of generations, where each successive generation repeats in part the previous generation. However, the confusion that results from the frames of reference in the novel is like the confusion in families that incest causes. The method of storytelling, the links on the narrative chain, and the figural chain itself are circuitous. They all turn back on one another, leading to the repetition without difference that is akin to incest. That the reader is implicated in the construction of the text in the ways suggested so far indicts the reader in the same system that forces Moll to act as she does; it implicates the reader in the passages about incest that are inextricably bound up with the issues of language because the prohibition of incest ensures the continuation of the paternalistic system. The reader is put into the position of reincorporating the seemingly anomalous events and situations of Moll's life--just as the Editor has attempted recuperation and partially failed prior to the fictional reader's consumption of the text--to make Moll's narrative cohere to the "Palate"(4) of the "moral" reading public.

Because the burden of authorship is constantly and simultaneously being evaded and asserted by the Editor, a complex conflation of roles eerily similar to the incestuous conflation of the hierarchical family structure occurs. If authorship is figurative "fatherhood,"⁷ then who is responsible for incest becomes an alarming question to pose. The combined voices of Moll and the Editor defer responsibility, at least rhetorically, leaving the reader in the uncomfortable position of complicity with an incestuous act (accidental or not): the absence of a patronym wreaks havoc throughout Moll's story,

⁷ See Chapter 3 of Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method*.

leaving the reader to sort the pieces. However, the confusion of stories and bad grammar at this point in the novel does not have any immediate punishment attached to it. In fact, the confusion between fact and fiction, and the pregnant pauses and "gaps" in the narrative to be filled by the readers and Editor, signify at least *continuation*, its own kind of narrative pleasure (Barthes 14), at this point in the novel.

The strange conflation of the family structure, however, *does* pose problems for the continuation of Moll's life with the family. Moll says that the family of the two brothers "used me with so much tenderness, *as if* I had been one of their own children"(27 emphasis added). To have a relationship with the elder brother is a kind of incest because of her figurative family position, and to have a relationship with the younger brother is--in Moll's terms--to commit "Adultery and Incest"(47). The elder brother eventually proposes to Moll that she marry the younger brother. The elder brother's proposal threatens the desirous, circuitous, and repetitious narratives that he has indulged in with Moll. He says that it is a proposition that has a "great many *Mortifications* in it to me, and may at first seem *Strange* to you"(30 emphases added); Moll "gave him a full look of *Horror* at those words"(30 emphasis added). The elder brother's choice of words to describe his feelings more accurately describe Moll's "strange" feelings of "horror" at the idea of being pimped into a doubly incestuous relationship. Given that definitions of "strange" include not only the more obvious sense in the passage of being "extreme"(OED), but also the sense of being "unfamiliar, abnormal . . .[and] difficult to take in or account for"(OED), the passage is doubly ironic in terms of the extreme *familiarity* Moll feels for the younger brother.

This familiarity, although not recognized by the elder brother, fills Moll with a kind of loathing and aversion towards the younger brother that is similar to the biological incest that occurs later in the novel. Just as the elder brother suggests that Moll marry the younger brother, her brother/husband suggests that they stay married and that they continue to deceive the rest of the world about their incestuous act. Moll is unable to

speak "for several minutes more"(31) after the elder brother makes the suggestion that everything "we have done may be wrapt up in an eternal Silence"(31). This silence prefigures her biological brother's muteness, her mother's advice, and the potential end of the narrative that the consanguine incest threatens. The "horror" of the act puts an end to speech and, therefore, threatens the end of the storytelling.

The elder brother says that in this new "Station we might love as Friends, with the utmost Passion, and with a love of Relation untainted, free from our just reproaches, and free from other Peoples Suspicions"(45). This new station, of course, would be a mortifyingly incest-laden one: the elder brother suggests a kind of platonic incest and adultery. By conceding, Moll is treated very well by the younger brother, and is loved by him as much "as any wife can expect."

but [the elder] brother being so always in my sight, at least, while we were in the Country, was a *continual Snare* to me; and I never was in bed with my Husband, but I wish'd my self in the Arms of his Brother; and tho' his Brother never offer'd me the least *Kindness* that way, after our Marriage, but carried it just as a Brother *ought* to do; yet, it was impossible for me to do so to him: In short, I committed Adultery and Incest with him every Day in my Desires, which without doubt, was as effectually Criminal in the Nature of the Guilt, as if I had actually done it. (47 emphases added)

The conflation of family relations in this passage reveals desire's power to usurp, to "snare," language and narrative, especially when the desire is for a taboo object. Moll directs *her* "kindness" toward an incestuous and adulterous object here (a now obscure definition of kindness is "kinship"[OED]), but when consanguine incest happens later in her life, she claims she is repulsed. The irony is that her biological brother is more of a stranger to her than the elder brother because she spent many years living with them as "one of their own children." She never has a similar experience with her biological

brother. Moll effectually *feels* like a family member, and her attitude is enough to produce incestuous feelings even though, legally, incest does not occur.

Part of the material I have looked at so far has dealt with Moll's learning the importance of narrative construction. This mastering of language and storytelling proves significant during the episodes where consanguine incest occurs because it serves as a model not only for her, but for the Editor and the reader as well. Whereas the episode with the elder and younger brother *seems* like incest to Moll, what she confronts during her stay in the colony has much more serious emotional consequences, and these episodes reveal what is at stake for narrative, language, and the relationship between Editor, reader, and Moll.

The Narrative Snare of Incest

After Moll Flanders hears the narrative of her mother's life, but before her mother realizes the ramifications of her narrative, Moll laments: "I was now the most unhappy of all Women in the World: *O had the Story never been told me*, all had been well; it had been no crime to have lain with my Husband, since as to being my Relation, I had known nothing of it"(70 emphasis added). The most tragic moment in Moll's life occurs because Moll's mother assumes that she has nothing to fear from telling her story. Moll's mother's story produces the crux of Moll's; its ramifications ripple outward, affecting what has come before and after its telling, including the Editor's approach to Moll's narrative and to his reader. The narrative of incest in Moll's original memorandums operates as a series of events that are in excess of the Editor's power to explain and contain Moll's life story. As a result, the figural relationships that the Editor creates are an attempt to reverse the genesis and chronology of the story so that it conforms to the bourgeois family norm rather than the structural disarray of incest. Opposed to the original order of telling (Moll's mother--Moll--Editor--reader), the preface attempts to reverse the temporal order to introduce a patronymic grammar to the form of the narrative. The Editor tries to

reframe for the reader a story they may wish they were never told because, as Moll's mother reveals, the stakes are quite high: the life and death of the narrative itself.

After Moll's mother learns the significance of her own narration, she warns Moll to "bury the whole thing entirely"(77), to "lie as we [Moll and her brother] used to do"(77), and to "let the whole matter remain *a secret as close as death*; for child, says she, we are both *undone* if it gets out"(77 emphasis added). Incest threatens symbolic death for the characters and the narrative, but to remain silent about it also equals death. The very structural ordering of the family will be "undone"--a kind of metaphoric unraveling of the narrative that leads to "death"--if the story is told. At the same time, the exact opposite of this principle that narrating the incest will lead to being undone is present: the telling and, especially, the retelling, of incest engenders much of the narrative and counters its "undoing." The life and death conundrum is the result of the prohibition of incest. Because of its prohibition, incest is eroticized, reconciling "what seems impossible to reconcile, respect for the law and violation of the law, taboo and its transgression"(Bataille 36), and life and death in the same desire. Moll wants to speak, "that I might be prevailed with to bring out that which indeed it was *like Death to me to conceal*"(80 emphasis added). Keeping "a secret as close as death" and a secret that is "like death . . . to conceal" is not as diametrically opposed a proposition as it may seem. The passages fit together because they suggest that narrative is co-extensive with life *and* death: there is no life or death without narrative.

Yet the tension between these narrative desires suggests a kind of irresolvable ambivalence that both under-girds and undermines dominant fictions about the stability of family structures. This irresolvability exists because the desire for law and disorder, and taboo and transgression occurs simultaneously. Moll desires both states, but temporally occupies only one or the other, except when incest is present. Desire exists on a number of different levels in the novel; most important is the desire constructed between the Editor, reader, and Moll's narrative. This relationship is the meta-narrative

that encapsulates and reframes Moll's narrative. Ostensibly, the Editor and the constructed reader reconcile and recuperate the unwieldy and dangerous narrative figure of Moll between them; they work in tandem to reorder and stabilize what the incestuous context disrupts. The Editor and constructed reader's recuperative project is, of course, doomed from the start because the same structure that is intended to prohibit incest is the system that eroticizes it. In this way, the details of Moll's story speak to the meta-narrative desires of the Editor.

Moll thwarts her mother's attempt to get involved in the married couple's dispute by stating "that the Reason and Mystery of the whole matter lay in herself [the mother]"(75): the maternal body breeds social riddles in the form of children. How each member of a culture is or is not related to one another is important to the stories that the culture tells itself and to the continuation of the systems that support the social structure. At this historical moment, children understand who their family is through proximity and by being told; without this closeness and family narrative they would all be, in a manner of speaking, strangers, riddled by and with "bad grammar." Specifically, it is the combination of the prohibition of incest and the institution of marriage--or exchange of women--that provides members of families with a grammar, a patronym: this ordering *should* prevent intermixing. The presence of the patronym is what *ought* to solve maternal riddles: "confusion in the generational code (incest) is parallel to confusion in the linguistic code"(Segal 68). Because of the missing father, mother, and scheme of "correct" patronymic relations when Moll is young, her blood relationships are unsolved riddles until, to her horror, she hears the story--a linguistic and generational code--she wishes she had never been told.

Moll's mother begins to show symptoms that signify the impact that incest has on the telling of stories. Moll's mother "was not inclin'd to believe the Story, or to remember the Particulars, for she immediately foresaw the confusions that must follow in the family upon it"(75). The potential destruction of the family narrative affects how the mother

"reads" Moll's narrative because "Incestuous marriage, a denial of the father, denies the hierarchizing and differentiating processes"(Segal 68). Almost in proportion to what Moll reveals, the mother symptomatically conceals through "forgetfulness." If the story cannot be proven, then the fiction can continue. And yet the nature of the relationship is so disturbing to the characters that even the mother's denial cannot completely overcome her horror: "why we are all *undone!* Confusion and Destruction forever! Miserable family! What will become of us? What is to be said? What is to be *done?*"(76 emphasis added). The OED offers a "curious" Middle English definition of "done" in "which it [done] was nearly synonymous with *kin*"(OED). Definitions of kind, kin, and done are all, appropriately enough, confusingly intertwined. Ironically, to be "undone" in this context, with the Middle English definition in mind, is exactly what the mother desires: to be "done" only exacerbates the problem. Significantly, desires to be both "undone" and "done" exist suggestively and simultaneously in a chain of signification. What ought to be performed, executed, and accomplished--other definitions of "done"--according to fictions about the prohibition of incest and reproduction has met with a mortification not felt before by Moll or her family members. The undoing that is the revelation of incest has brought a state of confused "decay" and "ruin" that has "destroyed"(OED) the family narrative by undoing (through "over-doing") the family relationships.

Because incest produces the inability to properly distinguish relations, the resulting confusion disrupts traditional systems of order and signification, making them "unreadable." In other words, the relationships of kinship and, ostensibly, love between brother, sister, mother, and children are in direct conflict with the relationships of feeling between husband, wife, mother-in-law, and children. What the attempts to separate relationships underscore is that when Moll conceals most personal names throughout the novel, both Moll and the reader are forced to refer to the characters by their personal relationships to one another, which in the case of her marriage to her brother/husband are always already present in the wrong combinations; when referred to as "mother," the

mother is always "mother-in-law," and the brother is always brother, husband, and son, each overdone in its own way. When Moll discusses the risks in revealing the incest, she states that what she risks is the loss of her brother: "he would have been neither a Husband or a Brother"(71), an impossible proposition. Incest suggests the "undoing" of the family narrative because the family no longer descends in the "natural" way.

The mother attempts to keep the story going by falsifying the truth, a method of (re)generation that has worked before in the novel. After Moll has revealed the incest to her, her mother tries *again* to conveniently forget significant details in order to question the "truth" of what she is saying: the mother "began to tell them [the stories of her life] with alterations and omissions"(76). The mother's symptoms remarkably resemble the Editor's tactics in the preface. Yet the repetition of the incest story preserves the life of the narrative even as the collapsing content of the narrative threatens its own demise. This contradictory movement informs all of Moll's story. The reason she retells a story she wishes she had never been told is to keep the narrative alive in the face of its impending death. The Editor's and reader's role as co-authors not only makes them complicit, but allows the entire narrative process itself to exist. To tell her story "*would have been some ease to me*"(70), but Moll cannot see that it would be to any other purpose than to ease her own conscience: "and yet to conceal it would be next to impossible"(70). The discursive presence of incest puts the social function of narrative at cross-purposes to itself, which in turn reveals a paradox inherent in incest. Narratives are based on the (re)telling of information; the secret of incest threatens the narrative if it is kept a secret, but it also threatens the narrative if it is told because what traditionally drives narrative is the conventional family structure of heterosexuality, marriage, and reproduction, and these narratives of structure are jeopardized when incest is present.⁸

⁸ See Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, especially chapter 5, "Desire in Narrative".

And yet the narrative of incest is symptomatically revisited; it becomes part and parcel of the temporal confusion of intragenerational *familial couplings*. To conceal is to keep a husband, to reveal is to have a brother, and Moll is both drawn towards and repulsed by both interrelated options. This ambivalence serves as a kind of resolution of the problem Moll experienced with the two brothers: "I could never be persuaded to Love one Brother, and Marry another"(39-40). Although not entirely analogous, she loves the third husband as a brother while she is his lover. In incest, Moll hovers between mutually exclusive categories. Her attempts to reconcile the two states of being are made possible by incest's ability to confuse taboo and transgression and narrative life and death. Prolonging this resolution, Moll waits three years to tell her brother/husband about the incest. She reveals a little bit at a time, which softens the blow perhaps, but it also has the now familiar characteristic of circuitously and seductively delaying the narrative that "must" come to an "end"(74): "The refusal to speak the unutterable, the inclination to smother it, is conceived of in terms of a kind of secondary incest, linguistic rather than physical, in which the tongue (the sexual organ of speech) desires to return to and remain in the womb of the mouth, not wishing to emerge and articulate in an atmosphere dominated by actual incest"(Tanner 40). In Moll's case, the refusal to speak serves to underscore her ambivalent desire for and in the "primary" incestuous relationship, the "secret as close as death" and that "which is death . . .to conceal" which strikes her brother/husband mute.

When she does reveal, Moll brings the discourse of law to bear first, and says "he neither was my *lawful* Husband, nor they *Lawful* children"(74 emphasis mine). Although incest is defined in irrevocably legal terms once Moll speaks it, we know from the words that she uses to describe her personal feelings about the physical act of incest that she is discussing something that is in excess of the public discourse of law.⁹ She makes the

⁹ Obviously, the force and abeyance of the law shifts throughout the story for Moll.

husband/brother sign a contract that absolves her of all guilt and gives her impunity for what she is about to say. This insurance enables her to speak and tell her story that, otherwise, threatens the economic and social stability that she enjoys because of the marriage contract. The problem of the relationship between characters is not only the result of Moll operating outside legal boundaries in order--paradoxically--to maintain a certain amount of social respectability. For Moll, the desire and erotics of narrating the story are present in her ambivalence about ending the narrative of her marriage to her brother/husband. Moll claims, yet again, the "necessity of breaking the case to him without any more delay"(79), yet "he had continued in his altered [now agreeable] carriage to me near a month"(79). The delay operates both as an extension of the "decaying" family narrative *and* as a kind of expression of the ambivalent desire that Moll has for the brother/husband and new-found mother: "could I have satisfied myself to have gone on with it, I believe it might have continued as long as we had continued alive together"(79). This admission--"pretending" to be man and wife when they are brother and sister--appears in another way. Moll says that while her story is "conceal'd from him"(80) she is the only one unhappy: to reveal would make them both unhappy. The "kindest thing I could do" is "keep him in the dark about it"(80). An act of "kindness," again, is a loaded one in this novel. Feelings of "Kindness" are, in Moll's case, a smokescreen that conceals her feelings for kin. The prolonging of her concealment--a narrative technique learned from the elder brother--allows her to maintain the tenuous, liminal, and desirable state of eroticism made possible by the prohibition and transgression of incest.

The "moral" question for Moll is the one about concealing or revealing the story more than it is about the act of incest itself: "I cannot say that I was right in point of policy in carrying it such a length, while *at the same time* I did not resolve to discover the thing to him; but I am giving an account of what was, not of what ought or ought not to be"(78). In this passage, "Moll" takes a firm stand against the incestuous behavior, but this

difference is shown to be an unstable, non-static dichotomy. This instability is illustrated in her "ought and ought not" approach. She pulls away from taking a moral stand and re-implicates the reader, and this movement away from rigid difference illustrates the ambivalence that pervades her entire relationship with her brother/husband. Moll is ambivalent partially because she makes the attempt to keep the family categories separate in her own mind, and she attempts to hate her brother/husband discretely as a husband as well as for being her brother; she claims that it is not the incest that causes the aversion, but the incest is only something that adds to it. This attitude contradicts her earlier statements about the relationship and the physical act, and yet it may help to explain why it is that Moll continues to sleep with him for years after she knows about the incest. This attempt at separating--of occupying the grammatical space of the conjunction between two (ir)reconcilable terms--further illustrates Moll's ambivalence towards the brother/husband: "I had no great concern about it [the incest] in point of conscience"(78). This statement reveals that the distinctions in Moll's mind are often arbitrary and fluctuating. But at the same time, "everything added to make Cohabiting with him the most nauseous thing to me in the world"(78). Every time Moll suggests that her feelings are ambivalent, she immediately reasserts a stable relationship that attempts to eliminate the possibility for ambivalence. After bringing the "what was" and "what ought to be" distinction into question, she asserts a kind of physical reaction versus mental state. Her body feels the "unnaturalness" of the union, while her mind is able to stay in the relationship because she realizes the social consequences if she leaves him *and* because she desires him. Her rhetorical device is revealed as an attempt to recuperate her own transgressive desires.

Moll's recuperation efforts are aided by her displacing her desires onto a less suspect object: her son. Not only do her desires for him seem more romantic than maternal, but his relationship to her is already something *in excess* of simply a son. To return to the promises made by the Editor in the preface, "there is not a wicked Action in any part of

it, but is first or last rendered Unhappy or Unfortunate"(5). Confusion in the generational code causes confusion in the linguistic code and, apparently, the "moral" code: Moll calls her child "*his* child"(251 emphasis added). It is the "issue" from the incestuous relationship, from which "no really good Issue came"(71), that Moll has the closest bond to: the child is "closer" than a son would usually be in the family tree. Not using the possessive pronoun to describe her own child is a symptomatic disavowal of her biological motherhood. It also represents Moll's mastery of rhetoric because the pronoun defers to a paternalistic grammar, and this deference absolves Moll of her responsibility and naturalizes her desire. The use of the pronoun also suggests that, as the events and relationship that she is to have with the child in the near future show, her ambivalence returns, expectedly, in a displaced form. An "unhappy object"(262) co-produced the desirable object that is her son. The son says "you shall be as near me as you can"(262) after Moll's refusal to share a house, and he provides Moll a neighboring plantation: "and thus I was as if I had been in a new world, and began now to secretly wish that I had not brought my Lancashire husband from England at all"(262).¹⁰ Moll finds a new incestuous love in her life that negates her most recent husband, Jemmy, but she--as usual--rescinds this statement in the next paragraph and stresses her undying love for her husband. The ambivalent desire that was centered upon the husband/brother is now displaced onto the son, which makes it a "safe" desire because it is "maternal."

Moll's symptomatic disavowal of the possessive pronoun is akin to the Editor's efforts to shift responsibility in the preface from himself to the reader. Just as Moll is ambivalent about her relationship to and desire for her son, the Editor's ambivalence about his "paternity" of the story is revealed through his adoption of Moll's narrative means even as he castigates the behavior that created these techniques. The confusion that results is similar to the confusion of the linguistic code that leads to incest. The

¹⁰ In addition to Ann Louise Kibbie, many critics note the economic benefits Moll reaps from incest. See Terence Martin (qtd. in Norton 370) and Carol Houlihan Flynn (86).

Editor both denies and asserts his paternity over his narrative "child," leaving the constructed reader in the uncomfortable position of recuperating the unruly narrative. The ambiguity, indeterminacy, and undifferentiability produced throughout the narrative because of its complex frames of reference, incestuous relationships, and "moral" obligations leave the reader without the option of disavowal. There is no one left to shift responsibility to, so the reader is left to reassert the patronym to reorder the bad grammar of this amorous chain of story.

Moll is burdened by the incest secrets that she keeps from Jemmy, but "let them say what they please of our sex not being able to keep a secret, my life is a plain conviction to me of the contrary"(254). The silence of Moll's secrets, her concealing rather than revealing, is a learned skill. Moll manipulates all of her husbands through her mastery of rhetoric and narrative practice. The "moral purpose" of this story is an attempt to rewrite the narrative so that the obvious pitfalls to order and narrative that the prospect of incest threatens are once again subsumed into a traditional confessional narrative, causing fear and teaching the "already known" moral lesson. Moll's memorandums are co-opted in the sense that "The Pen" has the "last word": he has attempted to re-configure and rewrite her dangerous narrative to be more acceptable to his constructed audience. Yet Moll warns the reader that it is "very seldom that some snare or other is not in their way"(210). The reference is to thievery in London, but these "snares" also have relevance to the reading of the narrative itself. The reading of the direct address as symptom reveals that this technique is the product of ambivalence, or the moral confusion resulting from incest. A "snare" is a textual moment that binds the reader in a variety of ways to the "amorous Chain of Story." The content of the novel is disruptive because of its representations of taboo acts, of which incest is the most central and extreme: incest ensnares more securely because the links between relations bind themselves too tightly. The reader is forced to participate vicariously in those same acts; incest is, in this sense,

an amorous "snare" that inscribes and encircles the reader within the tenuousness of familial structures and the desire they produce.

Whereas Moll's narrative recounts her passage from ignorance to knowledge, from being constructed by to constructing through language, it is presupposed by the Editor that the fictional reader ought to have already successfully traversed these dichotomies: "this Work is chiefly recommended to those who know how to Read it"(4). The reader is either "vicious" or "Moral" according to the Editor, but not in the naive way that Moll is either a "gentlewoman" or a "Madam." As Moll's memorandums illustrate, the world that is exemplified and made possible by paternalistic fictions is, at the same time, made untenable by incest, and this untenable proposition is present throughout the novel. For Moll, it is present in the "continual Snare"(47) that is her *felt* incest with the brothers, and it is continually present in the conjunction that binds brother *and* husband together in her incestuous relationship. To what end are these untenable propositions present? Why does the Editor reveal a story so potentially damaging? The Pen functions as a recuperative force throughout the novel. The censorship the memorandums undergo prior to publication, the preface, the direct addresses to the reader, and the models of reading that the novel contains all operate to order and reorder the "amorous Chain of Story." They shackle the reader not to the potentially destructive act of incest, but to the always recuperative act of (re)ordering incest. But the Editor is aware that the fictive reader may be as unruly and unpredictable as Moll herself, and perhaps not so penitent in the end. His desire for the reader is as ambivalent as his desire for Moll. The reader-- "moral" or "vicious"--is closer akin to Moll than not: they amorously (un)do for one another.

Reverted Incest: Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*

This novel invites readers to employ conjecture when interpreting because of its complicated narrative structure, ambiguity, ambivalence and, simply, because the narrator, John Dowell, uses it most of the time: "conjecture is pretty well justified"(129). Dowell's method of narration is disjunctive, paradoxical, and complex so that "one goes back, one goes forward"(201) in the narration recursively.¹¹ The movement backwards is exemplified by the five main characters' desire to (re)collect, catalogue, and control the past. Dowell, especially, molds himself as the figure of this kind of accumulative desire, so much so that his "silent listener"(201) might dismiss the narrative as nothing more than an attempt on Dowell's part to recast events in order to pleurably *recount* them, but his preservation through narration is a record of accumulative and incestuous destruction. His desire to repeat is apparent in his review of his own previous writings--his "diaries"(107)--and in the "rambling"(201) and "reflecting"(202) on the current version, itself in constant, confusing temporal flux: "one goes back, one goes forward" for "Nine years and six weeks"(8), "six months"(202), and "eighteen months"(253) more. Each time frame officially marks another moment when Dowell reassesses and repeats his past. The movement "forward" in the narration of the novel expresses the desire to reach a point where all that the movement "backwards" represents in terms of the recovery of past events and motivations coalesces in objects of incestuous desire.

The desire to return present in all the characters is often at odds with the possibility of a future. Two interrelated issues cause this conflict: first--as noted above--are the

¹¹ About the narrative, Wayne Show argues that "though we may say in a very superficial sense that there is a narrative progress through the novel, it is almost as accurate to say that the materials of the whole novel are presented simultaneously in each of the four parts"(207). Miriam Bailin suggests that "Attempts to make any logical connections between the discrete elements of the story and to trace cause-and-effect relations between these elements are impeded [W]hat connections one finally chooses to draw depend on which elements and versions of plot and character one chooses to connect"(632). John G. Hessler contends the novel is "a mine for speculation"(53). Also see the essays by James Hurt and Joseph Wiesenfarth, both of whom discuss the speculative character of the narrative, and see David H. Lynch (411-12) and Richard Hood's essay for the problems of narrative time in the novel.

problems inherent in narrating the past; second is the incestuous desire that defines all of the main characters and which compounds the temporal issues of narration by foreclosing on the possibility of generating a future. Dowell concisely addresses these problems when he attempts to justify his narration by self-reflexively asking "You may well ask why I write"(7). He then jarringly shifts to the third person plural and provides the following two answers: "just to get the sight out of their heads"(7) and for "the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote"(7). The first of his reasons proves to be a red herring; in fact, the narrative often shows that Dowell writes less to purge himself of the past than to rewrite it in a more sexually--and ultimately incestuous--self-satisfying way. His second answer to the question is just as fantastic a project as the first given the incestuous content of the narrative. The narrative is strewn with absent fathers, which complicates any appeal to the patriarchal lineage of generations: Jimmy's, Florence Hurlbird's, and Dowell's are unaccounted for. But when fathers are present in the novel, forms of incest occur: in Edward and Nancy's relationship, obviously, but also in Edward and Leonora Ashburnham's marriage between cousins--their mothers are both Powrys (150).¹² Unknown fathers produce, in one sense, "unknown heirs" (disenfranchised bastards) and the heirs' desire to recover the past. Unknown heirs exponentially increase the possibilities for incestuous couplings because of the absence of the traditional prohibitor of incest. Incest saturates the novel's personal relationships and suggests the extreme improbability of "generations infinitely remote" in terms of lineage; they are an impossible postulate in a world of familial desire turned in upon itself.

The narrative is a record of Dowell's incorporation and amalgamation of these involuted desires. He makes his acquaintances' symptoms and desires his own, becoming the central figure for "reversion," the key concept for understanding how familial desire goes awry in this narrative. "Reversion," with its many definitions, belongs to the

¹² Dewey Ganzel's excellent essay argues that "the suggestion of uncertain paternity is provocative to the reader if not to Dowell"(285) and concludes "that Nancy is Edward Ashburnham's natural daughter"(285).

general movement towards the past and the *familiar* of incestuous desire that negates the possibility of a future. Much like Dowell's narrative itself, reversion represents a return to certain conditions, practices, beliefs (*OED*). Reversion is the particular locus of desire in Edward's affair with La Dolciquita: Edward kissed La Dolciquita "passionately, violently, with a sudden explosion of the passion that had been bridled all his life. . . . La Dolciquita liked this reversion"(174). This type of desire should be read recursively throughout the narrative because it implicitly appears in his other affairs as well as in the affairs of the other characters.

"Reversion" also has a set of meanings that refer specifically to property and that rely on the determinability of paternity (the very possibility of those heirs and generations infinitely remote), and the connection between desire and money is what is at stake regarding incest in *The Good Soldier*. The common legal definition of reversion is the "right of succeeding to, or next occupying, an estate"(*OED*). Property can revert back to its previous owners. In this context, the affair with La Dolciquita reads like an economic exchange rather than a passionate affair. In yet another sense, reversion is the "rest, residue, or remainder of something"(*OED*) so--for those who can afford to "indulge if we liked in economy"(38)--"reversion" can symbolize waste material. The control of material in all the senses that reversion denotes is imperative throughout the novel because of what it represents psychologically both for individual characters and events *and* Dowell's narration about these people and occurrences. The combination of meanings present in reversion provides the groundwork for understanding the complex combination of property and incest in *The Good Soldier*. What follows is an account of how the varied desires apparent in reversion are part and parcel of the incestuous desires of the five main characters.

The Hurlbird Family Alliance

Like Edward's "reversion" with La Dolciquita, Florence's affair with Edward is also a case of reversion, but Florence's affair with Edward is her *second* attempt at this economy

of desire; her first is with Jimmy, and this affair explains the second. Florence is a "Hurlbird of Stamford, Connecticut, where, as you know, they are more old-fashioned than even the inhabitants of Cranford England, could have been"(7), and perhaps more old-fashioned than the inhabitants of Fordingbridge, England, "where the Ashburnham's place is"(7). In a suspect coincidence, it turns out that "Florence came from a line that had actually owned Branshaw Teleragh for two centuries before the Ashburnham's came there"(72). Why would Florence be determined to have Dowell, after spending a year in Paris, "buy some real estate in the neighborhood of Fordingbridge, from which place the Hurlbirds had come in the year 1688"(88)? What is the attraction of her ancestors, especially when it appears that her American environment is more "English" than England? "Reversion" in *The Good Soldier* is more than legal fictions, property, and paternity because it simultaneously signifies the *desire* to return to previous conditions, practices, and beliefs.

Would someone as "old-fashioned" as Uncle John Hurlbird, concerned as he is with public opinion and "efficiency"(20), dare to take a young, unrelated man--a "Bowery tough"(131)--on a yearlong cruise with his unattached niece?¹³ A compelling answer to this question lies in Florence's desired year in Paris--Jimmy's new address--before moving to the English countryside. Dowell's function with Florence mirrors Jimmy's with Uncle John, although Florence must avoid affairs of the heart rather than politics. Not surprisingly, the language Dowell uses to describe Jimmy's function is vague. For appearance's sake, Jimmy's stated function may be a fiction--like the heart ailment--of Florence's. Jimmy's unstated familial relationship to Uncle John is perhaps as close as Florence's, which would make Florence and Jimmy either first cousins or a form of brother and sister; they share the same "dark eyes"(25, 96) that appear, at times, to be

¹³ Roger Poole argues that it is "inconceivable"(411) that Uncle John do so. Poole concludes that "the name 'Jimmy' . . . [is] a conundrum, a mystery, a loci of doubt"(412) and thus is a fictional creation of Dowell's. I agree with Poole's assessment of the trip and the general problem of Jimmy, but not that Jimmy is Dowell's creation.

"ominous"(96). Although this relationship is conjectural, if the relationship is this close, it explains many of the uncomfortable and elliptical scenes with the Hurlbird clan early in the novel.

What is curious and important is the *unspeakable* aspect of Florence's past. When the aunts discover Dowell's intention of marrying their niece, Miss Florence Hurlbird "agitatedly"(89) waylays Dowell for a "singular interview"(89) as he makes his way to Florence's parlor: "You see, the two poor maiden ladies were in agonies--and they could not say one single thing direct. They would almost wring their hands and ask if I had considered such a thing as different temperaments"(89). What is unspeakable appears surreptitiously in polite code: "different temperaments" speaks vague volumes. They "would be too refined to put the motive into words"(95), although they "ought to tell [Dowell] more"(90). The differences are so great that "they shuddered at the thought of a European career for myself and Florence. Each of them really wailed when they heard that was what I hoped to give their niece"(89). Though they wail, their social code requires their silence. When the aunts allude to Florence's past, "they almost brought themselves to say that Florence's early life had been characterized by flirtations--something of that sort"(90). Dowell is flirting with the latent meanings signified by the dash, a technical device that, along with ellipses, he uses frequently during his narration. An unspeakable relationship with a relative would certainly be "something of that sort" that would mark Florence, especially in the potentially close proximity to Jimmy, as someone undesirable, but only in retrospect, when the generational code is simultaneously deciphered and thus becomes unraveled.

Uncle Hurlbird, a father-figure, shares the aunts' horror and habit of allusiveness and bars Dowell from seeing Florence "And, from something that he let drop--an odd Biblical phrase that I have forgotten--I gathered that the family simply did not intend her to marry ever in her life"(91). This "lost" Biblical phrase is as allusive as it is elusive, and only conjecture is left to fill the tantalizing void. Neither the aunts nor Uncle John are able to

narrate the past because of their heir's incestuous desire to symbolically and materially move backwards towards the past. The social and moral shame associated with the transgression of the incest prohibition--if it were ever discovered, and there is a greater chance of discovery if Florence and Jimmy were ever to meet again--has, in the relatives' opinion, taken Florence out of circulation. Florence's incestuous desire for Jimmy and her ancestor's property cause patriarchal Uncle John to attempt to withhold Florence, thus preserving the "sanctity" of exogamous exchange by eliminating the process of exchange altogether. Florence's "overmastering passion"(93)--perhaps a precursor of Edward's "desperate . . . love"(271) for Nancy--is, of course, for Jimmy and to regain her property by materially and libidinally conflating the events of the past two hundred years.

When he learns that the family's plan has been foiled by the elopement, Uncle John once again speaks elliptically of Florence's past and future. He "took the opportunity to read me a full-blooded lecture . . . as to the perils for young American girlhood He concluded, as they always do, poor, dear old things, with the aspiration that all American women should one day be sexless--though that is not the way they put it"(95). By positing Jimmy and Florence as relatives, a system of what amount to puns, or "verbal usury"(*Shell Money, Language, and Thought* [MLT] 49) is shown to permeate the narration. Uncle John gives a full-blooded lecture about transgressive "full-blooded" desire. The chronology of the novel is notoriously difficult to disentangle, but the lecture cannot address "American girlhood" if its subject is at least in her mid-twenties when she marries and--to the lecturer's knowledge--she lost her "girlhood" long before she ever married. If Jimmy is related, perhaps Uncle John's inspirational speech is not so misguided and the puns not unintended: Florence's misdirected desire suggests a dangerous, destroying, "overmastering passion." Without sex, the confusion of family genealogies, obviously, cannot occur, and so Uncle John works to ensure that his intention of withholding Florence succeeds by paying Jimmy a bribe to keep him "out of the United States"(96).

Florence ultimately fails in her attempt to have both her related lover and the ancestral lands without public scrutiny through the screen of marrying Dowell. But in the process of trying to attain these desires she leaves a frustrated (because secretive) consanguine incestuous relationship for the perhaps more satisfying--and socially safe--symbolically incestuous relationship with Edward. Because Edward is the "feudal"(176) lord of her ancestor's lands, he is a proxy for an incestuous relationship with her ancient family that symbolizes material reversion: "Florence was sticking on to the proprietor of the home of her ancestors"(108). Florence's attempts to appropriate Edward's position of ownership are as inextricably bound together with issues of incestuous desire as they are with the reversion of her ancestral property. Although she must abandon the Hurlbird family name through marriage, and thus Branshaw's reversion to the Hurlbirds proper, the single-minded pursuit of contact with her ancestors--"the only main idea of her heart"(98)-- determines all of Florence's romantic affairs.

Dowell is able to drop some often subtle hints about what Florence desired that, at least in retrospect, suggests he understands the single-mindedness of Florence's incestuous desire. Bagshawe, whose name sounds eerily similar to "Branshaw," is an "unmistakable man" with "a pallid complexion that suggested vices practiced in secret"(110).¹⁴ When Florence and Bagshawe spot one another at the hotel in Nauheim, Dowell describes her as "running with a face whiter than paper and her hand over the black stuff over her heart"(111). Her white face is reminiscent of Bagshawe's pallid complexion, a signifier of her own vices--the black stuff *in* her heart--practiced in secret that are threatening to become public. Conflating the behavior of Oedipus and Jocasta, but without the element of surprise, Florence "stuck her hands over her face as if she

¹⁴ Bagshawe's inn is located--provocatively--south of Stratford-on-Avon where the travels in England with Uncle John and Jimmy begin, towards the ancestral lands in Fordingbridge.

wished to put her eyes out"(111), runs to her room, and takes her own life.¹⁵ Spontaneous acts of great passion and remorse in *Oedipus Rex* become premeditated acts in *The Good Soldier*. Florence is prepared for suicide "if ever I discovered the nature of her relationship with that fellow Jimmy"(129). This fear of having her past revealed is "the secret weakness of Florence--the weakness that she could not bear to have me discover"(131). Not so strangely, considering the nature of her relationship to Jimmy, "She would not . . . have minded if I had discovered that she was the mistress of Edward Ashburnham"(131).

A troubling moment for the Misses Hurlbird occurs when, after their brother's and Florence's deaths, Dowell comes back to Waterbury to settle the estate. The "small, stupid action"(131) in Florence's past continues to send shudders through those that survive her. Uncle Hurlbird's money passes to Florence and then, because Florence dies only five days after him, on to Dowell, and so it is Dowell that is charged by John Hurlbird to "erect to him . . . a memorial"(215). Irony and a "moral dilemma"(215) surround the question of the Uncle's estate. Miss Florence Hurlbird believes that a lung institution should be constructed, but the other aunt, "by a kink that I could not at that time understand . . . insisted that I ought to keep the money all to myself. She said that she did not wish for any monuments to the Hurlbird family"(216). The "old lady did not wish the name of Hurlbird perpetuated"(217) and "perhaps also she thought that I had earned the Hurlbird money"(217). This reasoning, like so much of Dowell's reasoning, is revealing in so far as it is slightly off the mark. The money that passes through Florence's hands is tainted.

The "kink" is that the Hurlbird money, by passing through Florence's hands, becomes contaminated by her incestuous, shameful past, and thus the memorial would bring about more disgrace than glory for the remaining family members. More kinky yet, the money

¹⁵ Many critics argue that Dowell and Leonora are in cahoots and, together, murder Florence. For the most provocative reading along these lines, see Roger Poole.

is doubly incestuous because the memorial is to be maintained with the incestuous interest (217) produced by the already incestuously tainted principal. Following Aristotle's analysis of the word *tokos*, a word that refers "not only to the biological generation of likenesses but also to monetary generation or interest"(Shell *The Economy of Literature* [EL] 93), Marc Shell notes that "usury or monetary generation draws not from nature (*physis*) but from money (*nomisma*)"(EL 94) and "it is the nature of some animals and some plants to produce their likenesses (*homoiomata*), but it is not the nature of metallic money to do so"(EL 94). The memorial that would be constructed would be doubly incestuous because the money's replication of and upon itself would mirror the taboo relationship between Florence and Jimmy. Rather than perpetuate the incest, Miss Hurlbird wants to rid the family of the constant reminder of, and contaminating residue--or "reversion"--intrinsic in the money. Miss Hurlbird wins the battle with her sister over the "moral dilemma" of the money "either by revelations or by moral force"(218) so that "no memorial to their names shall be erected in the city of Waterbury"(218), making Dowell an even richer man.

An Economy of Incest

Incest (*incestum*) takes its name from being a privation of chastity. But all kinds of lust are opposed to chastity. Therefore it seems that incest is not a species of lust, but is lust itself in general. (Aquinas qtd. in Shell *EK* 45)

The relationship between Florence and Jimmy is certainly the most obscure incestuous relationship in the narrative. Dowell is much more explicit in his descriptions of other incestuous relationships, whether figurative or literal, so that, following the logic of Aquinas, it does appear that all species of lust in the novel are incestuous.¹⁶ Leonora plays symbolic mother to most of the characters, but especially with Dowell (53) whom

¹⁶ Although Bruce Bassof does not develop this aspect of his argument in detail, he does claim that "All of the relationships in the story have an incestuous quality"(46).

she also treats as a brother (36), implying the "want of any necessity of barriers"(37). This incestuous desire between mother and son (or sister and brother) is one of the most enduring, stable desires expressed in the novel, regardless of Dowell's ambivalent statement that he eventually "dislikes" Leonora. Unlike his other relationships, Dowell claims he feels a sense of constancy with Leonora. When both Florence and Edward are dead, "I cannot tell you the extraordinary sense of leisure that we two seemed to have at that moment"(117). The sexual tension that plagues their relationships with their respective spouses disappears, and the "want of natural boundaries" constructed by the mother-son and brother-sister (116) relationship which, of course, constructs its own set of boundaries and taboos, allows--albeit briefly--for a sense of artificial constancy and sexual satiation to be evoked. The relationship is, at one and the same time, a "safe" desire because of the prohibition of incest and an alluring, erotically charged relationship *because* of the incest taboo.

Edward's role as "father" of Leonora, Leonora's role as "mother" of Edward, both Leonora's and Edward's roles as "parents" of Nancy, and Dowell's desire to "be" Edward reveals an even more taboo and, thus, more erotically charged representation of familial desire. Edward is repeatedly constructed throughout the text as the desiring and desired father, both in terms of cultural and familial position. Edward surveys his land holdings with the pride of ownership (32); he is, for Nancy, "the model of humanity, the hero, the athlete, the father of his country, the law-giver"(124) and "He was the Cid; he was Lohengrin; he was Chevalier Bayard"(246); he attempts to explain to La Dolciquita, Dowell suggests, that "salvation can only be found in true love and the feudal system"(176); with Maisie "he was almost like a father with a child"(68); in the Kysite case Edward believes he acts as a protector and comforter to the "servant girl"(171); and, early in their relationship, he is both "pastor and guide"(154) for Leonora.

As with Dowell, Leonora frequently takes on the figurative roles of mother and, sometimes, father to Edward and the women who are close to her that appear helpless in

some way: "she had almost attained the attitude of a mother towards Mrs. Maidan"(69). "Almost" is the crucial term here because Leonora's "motherhood" often takes a paternalistic, controlling form. Leonora as "law-giver" is constantly usurping her "maternal" characteristics; in her misguided accusations against Mrs. Maidan "the cold justice of the thing demanded she should play the part of mother to this child"(80). "Cold justice" is the realm of the father, the law-giver, the feudal lord, not the jurisdiction of the stereotypical, comforting "mother," one aspect of the maternal role that Dowell fantasizes Leonora plays with him. About Nancy, "both Edward and Leonora really regarded the girl as their daughter. Or it might be more precise to say that they regarded her as being Leonora's daughter"(136). This attempt at precision on Dowell's part is perhaps even more surprising than Leonora's gender reversals, for it is not much earlier in the narrative that Dowell reports that Edward "regarded [Nancy] *exactly* as he would have regarded a daughter"(123 emphasis added). Over the course of the novel, Dowell reveals their attitudes as pretensions that mask desires which deconstruct conventional roles.

After her discovery of the financial trouble that Edward's affair with La Dolciquita causes, Leonora strips Edward of his means to act paternalistically. With the help of an attorney, she "put[s] the leash"(136) on him and becomes a trustee of all of Edward's property, "and there was an end of Edward as the good landlord and father of his people"(182). She sells two paintings of his ancestors, about which Edward cried for two days (182-3), and she rents Branshaw, the family's estate, which "affected him with a feeling of *physical soiling*--that it was almost as bad for him as if a woman belonging to him had become a *prostitute*"(183 emphasis added). Edward's passionate feelings about maintaining his family are marred by their uncontrolled exchange among non-kin. The confusion here of gender, sexuality, kinship, and property reveals a great shift in terms of power dynamics in their relationship. Ironically, Leonora, empowered by patriarchal law, becomes the law-giver, the feudal lord with the power to destroy the patriarchal tradition of Edward's family history by prostituting both the land and the vestiges of

power that the land signifies. Leonora's prostituting Edward's property resembles her pimping *for* Edward in his many affairs. The analogy Dowell makes, however, suggests that Edward is the pimp and Leonora is the prostitute (property). Her actions reconfigure the power relations suggested in the analogy. Pimping resembles usury because "One of the meanings of 'usurer' is 'pimp'"(Shell *EK* 126). By limiting his disposable income and, thus, his ability to bestow gifts, Leonora controls Edward's adulterous affairs, and "it made her more hateful to him--and more worthy of respect"(190). She controls his love life--and her intense interest increases her profits. She eventually offers to relinquish control to Edward after she has recovered the lost money but, in the end, maintains financial control until his death because of her overmastering desire to retain and increase their finances. She allows him just enough money to maintain the pretension of feudal lord, and thus maintain the appearance of "good people" but, as with the direction that Edward's affairs shows, Leonora's control over their ancestral property is finally an incestuous, endogamous movement towards reversion, not unlike Florence's own desire to return in order to maintain her own ancestral past; in fact, Edward's desire for Florence as vestige of his outright possession of his estate prior to La Dolciquita duplicates Florence's own reversion motives. Like a virus, these characters seem to pass their desires from one to another.

The presence of money, like the idea of inheritance, is described in many respects as self-perpetuating. Like money being kept within the family by being passed from one generation to another through inheritance and reversion, money is frequently decried in this text as being produced by, for, and within a particular set, or kind, of people: Edward "was a fellow that many men liked So every now and then some financier whom he met about would give him a good, sound, profitable tip. . . . So nearly all of [Leonora's] investments turned up trumps"(68). The possession of money in the narrative creates a kind of family structure in which the members are incestuously involved. Money further defines kinship groups and thus redefines exogamous exchange along class as well as

bloodlines, and one goes forward and backward within these lines incestuously.¹⁷ The money that is made from these investments breeds exponentially and incestuously upon itself.

For the Ashburnhams, the financier poses as a legitimate means of making money from money because the person who facilitates this increase is, like the money itself, a part of the same larger "family." A respectable financier is, because of conventions and traditions, "good people," and class endogamy is good practice. However, a similar form of producing money represents a reprehensible, *unfamiliar* accumulation of wealth. The episode that causes the Ashburnham's most immediate financial problems is Edward's affair with La Dolciquita and they go into debt for forty thousand pounds "borrowed from sharks!"(60) that leaves "a pretty solid hole in a fortune of a hundred thousand pounds or so"(60). Yet this borrowing from sharks is elsewhere described as endogomously borrowing from Edward's "money-lending friends"(182).¹⁸ Although the means by which the money is made (interest) is the same as that produced by the good financial tips Edward receives, the source and the context significantly alter the conventions and traditions to which "good people" attempt to adhere. The Ashburnham money is incestuously increasing itself in the pockets of those usurers who are simultaneously both outside *and* inside their "kinship" group. To avert the danger posed by these figures, Leonora further concentrates her power over Edward's property and affairs in order to consolidate the family line.

Edward views his affairs as compensation for the lost control over his finances and with Leonora's pimping assistance, they both attempt to stop the symbolic circulation of

¹⁷ Sophocles's play is echoed in *The Good Soldier*, and it is more than coincidental that "*Oedipus the King* is the classic example of a literary work in which the penalty for class exogamy, or apparent class exogamy, is familial endogomy"(Shell *EK* 195) because "Oedipus the 'tyrant' is allied with the rising class of merchants and moneylenders. The 'unnatural' incest in his family is a counterpart to the 'unnatural' usury practised by that class"(*EK* 127).

¹⁸ Marc Shell observes that the "English 'friend,' to which we usually attach only the general meaning 'intimate associate,' has the alternate meanings 'kinsman' and 'sexual lover'"(*EK* 191).

family by slowly narrowing his desire to within his family. The first in a list of at least three "girls"--who are all in their late teens or early twenties and are, therefore, not "girls" at all--occurs before his feelings for Nancy are revealed. The reader can conclude, although Dowell does not precisely do so, that Edward's affairs plot a movement towards an affair with his own "girl" in two ways: first, each "girl's" class position and, second, each "girl's" symbolic distance or proximity to the Ashburnham's domestic space. His course begins with exogamy and ends with endogamy, and the movement is, in the end, a simultaneous effort to preserve through reversion and a movement towards figurative and literal death.

In a summative paragraph Dowell lists Edward's affairs in an almost chronological order.¹⁹ According to Dowell, the affair with La Dolciquita is his first and most unlike his last even though the reversion he experiences with her sets the tone for all subsequent affairs. She is not of his class and, though he tries desperately, he finds no satisfying emotional connection with her. His second affair with the servant girl, the Kysite case, is not mentioned in Dowell's chronology. Here Edward again desires someone who is outside of his class, but in terms of the woman's occupation his desire moves from outside the home to inside it, and the trial--in an attempt to deter class exogamy--ultimately disrupts even as it makes apparent his erotic and emotional ties to the domestic servant (164). His third affair is with Mrs. Basil, "the wife of a brother officer"(63) who is like a sister-in-law, is closer in class and familial position and this affair is thus more satisfying. Edward's affair with Mrs. Maidan moves towards more entanglement with both money and familial desire because Edward's wife both pimps and pays for this affair and, as noted above, both Edward and Leonora behave as though they were surrogate

¹⁹ James T. Adams, in an analysis of the notorious problems concerning chronology in the text, argues that an adjusted chronology brings "Edward's affairs into the following order: the prostitute, the servant girl, Florence, Mrs. Basil, Maisie Maidan, and, finally, Nancy"(159). This "sequence describes a steady movement away from the merely physical towards the entirely spiritual, away from moral license towards moral discipline"(160). While Adams's arguments about the adjusted chronology are compelling, we disagree about what the "movement" of Edward's affairs signifies.

parents of the "girl." The penultimate affair with Florence represents a heightening of the incestuous possibilities of Edward's affairs. Florence is, at least in her ancestors' relationship to Branshaw, a kind of ancestor of Edward's. She has inherited all of her money and, if Edward were to run away with her, he would receive her money, which is, in a paternal line of ascent, the result of the land which he is now the prideful owner, sealing a "break" both in lineage and profits. His last affair with Nancy represents the final logical step in the movement of Edward's (and Leonora's) desire from the most extreme distance "outside" the family to fully "within" the family, and it also signifies a parallel movement in terms of property insofar as it keeps it "in the family."

This *economic movement* is not surprising because Dowell works hard in his narration to suggest that Edward's desire *for his daughter* is not surprising; they are, in many ways, a double of one another: "the poor girl . . . was just as straight, as splendid, and as upright as he. I swear she was. I suppose that was, really, why I liked him so much--so infinitely much"(102). They are mirror images of one another, and this doubling is what Dowell finds so attractive. As with the Kylsite case, Edward claims that the desire that he has for a "girl" remains repressed until a significant event draws it out: "he certainly loved her, but with a very deep, very tender, and very tranquil love. . . . But of more than that he had been totally unconscious. Had he been conscious of it, he assured me, he would have fled from it as from a thing accursed"(123). Dowell's defense that Edward is unconscious of his feelings is suspect. He argues that "it had not even come into [Edward's] head that the taboo which extended around her was not inviolable. And then, suddenly, that--"(124). There is no period at the end of this paragraph to stem the flood of desire that is created by the "discovery" that the taboo is, by definition, violable, and that only the possibility of its violation could have created its repression (or "unconsciousness") in the first place.²⁰ As with Dowell's "conversation" with Florence's aunts where a dash marks

²⁰ Robert Micklus is as suspicious of Dowell's "discoveries"(285-6) as I am of their "suddenness."

the unspeakable desire, the dash of desire here is interminable, without boundaries, a void that prefigures death. Edward "was very careful to assure"(124) Dowell that a physical desire did not spark his declarations to Nancy and discovery of himself, that his desire "did not appear . . . to be a matter of a dark night and a propinquity and so on"(124). "Propinquity" suggests both that Edward and Nancy's proximity on the bench created erotic feelings, and it also suggests their "nearness of blood" or "kinship" (*OED*) as a potential cause of desire, a similarity in nature, disposition, belief (*OED*). The boundaries present in an incestuous propinquity collapse in upon themselves. The denial of propinquity is at the same time an acknowledgment that propinquity, in all of its many guises, is a cause of reversive desire. Edward's confession to Nancy, Dowell supposes, is received by her as "a sudden pouring fourth of passion by a man whom you regard as a cross between a pastor and a father"(125), an almost exact duplication of the attitude that Leonora takes towards Edward early in their marriage. Dowell's words at once make Edward's desire sacrosanct and perverse in this context. Edward, too, is aware of the violation and, "when he realized what he was doing, [he] curbed his tongue at once"(125). Silence averts but does not deny the incestuous aspect of his desire. The unspeakable aspect of his desire, what makes him swallow his own words, "was the most monstrously wicked thing that Edward Ashburnham ever did in his life"(125).

Nancy is the "only woman [Edward] ever really loved"(126), and this observation sparks Dowell's pet theory that "With each new woman that a man is attracted to there appears to come a broadening of the outlook, or, if you like, an acquiring of *new territory*"(126 emphasis added). The simile seems misguided in the case of Nancy and Edward because the punishment for incest will prove to be exile (a perverse twist on the "acquiring of new territory"), madness, and death. The "new territory" in an incestuous relationship is actually quite familiar, a reversion back to a former desire. But Dowell does not stop with mere emotional imperialism: a man "wants to get, as it were, behind those eyebrows with the peculiar turn, as if he desired to see the world with the eyes they

overshadow"(126-7). This incestuous desire is aggressive and destructive: "the real fierceness of desire . . . is the craving for identity with the woman that he loves. He desires to see with the same eyes, to touch with the same sense of touch, to hear with the same ears, to lose his identity, to be enveloped, to be supported"(127). These passages make this issue of doubling more problematic because they suggest the conflation of two into one. The acquisition of ubiquitously female territory is thus always imbued with a simultaneously preservative and destructive, reversion-driven incestuous desire. Appropriately, as "doubles" of each other, Edward and Nancy's desire is reciprocal. This incestuous narcissism, a redundancy the narrative appears to embrace, both destroys Edward because he "wore himself to rags and tatters and *death*--in an effort to leave her alone"(128) *and* spurs his passion to new heights of desire and satisfaction: "Before he spoke there was nothing; afterwards, it was the integral fact of his *life*"(129). Edward's incestuous desire drives him both towards death *and* life.

The paradoxical meeting of life and death in incest is found, appropriately enough, in Nancy as well. Dowell constructs a conjectural narrative of what Nancy has read and, in the process, suggests a subjectivity for Nancy that it does not appear possible for him to know.²¹ Granted, all events in the novel are filtered through Dowell's consciousness, but it appears that Dowell can know the least about Nancy of the four characters. Dowell invents Nancy's sexual desires and fantasies, fantasizing a masturbatory scene that is nothing short of incestuous because Dowell "is" Edward: "I love him because he was just myself"(275). Dowell rehearses the imagined steps in Nancy's discovery that Edward desires her. She realizes that Edward mirrors the "chance passages" that she has read, and "He appeared as a man who was burning with inward flame, drying up in the soul with thirst, withering up in the vitals"(244). This recognition in "life" of what has been gathered from books then transfers itself into Nancy's own subjectivity; in her three

²¹ A blindsight that has been noted by Walter J. Creed (220).

glasses of wine with dinner Nancy discovers a saturnalian gaiety, "But in half an hour the gaiety went; she felt like a person who is burning up with an inward flame; desiccating at the soul with thirst; withering up in the vitals"(244) and dying. Nancy again becomes Edward's double, discovering incest's conflation of life and death in the same desire. Through Nancy's sexual fantasies about Edward (245, 250), Dowell creates and then vicariously experiences both life and death in his writing and fantasizing about incest.

Although the evidence provided for the reciprocity of Nancy's specific desires is often based on Dowell's conjecture, according to Leonora, Nancy's desire *is* present and Leonora acted the part of jealous wife, betrayed mother, and pimp.

She was torn between her intense, maternal love for the girl and an intense jealousy of the woman who realizes that the man she loves has met what appears to be the final passion of his life. She was divided between an intense disgust for Edward's weakness in *conceiving* this passion . . . [and] a feeling of respect for Edward's determination to keep himself, in this particular affair, unspotted. (222 emphasis added)

Leonora holds Nancy responsible for supplanting her position as object of desire and central importance in Edward's life. Leonora's strategy regarding Nancy turns out to be the same that she has employed with Edward's affairs in the past. Leonora wishes that "he were your husband, and not mine"(227). And although willing to give her husband over to Nancy, or Nancy over to her husband, the adulterous relationship *conceives* such an intense disgust in Leonora precisely because it is incestuous, even if Dowell often refuses to name it as such (251). Leonora's destructive behavior in this triangle performs its own type of reversion by once again reversing conventional family positions. Leonora's fantasy of whipping Nancy (229) and Edward (230) escalates to the point that "she wanted to go on torturing Edward with the girl's presence"(231). Leonora's beating fantasy is an attempt to regain power in the family triangle that she thinks she has lost with Edward's desire turning towards Nancy, but the beating fantasy is ambivalent, for

after the desire is revealed, Leonora becomes like a disempowered child, and she begs Nancy to save Edward by sleeping with him. The role of mother and daughter reverse: after Leonora begs her, Nancy "smiled at her with a queer, faraway smile--as if she were a thousand years old, as if Leonora were a tiny child"(235).

The complexity of the triangular desire between Leonora, Nancy, and Edward and the seemingly unanchored desire Dowell has for all three is concisely represented in the description of the interior space of Branshaw. At the height of the family turmoil, only physical walls separate the participants in the Oedipal triangle; these boundaries appear, at times, to be the only things standing in the way of the consummation of the desirous relationships. "Their rooms all gave on to the gallery; Leonora's to the east, the girl's next, then Edward's. The sight of those three open doors, side by side, gaping to receive whom the chances of the black night might bring, made Leonora shudder all over her body"(233). Like the family structure itself, the rooms allow propinquity, but they also mark off boundaries. The openings to each individualized space create fears of possibility in Leonora, for she recognizes that the thresholds--and the relationships that they portend--are not inviolable. Edward stands at the threshold of Nancy's room, fully opening the "half-opened door"(249) and leaning against the "door-post"(249) when she and Leonora are talking about the incestuous desire; he is unwilling to cross into the room and thus acknowledge his desire by passing across the physical boundary. When Nancy later crosses the threshold into Edward's room in order to "give" herself to him--revealing the tenuousness of the boundaries--he banishes her from his room and the incestuous danger that the act of crossing signifies (263). Where Edward's decision to reject this final step towards total reversion precipitates his suicide, and Nancy's willingness to take the final step prefigures her madness, one of Dowell's last acts is to purchase Branshaw, thus adopting and preserving as a kind of memorial the reversion-driven material and psychological collapse of boundaries between characters.

The Final Reversion

Dowell explains that the punishment meted out to Nancy fits the crime of transgressive desire, both within Branshaw and within Western culture: "It was that conventional line; it was in tune with the tradition of Edward's house. I dare say it worked out for the greatest good of the body politic. Conventions and traditions I suppose work *blindly* but surely for the preservation of the normal type; for the extinction of proud, resolute, and unusual individuals"(259 emphasis added). The conventional line, of course, is the mandated circulation of daughters, but the "traditions of Edward's house" have consistently proven to be incestuous. The tone of the line that Dowell follows here is more in tune with Leonora's ostensibly strict but ultimately ambivalent approach to "convention." Dowell proves to be Leonora's puppy dog by "trotting"(278) off to her in that last moments of the narrative and he obediently follows her destructively polarized approach to Edward and Nancy: the "fear of the practice of incest and the practice itself are social diseases that lead, one way or another, to the death of the body politic as we know it"(Shell EK 40).

As they do throughout the narrative, puns such as "blindly" suggest that Dowell is, perhaps, more aware of his allusions than he cares to explicitly admit. In addition to the many moments where Dowell explicitly employs conjecture and the technical devices he uses to create ambiguity, his consistent use of puns work to deconstruct and reconstruct the "conventional line." "Queer" is the most frequently used adjective to describe Nancy because she incites so much fetishistic passion in Dowell and Edward: she is strange, odd, peculiar, and eccentric (*OED*); yet she is also "of questionable character, suspicious, dubious"(*OED*) in terms of her parentage and desire. She is "bad money," perhaps "counterfeit"(*OED*), but a "forgery" to whom? Whether she is Major Rufford's child, Edward's, Leonora's, or someone else's, each possible parentage leads to different dubious relationships. Perhaps most troubling is her *seeming* to be a "true" double rather than a "false" imitation. This impossible paradox of redundancy and specious reasoning is the result of obscure origins: who fathers and authorizes Nancy's circulation is lost in a

dark maze of parentage.²² The result of all the many possible confluences of structural meaning surrounding Nancy inspires Dowell to conclude "it would have been better in the eyes of God if they had all attempted to gouge out each other's eyes with carving knives"(270). Marc Shell suggests that "theorists since the medieval era have argued that punning is [usury's] linguistic counterpart, since punning makes an unnatural, even a diabolical, supplement of meaning from a sound that is properly attached to only one (if any) meaning"(Shell *ML* 22). In the context of *The Good Soldier*, words that usually suggest only one meaning, one structural position in relation to an other, such as "father," "mother," "daughter," "son," "sister," and "brother," all become diabolical puns that threaten the conventional ordering of social structures. Dowell masters this chaos in the act of narration by allowing his unanchored desire to drift within and across all these conventional lines.

Dowell also claims to recognize the necessity for punishing the criminal in order to preserve the "normal," albeit with some reservations about what constitutes "normal": "I see that it is a happy ending with wedding bells and all. The villains, for obviously Edward and the girl were villains, have been punished by suicide and madness. The heroine--the perfectly normal, virtuous, and slightly deceitful heroine--has become the happy wife of a perfectly normal, virtuous, and slightly deceitful husband"(273). Unless Dowell is being entirely sarcastic here, which is unlikely given his tone throughout the narrative, his reasoning is anything but "obvious." Yet what this conclusion allows Dowell to justify is crucial to his desires. To preserve the appearance of convention and tradition, "it was necessary that Edward and Nancy Rufford should become, for me at least, no more than tragic shades"(274). Transforming Edward and Nancy into abstract ideas--just as his act of narration transforms through abstraction--allows Dowell to amalgamate and incorporate their desires as his own. It enables him to "get behind" both

²² Something similar happens to Oedipus: "One day, he says, someone in the court [of King Polybius and Queen Merope] called him *plastos* . . . meaning 'counterfeit' as well as 'bastard'"(Shell *EL* 98).

of them in an act of incestuous psychological imperialism. Ironically, Dowell explains that it is *his own* propinquity that keeps him from acknowledging the taboo: "yet I am *so near* to all these people that I cannot think any of them wicked"(125 emphasis added). Dowell tries to "push that image of [Edward] away"(125), "but it always comes back"(125-6). As Edward attempts to suppress the desire inherent in the family structure and dies for his trouble, Dowell maintains that he attempts to curb his own desire for the characters (and *their* desires) and fails: the return of the almost-repressed.

Dowell wants to be understood as passive participant in the events he narrates, but his act of narration is anything but passive. His preservation of word and thought is plagued by the incest that is attributed to his intimates and is compounded by his own investment in these motivating forces; they are often *the result of* his interest in them. Dowell becomes *the* figure for reversion. At the end of the narrative he has become the "rest, residue, or remainder" of his four friends' lives. Materially, he has Uncle John's and Florence's money, the Hurlbird/Ashburnham ancestral property, and he has even taken possession of Nancy. He has discovered great material fecundity in other people's incestuous desires after making them his own. Psychologically, his appropriations mimic his material increase. Like the incestuous interest produced through usury, Dowell uses his friends to satiate his own desires by parlaying their desires through multiple and supplemental retellings. The narrative itself represents the interest produced from their principle. And so Dowell's symptoms, the lens through which the reader understands the issues and symptoms of the other characters, flow "backwards" freely over the course of the narrative, making their presence felt in economies of reversive desire. The many dashes, ellipses, puns, and ambiguous phrasings that characterize Dowell's syntax and diction signify how "his" desire(s) do not so much trail off to a definitive end as they suggest the interminability of his desire to re-appropriate through re-narrating his tale. He does not get the "sight out of his head" so much as he constantly recounts it in order to pleasurably relive it. It is a desire that *embraces* the want of any necessity of barriers,

and thus a desire that engages and exists in the confusion of family members with one another and the structural systems of exchange that signify them. If "one goes back, one goes forward" in this kind of narration, the pathway is always recursive, antagonistic, and insular. This narrative economy is incestuous even as it purports to reproduce and preserve in narrative the lives and desires of others. There are no "future generations" for Dowell except as the products of his fantasizing. He maintains his "silent listener" and the insane Nancy as the "unknowable heirs" of his authorship: it all reverts back to him.

Twincest and the Oedipal Drive of Narrative in John Barth's Novels

What drives the nearly ubiquitous presence of incest between opposite-sex twins in John Barth's novels? The answer to this question is important because the paradoxes that twincest embodies and invokes are intricately related to Barth's interests in the form and function of the postmodern novel. The explicit presence and repetition of twincest is itself a sign of Barth's interest in form: its overtness actually creates the desire's opaque paradox.²³ Twincest is an object *around* which meaning in the novels is created and destroyed. Because of this paradox, however, the metaphor of twincest as "center" ultimately does not hold. The "center" which grounds representation in Barth's novels is a void marked by twincest. Twincest represents the desire for an object where only the process, reproduction, and circularity of desire itself is found, rather than an attainment of the desired object. John Barth's novels expose, reproduce, and reconfigure the paradoxical relationships between the presence and absence of twincest, heterogeneity and homogeneity, and between symbolic narrative life and death.

Because the process of reconfiguration in Barth's novels is simultaneously so clear and opaque, writing about the forms and figures of narrative structure that appear in his fictions has become a common practice for critics, including himself.²⁴ My arguments share this practice because they examine and deploy the emblem that appears on the title page of the 1982 editions of the novel, *Sabbatical*. In a more or less chronological order, beginning with *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the "progress" of Barth's novels is a movement that corresponds to the shapes of the emblem, from the outer circle formed by the outermost edge of the three wedges, to the three "roads" that form the letter "Y"--also likened to a

²³ See Slavoj Žižek on the respective relationships between absence and presence and modernism and postmodernism (145).

²⁴ Besides circles, spirals, and coaxial lines, the most common spatial form employed to describe Barth's narrative forms is the Möbius strip (Walkiewicz 88-89, Harris *Passionate Virtuosity* 123, Ziegler 18) because of his explicit use of one at the beginning of *Lost in the Funhouse*.

"crotch"--to the inner circle that lies at the center of the design. This movement from "outside" to "inside," however, is finally frustrated by what is concealed and what is revealed *about* the innermost circle. This revelation develops Barth's quasi-incestuous re-enactments of his previous novels.²⁵ Barth's more recent novels rely upon this revelation about his previous representations with their very ex-centricity; it is with these novels that the (im)possibilities of the emblematic figure and what *it* has come to represent for the drive of narrative are realized.

The issue of narrative movement is related to one of the more important paradoxes among the many that Barth's novels represent: the opposition and connection between narrative life and death. In his non-fiction Barth claims that "literature, like language, is seldom simply but always also about itself" (*Friday Book x*). The self-reflexive aspect of fiction in this passage describes a circular relationship: a narrative mode that always folds back upon itself. The form of the circularizing narrative is immortalizing (Harris "The Age of the World View" 429) because of its continuity, but at the same time it is enclosing, exclusive, static and, thus, embraces symbolic narrative death through the suspension of movement. This aspect of the "motion" of narrative literature and language is significantly different from the movement suggested by conventional Western paradigms. In this latter model the movement is typically and infinitely *between* things in an "either/or" relationship of difference, such as that between male or female, and life or death. The movement of narrative under this paradigm is towards singular resolution. Barth deconstructs these binaries--and the narrative movement that represents them--by reconfiguring them into different, infinitely simultaneous relationships, favoring a "both/and" representational relationship. This representational method allows for

²⁵ Barth reveals that he is in "the habit of giving my first attention to my fiction in progress, including the reverberations in it of what I've written before, the retrospective illumination of old themes by new variations and reorchestrations, and the possible foreshadowing of future projects" (*Further Fridays* 280). This process perhaps reaches its "peak" in *LETTERS*, a novel that, ironically, does not foreground incestuous opposite-sex twins, but does include six characters from previous novels in an act of "incestuous authorship" (Schulz 150) where the character of Barth as Author is "incestuously involved, so to speak, with all these products of his own mind" (Schulz 134).

pluralism: seemingly exclusive narrative movements exist simultaneously, often paradoxically.

Barth admits that his own "command of polarities is notoriously shaky" as a result of "being an opposite-sex twin" (*Further Fridays* 185).²⁶ Opposite-sex twins suggest a simultaneous "both/and" relationship for Barth, and his combination of the seemingly opposed concepts of narrative life and death are the result of the above observation and an early exposure to the narratives of Sheherezade that forever linked the acts of narrating, sexuality, and death in Barth's mind (*Further Fridays* 245). Barth concludes from this exposure that "narrative equals language equals life" (*Friday Book* 236) even as the presence of death signals a narrative's end. The act of deploying incestuous paradox upon narrative forms and as a narrative form is an effort to "try whether different kinds of artistical felt ultimacies and cul-de-sacs can be employed against themselves to do valid new work; whether disabling contradictions, for example, can be escalated or exacerbated into enabling paradoxes" (*Friday Book* 78-9). This essay adopts this manifesto and charts the way Barth's representations of twincest reconfigure "either/or" paradigms; this reconfiguration has significant consequences insofar as it attempts to *remap* the monolithic, Western, Oedipal drive of narrative.

The Oedipal drive of narrative is a product of the logic of binaries; the movement of narrative is towards either one or the other pole. Roland Barthes argues the connection between language, narrative, and the Oedipal exists because the point of narrative is to "know," or "reveal," or to learn what the "origin" or "end" of the story is (Barthes Qtd. in de Lauretis 107-8). The complex process of identification and mastery implicit in this drive parallels the narrative of identification between one parent or the other. Over the

²⁶ In his non-fiction Barth frequently denies the presence of autobiography in his fiction (*Friday Book* 98). It is not my intention to "prove" the presence of autobiography, but to read both the non-fiction and fiction together, like opposite-sex twins, as part of a project of incestuous narrativization, where the one mode simultaneously informs, deconstructs, and reconstructs the other. In addition to the collapse of these modes, reading "separate" works serially is something that Barth supports (*Further Fridays* 326).

course of his oeuvre, Barth disturbs this Oedipal drive of narrative by making traditional binaries synonymous and, therefore, unidentifiable through conventional means of differentiation. This ambiguity creates problems for not only what is revealed and concealed, but how revealing and concealing are accomplished, that is, the form of the narrative itself. Roland Barthes's description of the Oedipal drive of narrative proposes a point of closure, an implicit assumption that riddles will be solved, an origin or end found, and knowledge achieved. But Barth remaps this oedipality through a different understanding of how a "drive" functions. The narrative of his novels, especially when read serially, embody what Slavoj Žižek describes as the drive's ultimate aim: "simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path The real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movement of this closed circuit"(5).²⁷ It is this drive to repeat that explains the complex, Chinese box-like narrative constructions in the novels, the self-reflexiveness of the form and language, and the unrepresentable void that is the decentering "center" in his most recent novels.

Barth's opposite-sex twins exemplify this drive to repeat. Barth often represents them as polymorphously perverse, incestuous, and privy to an inarticulate language in the womb. The fantasy of the twincestuous womb as a place of symbolic ambiguity, of (re)production within reproduction, and of narrative reproduction that also constitutes narrative death, is a fantasy that constantly returns in Barth's fictions. By making the individual literally two halves of the "same" person--opposite-sex twins--Barth's representations of this polymorphous, incestuous perversity evoke a comparison with the bisexual constitution Freud suggests exists in all infants prior to the advent of the Oedipus complex (Freud 86 *n.*). Leo Bersani argues that "the Oedipus complex represses

²⁷ This definition of drive is distinct from desire, a related and powerful aspect of Barth's narratives: desire "can always turn into its opposite or slide from one object to another, it never aims at what appears to be its object, but always 'wants something else.' The drive, on the other hand, is inert, it resists being enmeshed in a dialectical movement; it circulates around its object, fixed upon the point around which it circulates"(Žižek 134).

the unintelligibility of Oedipal relations"(101) because it stifles the internalization of *both* rivals/parents. In other words, the Oedipus complex is a master narrative that overrides polymorphous perversity by attempting to conceal other (non-) narratives that disrupt the imposed coherency of the master narrative.

Barth's opposite-sex twins, when "remembering" and metaphorically moving back towards the womb-crossroads via incest, form one "whole" bisexual subject rather than two individual subjects, thus reestablishing the unintelligibility of Oedipal relations and deconstructing the Oedipal drive of narrative by complicating its "origin," process, and "end." In more recent novels, Barth further reconfigures this division and recombination process by representing divisions within each individual twin. This unintelligibility through reconfiguration is represented as a reconstructive return to "wholeness." The process of return to the "center" of the crossroads-crotch in Barth's novels exemplifies what Teresa de Lauretis calls "narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance"(157): the elements of the Oedipus myth are re-written, re-examined, and re-deployed to ultimately reconstruct the relationships between subjects, narrative, and Oedipality. The remapping of the drive process itself is what is foregrounded, for such Oedipal desires to "know" and "reveal" the "origin" and "end" can never be fully, singularly satiated in Barth's novels.

The Outer Circle

The most important prefix in Barth's work is "re" because of its defiance of finality *and* its tacit desire to locate an origin, or beginning. Barth first addresses the (dis)continuity of twincest and the miasma that lies at the center of a figurative crossroads in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and the later novels serve as "reenactments"(Friday Book 170) of this "original." Ebenezer Cooke's opposite-sex twin, Anne Cooke, becomes an expert in "Geminology"--the study of twins--out of desperate, unrequited "love or lust"(489) for

Ebenezer.²⁸ The conjunction connecting and separating the binary relationship here--as with each use of "or" in this chapter of the novel--belies the general point Henry Burlingame attempts to make Ebenezer understand: it is *both* love *and* lust that move Anna and, by extension, all opposite-sex twins toward their "other halves."

When Henry begins a seemingly exhaustive lecture on the place and role of twins in narrative traditions (496), the lesson to be gathered from these generalizations is that "whether their bond be love or hate or death . . . almost always their union is brilliance, totality, apocalypse--a thing to yearn and tremble for"(497). This exemplariness of desire, its tendency towards resolution in unity and death, is a "movement" whose "resolution" is mired in paradox and taboo: "Your sister is a driven and fragmented spirit, friend; the one half of her soul yearns but to fuse itself to yours, whilst the other recoils at the thought. 'Tis neither love nor lust she feels for you, but a prime and massy urge to *coalescence*"(489).²⁹ "Coalescence" is a complex, compound, inclusive proposition that upsets "either/or" and "neither/nor" binary structures, and the drive towards (or, more precisely, around) it reappears throughout Barth's novels.

Being an opposite-sex twin makes the desire to coalesce complex because it requires the intermixing of four divided selves--(at least) two per twin--into one "whole" subject through the "recovery" of the unintelligible and incestuous narratives prior to the advent of the master, Oedipal narrative. The movement towards wholeness is a metaphorical movement backwards in time and space towards an origin--a "resolution" that *ostensibly* represents the kind of closure Barthes identifies as the Oedipal drive of narrative: Anna

²⁸ Incestuous desires are not limited to Anna and Ebenezer. In *Passionate Virtuosity: The Fiction of John Barth*, Charles B. Harris provides an exhaustive list of the nine incestuous or quasi-incestuous couplings that fill the novel, of which Anna and Ebenezer serve as a centerpiece (80).

²⁹ Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug argue that Barth "mocks" Henry's theories here, teaching his readers to "distrust portentous interpretations"(83) and, thus, serve warning "to anyone trying to place the twinning motif at the center of *The Sot-Weed Factor* specifically or Barth's works generally"(82). This argument overlooks the nearly ubiquitous presence of twincest--"centered" or not--throughout Barth's novels, and while this motif's first appearance in *The Sot-Weed Factor* is parodic, it does express the infatuation that the paradox of twins and incest hold for Barth from this point forward in both his fiction and non-fiction.

"repines willy-nilly for the dark identity that twins share in the womb, and for the well-nigh fetal closeness of their childhood"(489). The fantasy of the origin is incestuous "inasmuch as twins break the laws of chastity while still embraced in their mother's womb"(494). This fantasy undermines the prohibitions the master narrative constructs. The coalescing of opposite-sex twins represents an incestuous construction of a bi-sexual self, and (yet) the desire to return and reconstruct "wholeness" is signified by, repeated through, and made (im)possible because of the means of representation itself: language.

The felt discontinuity between the twins is the result of their acquisition of symbolic language; their desired continuity is the fantasy of inarticulateness. The alphabet becomes an explicit signifying system of incestuous desire when Anna gives Ebenezer an engraved silver ring that used to be their mother's: Anna "was wont to read the letters ANNE B as ANN and EB conjoined"(490). The way in which Anna reads the letters marks the desire for return and reconfiguration in the sense of opposite-sex twins re-joining lost "halves." The original narrative of the twins' father's gift to their mother is returned to and reconfigured, and two narratives at cross purposes (the heterogenous desire of the parents versus the incestuous homogeneity of the twins) are produced from "one." Thus the letters on the ring--a fantasy of the womb--signify a symbolic, disruptively incestuous and paradoxically cyclical return to "origins" that precede Anna's and Ebenezer's conception. But the circular figure of the ring and the figures on the ring suggest the absence of an origin and an end. The irony is that language, with its potentially endless possibilities for reconfiguration through division and recombination, is the only means by which a return to inarticulateness is signified. This circular trap reveals only the *process* of drive itself: re-turn.

The fantasy of a return to the past is reflected in the form of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which represents a disruptive return to the earliest articulations of the genre of the novel, the language that the early novel in English employed, and its source material. The metafictional turning to the past, the search for origins in order to articulate the narrative

problems of the present, is entrapped within the incestuous inscription of Oedipal desire in narrative. Similar to Anna's reading of the letters on the ring, Henry Burlingame's lecture suggests the raw material of narrative language, individual letters, are marked by the desire for incestuous return. Henry tells Ebenezer his sacred letters "are A, C, H, I, M, O, P, S, W, X, and Z"(493). "'Tis half the alphabet!" exclaims Ebenezer, who quickly learns from Henry that each letter signifies the "making of two into one"(493). In this sense, the "half" of the alphabet that represents incestuous combination also signifies--by its absence and through the pattern established by Anna--a desire to "coalesce" with the missing half. The individual letters of the alphabet become signifiers for desire, incest, "totality," and "apocalypse" insofar as the endless combination and recombination of each letter--as with the inscription on the ring--becomes a token for both the "loss" of and rejoining with its other half. This circling back upon itself--the "wholeness"--present in opposite-sex twins and language almost serves as a synecdoche for the movement of the narrative itself.

The novel follows the plot that individual letters suggest by "rejoining" the twins. The written and spoken word become superfluous when reconnected: "The twins were as close as they had ever been . . . with the difference that their bond was inarticulate"(746). This "rediscovered" inarticulateness signifies the return to an incestuous bi-sexual self that relies upon the fantasy of the disruptive and paradoxical mother, a body which encompasses both life and death.³⁰ The presence of this third term between twins disrupts even as it enables the continuity of their relationship. It is the "memory" of the body of the other twin and the mother, and the fantasy of an absence of language altogether, that signify the disruptive stranger that always lies within oneself.³¹

³⁰ Charles B. Harris argues that in Barth's fiction "the language of silence is the language of death"(*Passionate Virtuosity* 79).

³¹ About this stranger within, Slavoj Žižek theorizes that "by 'circulating around itself,' as its own sun, this autonomous subject encounters in itself something 'more than itself,' a strange body in its very center[:]. . . . the designation of a stranger in the midst of my intimacy. Precisely by 'circulating only around itself,' the

By removing the narration from the field of representation, the death of the narrative implicit in the twins' rediscovered inarticulate language disrupts the narrative immortality the form of the circle suggests. Paradoxically, the plot of the novel embraces what appears to be Oedipal "closure" even as it redirects it. The plot appears to find closure with the twins' vicarious physical desire for one another: their attention to the memory of Henry Burlingame in Ebenezer's case and the physical attentions to Joan Toast by Anna (746). But, like the figure of the mother, Henry and Joan disrupt the seamlessness of twincest by creating triangular relationships that always mediates their relationship.³² Further, these triangles are always preceded by the split individual subject--the "stranger" that lurks within him or her self--and this subject's opposite-sex twin. The "complicated ramifications of the twin motif are never resolved"(Safer 434) in *The Sot-Weed Factor* except insofar as these ramifications are understood within the context incest represents. The twins' ostensible rejoining "kills" the narrative; it ends the need for letters as signifiers of desire. The plot seems to have run its course, but the course is Oedipal with a vengeance because the narrative circuitously and (dis)continuously refuses to expose an "origin" or "end" that is not always also a beginning as well.³³ Hence *The Sot-Weed Factor* is like the outer edge of the emblem: the sense of the form of a closed circle is present *and* the movement of the narrative is always redirected and discontinuous because interruptions in the pathways of desire and drive are always already being reintroduced.

Three Roads: (Im)possibilities

subject circulates around something that is 'in itself more than itself,' the traumatic kernel of enjoyment that Lacan refers to by the German word *das Ding* [the Thing]. The Subject is perhaps nothing more than a name for this circular movement"(169).

³² David Morrell makes a similar observation about twins and triangles in *The Sot-Weed Factor* (109).

³³ As nearly every critic of the novel acknowledges, the end of *The Sot-Weed Factor* creates as much ambiguity as it resolves.

Twincest in *The Sot-Weed Factor* marks a beginning of what becomes a fictional obsession in Barth's later works; but when his novels are read together *The Sot-Weed Factor* is like a point upon a ring of fiction that constantly encircles and is consistently recycled throughout Barth's oeuvre. In a more linear chronology, after *The Sot-Weed Factor* Barth emphasizes his investigation of how these various returns suggest the deconstruction and reconstruction of the problems of literary form as symbolized by incestuous desire. Specifically, the relationship between incest and genre, authorship, readers, and text become the object of contention and paradox in *Giles Goat-Boy*, especially in terms of the Oedipal drive of narrative. The problems of form in this novel are shown to be symptoms of the presence and desire of twincest and are present everywhere. While the plot features George and his possibly opposite-sex twin, Anastasia, sexually re-coalescing in the belly/crotch of the WESCAC computer (481), the more engaging incest occurs in the doubling of the *Oedipus Rex* play symptomatically reenacted and re-orchestrated in *Giles Goat-Boy* as "Taliped Decanus." The form and content of the play are re-orchestrated and reenacted--not strictly repeated--which allow the paradoxes inherent in the concept of genre to be revealed. This revelation, in turn, produces not only the collapse of generic conventions, but of the conventional rhetorical categories of author, reader, and text. Like the three roads figured in the emblem, the collision of these three categories leads to more narrative (im)possibilities.³⁴ Out of this seeming "end" to genre and narrative an apparently "enabling" paradox is (re)produced, and thus the repetition of the symptomatic process of a riddle and its solution is (re)enacted.³⁵ A "felt ultimacy" and "cul-de-sac" in *Giles Goat-Boy* is the contradiction between Socrates's dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living and Sophocles's

³⁴ The connection between the three "roads" of the emblem and "teller, tale, and told" is borrowed from Walkiewicz (144).

³⁵ Heide Ziegler argues that "Each book he has written generically seems to convey the sense of an ending; each, however, seems to offer the author the personal possibility of a new start. Thus Barth's sequence of fictions gives the paradoxical impression of recurrence as well as of continuance"(18).

lesson that to know oneself is horrifying and destructive in its revelation (*Friday Book* 51). Incest is what Barth uses to plumb the differences between these two (im)possibilities: does incest, an act riddled with disabling paradox, create an "enabling paradox" in terms of conventional genre or rhetoric?

An aporia of authorship is complexly created by the numerous prefatory materials and the title page, but the play-within-the-novel is what most upsets conventional notions of authorship. As the ostensible literary precedent, Sophocles's version of the Oedipus story is itself a re-orchestrated and reenacted version of a long-standing and widely varied tradition of oral narratives.³⁶ The ambiguous relationship between the written and spoken word and between narrative "parent" and reorchestrated "child" in *Giles Goat-Boy* is reenacted in the play, constructing a depth of synechdochic narrative complexity that makes clear taxonomy impossible except insofar as the *process* of layering is understood.

The self-reflexive, metafictional, countergeneric, and quasi-incestuous construction of the play-within-a-novel expresses a complex relationship between author, reader, and text that is metaphorically incestuous and analogous to the confluence of the three crossroads in the emblem. The main characters in the novel interject opinions, ask questions, and comment on the action of the play, making the readers of the novel apparently passive "viewers" of active "viewers" of "actors" who modernize a translation of a translation *ad infinitum* within an allegorical framework. It is this very act of symptomatic "distraction" that is the point of the narrative because the refocusing of the Oedipal drive of narrative through the deconstructing and reconstructing of *Oedipus Rex* itself is what is at stake: "literature, like language . . . is always also about itself."

The interjections and interruptions of the play by the characters of the novel serve as stage directions to the action of the play, making the characters in the novel mediating actors and viewers in the drama between the actors in the play and the readers of the

³⁶ With this "re-writing" in mind, we should understand Sophocles's Oedipus not as an "origin," but as "oedipal with a vengeance" itself.

novel. The novel's characters serve as commentators on the genre of ancient drama itself, which, in turn, serves as meta-commentary on the genre of the novel as a genre--and representational model of the readers of the novel--because of their mediating status. To deviate from these laws and forms is to confuse not only who or what constitutes the author or reader, but the concept of heterogeneous genres itself. In a circular relationship, the readers of the novel are interpreters of self-reflexive actor-characters who reveal the fictitiousness of the genre in which they participate and, in turn, also reveal the fictitiousness of the readers of the novel's self-reflexive acts of interpreting and reading.³⁷

The reader of the novel is asked to interact with both the form and content of the play, its relationship to the greater whole of the text, and the issues of genre that frame them: "[W]hen the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they're in, *we're reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence*" (*Friday Book 73* emphasis added). As works of fiction, the readers both tenuously "inside" and "outside" the text incestuously intermingle and "recognize" their mutual (re-)creation. What this incestuously indiscriminate and perverse intermingling reminds us of, like opposite-sex twins in the womb, is what the complex relationship between author, reader, and text articulates and ultimately deconstructs in order to reconfigure the binary relationship between Socrates's dictum and Sophocles's lesson that, according to Barth, under-girds the basic presuppositions of Western thought.

When characters read, readers "know themselves" and, like Oedipus's (re)discovery that the narrative of his life has already been written by the Oracle at Delphi, this revelation underscores the fictitiousness of the heterogeneity of author, reader, and text. The result of this recognition of the collapse of categories is anxiety; the anxiety of

³⁷ The Chorus performs literary criticism of the play they are actors in (304) and this ironic and critical distance from their part as actors conflates the roles of actors in the play, characters in the novel, and reader/critics of the novel because the chorus appears to occupy all three positions simultaneously, although they cannot transcend them (305).

proximity produced through intermingling is analogous to incest.³⁸ What is constituted through this mix-up is an Oedipal narrative with a vengeance, an enabling paradox insofar as it reveals the disabling, concealing effects of the "master" narrative. This (un)intelligibility is related to those "both/and" moments, experiences, and desires prior to the advent of the master narrative that Bersani argues are symbolic of the bisexual constitution of the subject. Barth's narratives figure a return to this unintelligibility through the recognition of form as symptom of an incestuous fantasy that disrupts, remaps, and delays the Oedipal drive of narrative.

Synechdochally, the text as a whole embraces the absence of differentiation through a paradoxical overabundance of differentiation, both in terms of content and form. And so the scene of the play-within-the-novel seems to beg the question: who or what is reading whom or what here? The text argues that binary differentiation is deconstructed, perhaps transcended: "Equally true, none was the answer; the two were not different, neither were they the same; and *true* and *false* and *different*--Unspeakable! Unnamable! Unimaginable!"(650). This conclusion is the result of the paradox produced between the dictums of Socrates and Sophocles. The title page shows that to "know thyself" by attempting to name oneself leads to the embracing of contradiction and the intermixing of genres and rhetorical positions that is transgressive of conventional forms and leads to classificatory abyss. The conflation of author, reader, and text(s) self-reflexively present in the play-within-the-novel is perhaps most transgressive because it ultimately deconstructs the separateness of conventional rhetorical positions so that who speaks, names, creates, and receives is modeled after incestuous patterns of involution. The reformulation of these positions constitutes transgression and an embracing of paradox that both enables new possibilities and yet remains outside of acceptable forms of thought

³⁸ Lacan defines anxiety not as "the loss of the incestuous object but, on the contrary, its very proximity"(Qtd. in Zizek 146).

and speech because it stems from desire, the unnameable consequence of the acquisition of language.

Whether it is "love or lust" in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the intermingling of genre, author, reader, and text in *Giles Goat-Boy*, and the acknowledged inseparability of narrative, life, and death in all of Barth's writing, Barth's novels always posit the reorchestration and reconfiguration of conventional paradigms through incest in order to reveal both the possibility and impossibility of representation through taxonomy and categorization. Through redirection in order to preserve repetition, Barth's novel enables disablings and disables enablings of the seemingly heterogeneous and always homogenous issues of genre, author, reader, and text.

"Attaining" the Encircled Center

What makes some sense of the seeming generic and rhetorical nonsense of *Giles Goat-Boy* is the retroactive imposition of the narrative(s) that the emblem at the beginning of *Sabbatical* suggests. Understood under the emblem's rubric, *The Sot-Weed Factor's* (dis)continuity is the "outer circle" of the emblem, which then leads to the "three roads" of *Giles Goat-Boy* that disturb binary differentiation--even as they simultaneously represent the division of one into two--when they "move" toward the center circle of the emblem. The next pair of opposite-sex twin novels, *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*, represent the ostensible attainment of the center circle in terms of plot. But this attainment is represented both as a simple arrival and as an incredibly complex psychological and narrative movement.³⁹ With these twin novels we find the recycling and reenacting of the problems from the earlier set of twin novels, but not their simple repetition.

³⁹ About *Sabbatical*, Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug argue it "affirms the indeterminate and non-closed rather than the stability offered by paradoxical reconciliation"(180) so that "The proper sorting of genre and narrative roles and responsibilities becomes virtually impossible"(182). This description also serves as an accurate description of its twin, *The Tidewater Tales*.

Part of the taxonomy problems in *Sabbatical* result because the narrators are each one of a set of dizygotic twins who have married, thus forming a kind of opposite-sex twin coupling. The genealogy of their families is further conflated and confused by the common-law step-child status of Shelley, who is in some ambiguous social senses Fenwick's niece (47). As with the problem of identifying genre and rhetorical position in *Giles Goat-Boy*, she feels "daughterly" (171), he "avuncular"(188) prior to their marriage. The complex process of naming during their courting (194) reveals the power of language to order and potentially disorder relationships in a knot of unnameable (im)possibilities. The name game that they play belies the transgressive power of the language they use and the regressiveness of their desire. Fenwick states that "it's a generally accepted fact about twins that we tend characteristically to regressiveness, one manifestation of which is a reader slipping into turpiloquence"(13). The turpiloquent word they wish to avoid is "fuck" and its various conjugations, and they vow not to use it in their narration. Yet their narration's content is focused upon their own and their other family members' fucking, which is always already characterized by its incestuous, regressive, movement back toward the "center" of "origin." In this way the language they employ in their narration always circles around the thing it cannot completely represent.

As symbolic opposite-sex twins, the narrators' regressive method of narration--a combination of their two voices into one voice--mirrors Aristophane's arguments in Plato's *Symposium* that it is the nature of humans to attempt to recombine with their lost half in order to form a whole:

our both being twins (though dizygotic) ought to give us some authorial edge over . . . other such fanciers of twins, doubles, and Doppelgangers as images of the divided or narcissistic self; even of the schizophrenia that some neo-Freudians maintain lies near the dark heart of writing. Oh? We literal twins, he declares, might justly turn the tables and use schizophrenia as the image of our plural selves, narcissism as the image of our love for one another; for we know to the

bone the truth of Aristophane's wonderful fancy: that we are each of us the fallen moiety of a once-seamless whole. But so far from being doomed to seek forever and in vain our missing half, whether of the same or opposite sex, we know that half supremely well, perhaps better than anyone normally knows anyone else; and our habit of wholeness ought to make us ideal partners, especially for another twin. (331-332)

This essentialist argument foregrounds the regressiveness that is apparent in the "characteristics" of twins and in the use of language and narrative form throughout. The search for the "dark heart of writing" in the novel is itself a search to uncover by recovering a lost past of wholeness of self, or the ability to say "we" with not only another person/narrator, but to say "we"--and not "I"-- when referring to oneself rather than the third person singular that Fenwick employs in the passage. There are many "selves" present in the passage--at least two per twin--being constructed as a single self: an "I" that is always also a "we." The Oedipal drive here is the "habit" of the movement towards an other--a "partner"--even though the narrators claim "wholeness" is always already attained within the (twin) self. Central to this passage is the fantasy that recovery *is* possible, and this fantasy is reflected in the plot of the narrative.

As Fenwick and Shelley navigate the Chesapeake Bay--an always uterine and sometimes seminal symbol throughout Barth's novels--towards "home," they realize that they will need to return to a certain geographical point in the Bay and a fantasized moment in their lives: a junction of three roads that form a "Y" and represent a symbolic "crotch"(350).⁴⁰ When read together, and exemplified by the emblem, Barth's fiction and nonfiction represent a fascination with and movement towards the figure of the "crotch." Usually gendered female, the crotch is a place that signifies both biological and narrative

⁴⁰ The reproductivity associated with the Chesapeake runs throughout Barth's oeuvre. In *LETTERS* Todd Andrews and Jeannine Mack's incestuous coupling occurs in the "amniotic waters of the Chesapeake"(704), and involves what Todd refers to as ejaculating "what feels like an entire Chesapeake of semen into her"(704).

reproduction and symbolic death in the form of narrative suspension. The crotch is likened to a crossroads where contradictions and strange correspondences combine. The act and desire that motivates this drive towards the crotch/crossroads is always both a return and a beginning that is incestuous. In terms of the emblem, the crotch includes the "Y" formed by the three roads and the center circle, "where three roads meet"(350); "where Susan and Fenn subvert the dichotomous Western paradigm by realizing a fourth option: they can choose to remain at the juncture" where they "eclips[e] binaries"(Harris "The Age of the World View" 427). The three roads themselves undermine binary constructions, and the fourth option of choosing stasis makes this deconstruction even more complete.⁴¹

Shelley's mother, Carmen, further deconstructs convention by proposing all parents are grandparents, and thus all children are grandchildren. Her reasoning is that all female ova and all male spermatozoa are an individual's children. When ova and sperm combine, their act is separate from their "parents" so that what they (re)produce is another generation. Sperm and ova are "contraries, they come together . . . literally and for keeps, never to be their separate selves again, but to become something both and neither"(242). Sperm and ova are thus like opposite-sex twins, and Carmen's narrative of their union is similar to the fantasy of reunion between either the opposite-sex "parents" that produced them or that are produced by them. This strange conflation of generations and relationships between people deconstructs and reconstructs Aristophane's position that we are all lost halves; as a fantasy, it traverses the felt fragmentation of the individual subject staged by Barth "literally" as the problem of opposite-sex twins. Carmen's ideas reflect "not our sense of being the sundered fallen half of a primordial whole, but rather our unconscious memory of having been sexually conceived by the absolute union of contraries"(242). The union of contraries, or the absence of differentiation, present and

⁴¹ For three distinct readings of the emblem, see Harris's "The Age of the World View"(427), Slethaug (649), and Ziegler (83).

made possible in the "crotch," is analogous to finding oneself in the center of a crossroads where one is neither on one road or another, but on all and not on all at the same time. The return to the crossroads represents for Fenwick and Shelley a chance to not only to remake the past, but also to reengage with their tangled family drama and shatter conceptions of individual selves.

The Oedipal drive of their incestuous narrative is a movement backwards in space and time to the source of their Oedipal drama that appears to fulfill Roland Barthes's narrative paradigm. But the crotch is the place where their writing and their sexual lives coalesce, deconstruct, and suspend: "They both come first! . . . The doing and the telling, our writing and our loving--they're twins. That's our story *If* that's going to be our story, then let's begin it at the end and end it at the beginning, so we can go on *forever*"(365 emphasis added). Paradoxical because of their simultaneity, they are the authors, readers, and text polymorphously perverse and incestuously (re)combined. Priority and differentiation are lost in the crotch, and narrative life is also narrative death by disabling and suspending the Oedipal drive towards "knowing" by "revealing" the "origin" or "end" of the narrative. However, most devastating of all is the unrepresentability of the state that lies at the "center" of the crotch: the "If" of their narration reveals the fantasy of their desires, the play of (im)possibilities and, thus, in "the end," the "If" leaves only the "forever" of repetition.

The Tidewater Tales: A Novel, published in 1987, is the opposite-sex literary twin of *Sabbatical*, published in 1982. *Tidewater Tales* reenacts rather than simply repeats its "twin."⁴² Major plot lines from *Sabbatical* are "retold" and Fenwick and Susan Turner appear as their "real" selves: Rick and Lee Talbot (413). Rick, like Peter Sagamore, is a frustrated writer, and Peter ends up providing Rick with the plot line and resolution of his

⁴² While "twins" is an appropriate designation for these novels, it is not an exhaustive description. In fact, as will be suggested, *The Tidewater Tales* is also like a "parent" to *Sabbatical* even though its production is chronologically later.

story (557) that will eventually become the novel *Sabbatical*. Confusion reigns between which narrative is "born" first: "This duplication within duplicitous duplication exceeds the boundaries of binary opposition, and the narrative disappears within itself, an example of infinite recursiveness"(Fogel and Slethaug 198). Thus the confusion between the "real" and the "fictionalized" and the rhetorical positions and functions of author, reader, and text: "What you're reading reader, is [Peter's] and [Katherine's] *story*. But what husband and wife are living, and trying rather desperately just now without success to read ahead in, is not their story. It's their life"(140). The metaphor of "reading ahead," when applied to the authors themselves, contracts the conventional separation and function between author, reader and, by extension, problematizes the notion of text, because "text" here is represented as something outside and beyond the control of those who are authoring it. As with the recognition of fictionality that is reenacted in *Giles Goat-Boy*, the narrators' self-reflexivity here refers to a "real" that is always also narrativized fiction. The opposite-sex twin aspects here--the "real" and the "fictional"--are tied together in two ways: metaphors of "reading" are used to describe the relationship between the fictionalized *and* the real account; and "life" refers to nature, or the "natural" as opposed to the narrative because "Nature is not naturally narrative . . . [and] not except by accident dramatically meaningful"(143). This separation--which appears to refer to something other than a narrative construction and endless reenactment--is belied, however, by the connection between twins and nature.

In *The Sot-Weed Factor* Henry discourses about the long-acknowledged connection between natural forces, such as thunder and lightning, and the appearance of twins (492). The narrative of *The Tidewater Tales* begins--as *Sabbatical* begins--with deadly storms, in this case "twin thunderstorms" named "Blam!" and "Blooey!"(23). Blam! "was born"(23) and Blooey! "offsprang"(23) and "The Tideater Tales: A Novel saw daylight about six p.m. during Blooey! along with other things she gave birth to that remarkable evening aboard Story, at anchor . . . up near the cervix of Chesapeake Bay. But it was

conceived just prior to Blam!"(23). The twin children in embryo, the twin narrators, and the twin storms are intricately tied to narrative processes of reproduction and narrativized natural forms and occurrences.⁴³ A writer by trade, Peter's inability to narrate prior to these twin storms and the conception of twin children is overcome by these events (48); nature, narrative, and sex are not limited to the ability to narrate, but are tied to and rely upon the presence of a reader/listener, who forms a twin relationship with the narrator(s): "Sex and stories, stories and sex. Teller and listener changing positions and coming together till they're unanimous"(114). This fantasy of shifting positions and coming together of sex and narration mimics and marks a return to the activity of twins in embryo; an ultrasound reveals "what looked like a sibling-incestuous, polymorphously perverse prenatal orgy"(26). Thus the "twin narratives"(127) of Peter and Katherine are suggestive of narrative and incest, as is the relationship between (twin) narrators and reader(s), which self-reflexively conflates rhetorical positions in the same way the play-within-the-novel in *Giles Goat-Boy* and the return of (and towards) the crotch in *Sabbatical* do.

This polymorphous perversity is related to the (twin) theme of sperm and ova reenacted from *Sabbatical*. The play-within-the-novel that Peter and Katherine find, read, and re-narrate, SEX EDUCATION: A PLAY, is the staging of a sperm meeting an ova. The play is a microcosmic dramatization of the drama of the "crotch" in *Sabbatical* and the incestuous intermixing of genres in *Giles Goat-Boy*, as well as a play which repeats in "micro form the structure of *The Tidewater Tales*, . . . like so many Chinese boxes enfolded inside one another"(Schulz 166). In *Sabbatical*, Carmen--who is Carla in *The Tidewater Tales*--argues that parents are actually grandparents and children grandchildren. Katherine adds "surprisingly, it's the same with writers and readers

⁴³ There are many more connections beyond the scope of this essay between *The Tidewater Tales* and *Sabbatical* and the issue of doubling in each of them. See the work by Harris, Ziegler, and Fogel and Slethaug.

You generate your stories, and your stories generate your readers"(410). Peter disagrees: "if stories were children, their readers wouldn't be their children; they'd be one of their parents, and the author the other. *The Mother and Father of Invention*"(410). "Mother" and "Father," and writer and reader, conjoin at the crotch to produce narrative together by forming a twin, bi-sexual "whole" that confounds and collapses the relationships usually found between "mother" and "father" and self-reflexively underscores the fictitious construction of the reader of the novel.

The generation of stories--linked to birth and nature--begins the narrative. The narrative ends with the birth of the narrators' twins (who themselves narrate from the womb at times), but as with *Sabbatical*, the end signifies the beginning as much as it does Oedipal closure: "We'd launched a new stanzaic pair: a Jack / Implying and preceding some new Jill"(654). The Jack and Jill reference implies incest (*Once Upon a Time* 220) as well as the (pro)creation of narrative. The notion of twin-like narrators producing twin narratives and twin children and twin-like readers who, in turn, (re)produce the narrative with the narrators, suggests an endless cycle of the involuted and enclosed reproduction of incestuous narratives: a "Once Upon a Time the Ever After of"(655) a novel that--with what became a pattern between 1976 and 1987--is knotted together and suspended by beginning and ending with its own title page (5, 656).

The Center of the Circle?

With these twin novels the figural movement toward and ostensible discovery of the "center" of the emblem and all that it has come to represent is achieved. The moment of attainment at the plot level is, more or less, where both novels "end" and then the processes begin all over again. Yet this "solution" to the riddle of the divided self and selves generates more riddles about what the center itself is, how it functions, and whom it affects. It is with *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* and *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*, the next set of twin novels, that the center--riddled with questions--is explored. Each novel deals explicitly with the issue of the passage of time, an issue that

becomes deeply confused as a result of the involuted desire present in twincest. These two novels reenact the re-staging of twincestuous desire that has become familiar in Barth's previous novels, but with the following difference. While fantasies of "coalescence" are left more or less unproblematized in the earlier novels, where the problems of form are the major symptoms of twincestuous desire, in this last pairing of novels the representation of the center and its many paradoxical effects begin to expose the very impossibility of twincest itself.

The paradoxical result of attaining the "wholeness" of the center is the absence of the chronological passage of time and, thus, the simultaneous immortalization and destruction of narrative. This explicit suspension quite clearly reveals the opacity of twincestuous desire--its "hole-ness." Twincest ultimately operates in Barth's fiction as a "sinthome," Jacques Lacan's term for the "psychotic kernel that can neither be interpreted (as symptom) nor 'traversed' (as fantasy)"(Zizek 137). The sinthome is the Thing (Freud's *das Ding*) that ex-sists, that is ex-centric, "beyond meaning, resisting symbolization"(Zizek 137), even as it functions as the very center of meaning production. While the problems that twincest produces for form appear as symptoms--in Barth's terms, "disabling contradictions"--and the fantasies of return to the womb and recombination with the lost half appear to traverse the problem of the stranger within, twincestuous desire still presents an ex-cess in the economy of drive and desire that is something unnameable, unimaginable, impossible, and yet also an enabling paradox that can both produce and destroy in the same movement and moment. What twincest *is* is uncontainable because it eludes representation except insofar as its constant refrain is heard over the course of Barth's novels. As with the earlier novels, twincest explodes and implodes narrative conventions by dislocating elements of signifying chains, but with these last two novels the impossibility inherent in twincest itself is posed, which, in turn, calls into question the (im)possibility of its representation as such.

The effects of the *sinthome* are felt in the problems with verb tense and the difference between singular and plural in Barth's most recent novels and appear as riddles.⁴⁴ The combination of past, present, and anticipated conditional future, mediated by the riddle and its solution, promises insight, but revelation is always delayed, offset, and extenuated infinitely by the creation of another riddle. *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* explores this interminability of the desire to know. The narrator, Simon Behler, is in an unspecified "hospital"(4-5) with a female doctor he has apparently never met, and he begins to deliver a story he promises his auditor she has never heard before. Like the deliverance through transference brought about by the "talking cure" between analysand and analyst, Simon "imagines"--a continuing process despite what is revealed--that this doctor would be a "chorus" or "jury" or "spectrum" of "my major women"(5), including his twin sister, Bijou, who, he believes, was strangled by his umbilical cord at birth.⁴⁵ Thus, the riddle of the doctor's identity and of the patient-doctor relationship instigates the narration. What is shockingly conventional--or seemingly so--about the novel is that the doctor is revealed to be Bijou herself in the final chapter, apparently fulfilling the desire to "know" and "reveal" the "origin" or "end."

This conventionality, however, is radically subverted many times over throughout the novel. What is not conventional is the riddle that this closure poses retrospectively upon a serialized reading of twincest in Barth's oeuvre. The revealed (re)connection between lost halves in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (re)introduces and emphasizes the irrevocable rift within an individual that the fantasy of idyllic reconnection will not mend. To employ the titles of the first and last chapters, there will always be a paradoxically "familiar stranger" who is always also a "destroyer of delights." The opposite-sex twin who is desired operates like a "strange attractor," a "fatal attractor"(Zizek 38) who creates

⁴⁴ A riddle is an insistence, a return of the repressed that serves as a narrative delay that negotiates a revelation through the creation of yet another metaphor, myth, and riddle (Felman 1043).

⁴⁵ This strangulation can be read as a kind of castration if we understand "Bijou" as a family "jewel."

chaos within the twin who desires *and in the form of the texts themselves*. Rather than serve as the point of Oedipal closure in the novel, Bijou's presence throughout the text disrupts what otherwise appears to be a highly formalized structure of *frametales*.

The distortion of any coherent chronology--symbolized by Simon's ability to tell the time of day but not the day itself, or the month, year, or century--is an effect of the conflation of time by incest. Incestuous desire intensifies, localizes, and distorts because it contracts. And so the structure of the frames of the narrative collapse as well; they map not a movement from "outside" to "inside" to "outside," but the circuitous desire around a fantasy object (Bijou) who drives Simon to a re-beginning--an apparent exit from the *frametale* and womb itself--that always also marks her death and his entrapment within an endless, circular, and symbolic pattern of retroactive fantasy, desire, and enunciation. Bijou asks Simon in the last chapter "Remember how it was? she says, familiar stranger: In the spaceship, weightless, making ready to go Outside? You went first, you always thought, but *I* was the one; *I* went first. I know the way. Follow me, now: Two. One"(573). The countdown to their (re)birth is always also a countdown to their (re-)death. To count down means the ability to measure and mark time chronologically, but as the seven year gap in the narration between the representations of the womb and Simon's childhood room, and the many distortions of time that occur as a result of Simon's lost watch illustrate, incestuous desire reconfigures chronological time.⁴⁶ Twincestuous desire's involuted circularity make "two" into "one" in three ways: it conflates the passage of time; it "reconnects" lost halves; and, most importantly in these last two novels, it reveals the singularity and impossibility of incestuous desire by overemphasizing the proximity of the object. To incestuously become "one" reveals the

⁴⁶ Like *The Sot-Weed Factor*, incestuous desire permeates the form of this novel and almost every character's relationships. Many of the events Simon recalls deal explicitly with his sexuality, and his sexuality almost always deals with incest. His second sexual experience occurs on top of his dead twin's grave (129); who he is having sex with is also having sex with her father (315-317); Simon has erotic feelings about his daughter (213); he has sex with his first lover's sister (312); a later lover, Yasmin, is believed to have sex with her "brother"(494), but she actually has sex with her father (543) who, it is suggested, will soon be having sex with his son (559), etc.

impossible object of desire as something within the self: the "familiar stranger" within rather than without; a strange and paradoxical *co*-axial reversal of the treble figure of the crossroads that also makes two from one

Incestuous desire and the fantasy of reconnection with the "lost half" invokes a time paradox meant to fill out the empty space that is the cause of desire. Simon "remembers" being in the womb, conscious during the third trimester, when and where he would tell Bijou stories of the outside: "In these tales of adventure, love, and mystery there was no *Once upon a time*. Our language had no tenses"(27). The fantasy of being present before his own beginning produces a "temporal short circuit"(Zizek n. 172) that, paradoxically, allows Simon to precede himself and witness his own origin. The split in consciousness within himself that allows for this fantasy is signified by his switch from the first-person to the third-person singular at the end of Chapter One--the beginning of the "talking cure": the switch produces an exteriority from self that still lies within the self. The movement from "two" to "one" at the end of the last chapter, then, also represents the change back from third person to the first, and the ostensible recombination of the split subject. Yet, once again, this sense of closure of both self and form is frustrated by twincest. The fantasy of the absence of verb tenses in the womb--unlike the "inarticulateness" found there prior to this novel--is the result of the presence of the time paradox, and this fantasy echoes chaotically throughout the narration with the absence of chronological time. Thus, the whole narration seems timeless and always already occurring within the womb. Like a Chinese box, the fantasy of recollection and (re)combination is repeated in the form of the entire novel. In this sense, the narrative process is both an act of immortalization and an act of symbolic death: the fantasy of a language without verbs suspends the passage of time.

This suspension that is both life and death within language is figured by the letter-symbol "Y," the familiar and strange figure we have come to expect in Barth's novels.⁴⁷ This letter-sign is the first letter of the ostensible object of Simon's desire in the novel, Yasmin. Her pelvis forms a "Y" which is the object of Simon's immediate desire, but as with the fantasy of his past and the "womb" that is the present of the narration, it is also the figure of his movement towards a point that is an empty void around which his desire already endlessly circulates. The three prongs of the "Y," like the emblem modeled upon it, "lead" toward a center that is a void filled with fantasy. The womb-like form of the novel--the frametales that incestuously generate an involuted narrative that eludes closure--is compounded by the desire for the incestuous (linguistic) polymorphous perversity of Bijou, and the incestuous return to the body of the mother. This Chinese box method of construction, however, has no ultimate "inside" to be reached. It is the textual process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of incestuous narrative--the "wholeness" that is always also riddled with "hole-ness"--that the sinthome endlessly sounds in its repetitions.

The narrative language riddle time creates is the subject of *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera*, which represents all of the movements that it suggests the "Y" signifies (228). It is an incestuous intermixing of forms in the form of "a memoir bottled in a novel"(vii). The subtitle serves as a kind of bookend to the text(s) Barth has produced because it reproduces the title of his first published work. The "fictionalized cameo"(vii) appearances of Barth and his biographical relatives is a reworking into fiction of the well-documented nonfictional accounts. Barth's division of fiction and nonfiction writing into opposites--even produced at opposite ends of the week (*Further Fridays ix*)--is analogous to the fictional representations of opposite-sex twins, the interest in the symbolic power of incest, and issues of narrative life and death. The fictionalized Barth's fictionalized

⁴⁷ In another return to earlier fictions, this novel makes much of the sexual symbolism of the letters of the alphabet (283), similar to what is found in *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

"counterself," Jay Wordsworth Scribner, has sex with Barth's fictionalized opposite-sex twin sister, Jill (123). This psychological splitting of Jack (who both is and is not John Barth) into two is like the creation of a same-sex twin with binarily opposed personalities. It is the recognition of the split in consciousness--the familiar stranger lurking within oneself--that makes this triangular and incestuous relationship different than that between Henry, Anna, and Ebenezer in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. This difference illustrates the shift from a comparatively unproblematized movement towards coalescence with the other half to the very impossibility of attainment because of the fragmented, alienated self mired in fantasy relations whose movement is endlessly circular. This fictionalized memory of nonfictional events conflates, confuses, and leads to self-reflexive "Vertigo! But vertiginous Time is the very medium that floats this opera"(131). And time is not individual because of the incestuous twinship in the womb; the "memoir" is plural--"our time"(136)--not singular.

As with Anna's interpretation of the letters on the ring in *The Sot-Weed Factor* where two become one, the letters used to describe Barth and his twin are conjoined: "JackandJill [rather] than Jack and Jill"(172). Where *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* offers the fantasy of a language without verbs, and thus without time, even as it employs verbs to describe it, here the reader "sees" a spatial and temporal conflation on the page, and this conflation relies upon the very system that makes such confluations (im)possible. The paradox revealed here is the ultimate (un)representability of twincest through the medium of language because language and narrative conventions are structured to repress such transgressive contractions, and in doing so make such representations inevitable.

This plurality in utero and early childhood sets a pattern that is established for life: Barth's relationship with his second wife is "discomfitingly reminiscent of my early twinship"(163). This discomfiture is the result of early childhood teasing about opposite-sex twins that is barely understood but seems to haunt Barth's personal and professional

life. There is the sense of an "original sin": "It had to do with our being twins, more particularly opposite-sex twins. It had to do with our being JackandJill"(210). This search for the origins of the "original sin" leads to an eleven page *very* close-reading of the first two stanzas of the Jack and Jill nursery rhyme. But Barth both reveals and conceals even as he addresses the most taboo confections of form and desire. He considers that to render the entire rhyme in couplets would lead to incestuous possibilities in terms of content, one of which resembles the alphabetic symbolism present throughout his work, but Barth refuses to consider this possibility with the same depth of analysis he applies elsewhere: "aa bb / ab ab--the metaphorical possibilities whereof, this exegete declines to consider"(211). Hence a limit is drawn around an unattainable, unrepresentable object, and a riddle is constructed from solutions.

Barth's own literary criticism--especially in a "fictionalized" form, not only deconstructs the binary opposition between fiction and nonfiction, but it explicitly puts into action the notion that characters reading reminds the reader when reading of the "fictitious aspect of our own existence." This fictitiousness resembles the traditional narrative schematic of Oedipal relations, and the revealing of these processes hearkens back to the moment of undifferentiated "wholeness" prior to their inception. The narratives of these moments--figured as a return to the crotch and a recovery/reconfiguration of the past in Barth's fictions that, ultimately, cannot overwhelm the sinthome of the center--work to deconstruct, destabilize and, thus, Oedipalize with a vengeance the Oedipal drive of narrative and its forms. The result is text that simultaneously embraces paradox and reproduces contradiction. There is a temptation here to read the incredibly complex confections of author, reader, text, genre, and time in *Once Upon a Time* as the end of a long narrative process in Barth's novels: to read this novel as a center, as the ultimate revelation and representation of twincest's affects and effects and, thus, the embodiment of the emblem. Yet this would defeat the lesson that Barth's readers already know: it is the repetition of the process of drive and desire that is

at stake, and it is the refrain of the paradoxical sinthome of twincest that enables this (dis)continuous process.

On the Trail of White Tubes and the Tale of Origins: Primal David Lynch

All incest narratives are about a process of returning, and this process almost always involves the revelation--to the viewer, listener, or characters--of something that has been concealed. Within this simple rubric, David Lynch's incest narratives operate complexly: each sequential film repeats--in the form of an endless loop--those that have preceded it. The strange loop quality of his oeuvre creates a paradox because each of the films is about the search for an origin, a moment from which all things can be linearly traced, yet each new film--and his work as a whole--reveals only the endless process of this search.⁴⁸ The argument I will pursue in this essay embraces this paradox: Lynch's films form a loop in which each film endlessly searches for an "origin," yet the only way to understand this phenomenon is to look back chronologically towards the beginning of his career to identify the point of this originless-ness. This paradox is the product of the primal scene fantasies that appear in each of Lynch's early films. Rather than begin at the point of "origin," I will start by examining two suggestive models and methods of reading provided by Lynch and a paradigmatic moment from a later film that all invite this search for an origin.

Lynch provides a model that describes the looping structure of his narratives and the elusive, hypothetically finite moment of origin that instigates and maintains the desire behind his narratives' movement. Never at a loss for an odd simile to describe his work, Lynch makes connections between films and dreams, and visual and linguistic representation that illustrate the above paradox. In nearly every in-depth interview, Lynch expresses his personal fascination with the shape of a duck viewed in profile; he

⁴⁸ Douglas R. Hofstadter defines the "Strange Loop" phenomenon as "whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started"(10); there is a "strong sense of paradox"(15) in these systems because the tension between the infinite process of movement around the loop is expressed in a finite way: the loop itself.

draws an unusual but suggestive connection between how the viewer's eye moves around the outline of the duck and the movement of narrative in his films:

And the head comes up and comes down into this fantastic S curve. And the feathers on the head are *kind of* short and swift because it's faster. The bill and the head have to be a faster area. It can't be very big. The head is slower, and the neck has that S curve that lets you come down to the body. The body is *kind of* uneventful in a way. It can't have too much fast area. . . . The eye *wants* to go down the S curve . . . and it [the eye] makes the whole trip. (Qtd. in Nochimson, emphasis added 25)

Visual image and narrative event *almost* become interchangeable in this description; declarative statements are made about the physical characteristics of the duck, and the narrative rules that follow are rigorously exclusive, but these two positions are mediated by a tenuously expressed third position--a "kind of"--that relies upon incomplete similitude to form an inconclusive analogy.

Key to this linguistic mediation between visual and narrative absolutes is his fascination with the eye of the duck, which is separate from the outlined form but central to narrative movement because it both suspends the narrative and the movement of the viewer's eye *and* makes that very movement's reason for being and cohesiveness possible. An analogy can be made here between the function of the eye-of-the-duck and the incestuous primal scene fantasy to which Lynch constantly returns. The primal scene fantasy functions as a tenuously posited origin that, psychoanalytically speaking, makes all subsequent narratives cohere because of its structuring action.⁴⁹ Incest and the primal scene fantasy are closely related because the primal scene fantasy fixes the subject within a mother-child-father triad that, in turn, constructs the violence and desire inherent in the

⁴⁹ Freud states that the "after-effects" of the primal scene "act as a starting point for the child's whole sexual development" ("Some Psychological consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" 186).

Oedipal scenario. The eye of the viewer desires to travel around the form of the duck and complete the loop, but both the eye of the viewer and the narrative itself are ostensibly caught by the eye-of-the-duck (scene), just as incestuous desire is ostensibly stymied by its cultural prohibition, and just as the primal scene fantasy falters upon its status *as* fantasy.⁵⁰

What is most disturbing about Lynch's films is the act of concealment that is produced through *too much* revealing. The technique he most frequently employs is one of compounding symbols, tropes, ideas, and desires; the discourse with which his films most frequently engage is psychoanalytic and, most simply put, most elements of his films are overdetermined.⁵¹ In the spirit of this complexity, I turn to yet another attempt on Lynch's part to explain his work in order to stress the importance of "origins":

[My films are] more like a dream thing. It might be one or two steps removed from a sentence describing your illness. So they're more like symbolic things that could be open for interpretation. Just *like* you talk about a piece of decaying meat. If you happen upon it in a certain setting, you could almost hear people oohing and aahing about its beauty. *Until they realized what it was*. Then they would not find it beautiful anymore. As soon as it had a name attached to it. (David Lynch qtd. in Breskin, emphasis added 88)

The above response to the question "[H]ow do the films hide your fears?" concisely illustrates the dominant interests in David Lynch's films. Tellingly, his extensive use of simile as framing device is symptomatic of the drama of displacement and condensation within the "dream thing" he so frequently stages in his films. His dreams-within-dreams

⁵⁰ The most extended discussion of the eye-of-the-duck appears in Nochimson; here Lynch identifies three moments he considers to be eye-of-the-duck scenes: Ben's apartment in *Blue Velvet*, the musical performance in *Elephant Man*, and the car wreck in *Wild at Heart* (24-26). While Lynch is quite particular about which moments constitute eye-of-the-duck-scenes, I use his model as a method for reading aspects of his oeuvre he has not--and probably would not--read in this way.

⁵¹ By making this claim, I am not ascribing *psychoanalytic* "intention" to Lynch, but I do ascribe an intention to craft complexity of form. In interviews, he frequently denies or avoids discussing the influence of any particular school of thought informing his films.

meta-structures create problems for identifying narrative time and context, as the scenario of decaying meat does, that--in turn--conceal and reveal the very processes of revealing and concealing.

For Lynch, the force that instigates and maintains these problems is language, and several conclusions can be derived from the "meat" simile above. "Attaching" a word to a thing transforms the understanding of the thing. The word is "removed" from the thing itself. This contiguity and discontinuity creates the symbolic and ambiguous sliding of meanings. This problem is compounded by Lynch's many similes, in which he attempts to attach word-things to other word-things. The word "like" within this system represents similarity even as it requires that essential differences be maintained, but under the auspices of an always already suspect word attachment. The simile in the above context also suggests the problems associated with narrative time: "Until they realized what it was" in this simile is like the after-the-fact recognition and reworking of the primal scene fantasy that an individual endlessly undergoes. This process of deconstructing and reconstructing relationships between the visual and the linguistic apparent in both models of reading is the story that Lynch tells and retells throughout his oeuvre. This story is always a return to and reworking of the dynamic of the primal scene fantasy because the violence and desire embedded in connecting a thing to a word is like the problematic pairing of mother (imaginary thing) to father (symbolic word) and the shifting points of identification within this scenario (relationships of similitude) that the individual "viewer" endlessly reconfigures.

The endless looping quality of his films--with their paradoxical tendency to move backwards towards an "origin"--is best illustrated by the interrelatedness of the forms that recur within them.⁵² *Wild at Heart* (1990) offers a paradigmatic, eye-of-the-duck

⁵² Almost every critic who mentions more than one film in an argument discusses thematic and visual repetition in Lynch's films. For Lynch himself on the issue of repetition, see David Breskin's interview, especially page 87.

moment where the visual-linguistic-incest-primal scene fantasy is revealed. This nexus is always signaled by the reappearance (or descriptions) of significant shapes and forms. When on the lam in New Orleans and following moments of sexual bliss, Lula says to Sailor "You *remind* me of my daddy" and, a little later in a similarly shot scene, "You've got the sweetest cock. It's *like* it's talkin' to me when you're inside. It's *like* it's got a voice of its own"(emphasis added). These two moments combined articulate the central narrative problem-nexus within the film and oeuvre; like Sailor's speaking penis, they have a voice of their own whose speech transcends--because it is a *reminiscence* that *suggests* similitude--its specific context. The presence of the narrativizing "penis," or what I re-name the "white tube," in what can be called the early portion of Lynch's career--from *The Alphabet* through *Dune*--is critical in understanding his narratives because it embodies his agenda.⁵³ As Sailor reminds Lula of her daddy with the supplemental, deferred, and retroactive logic of a dream, these two scenes direct their viewers to the scenes' own "primal" and incestuous heritage.

The two scenes' context within *Wild At Heart* establishes the language that incest speaks and the work it performs in Lynch's oeuvre. When Lula's two statements are read together, a dream-like incestuous sexual economy of displacement and condensation is created: Lula's father--"Uncle" Pooch--Sailor. Lula's father is killed in a fire--revealed to the viewer through Lula's reconstructive fantasy--and is replaced first by "Uncle" Pooch, who is shown in a flashback just after sexually molesting Lula. Sailor then replaces "Uncle" Pooch after his "accidental" death. Sailor is literally connected to Uncle Pooch and Lula's father through business concerns and the contracts on their lives executed by Santos, and figuratively by the familial-sexual triangles formed by Lula, her mother, and

⁵³ This is not to say that the later films do not repeat this agenda, but that their thematic relevance can only be fully understood through an analysis of the continuum that the early films represent. For example, the "red room" from both the *Twin Peaks* television series and film prequel, and the strange doubling of characters and looping narrative of *Lost Highway*, all contain visual and/or linguistic *reminders* of earlier origins.

each of these men. The psychological connections between the three men are made more clear in Lula's mind during the flashback to the aborting of her pregnancy by Uncle Pooch soon after she realizes she is pregnant by Sailor. Each pregnancy is invested with a psychological displacement and condensation of the loss of and love for her father, and each successive sexual encounter is pregnant with incestuous meanings that bind together the paternal figures in Lula's life through her body and/or her mother's. In the incomplete and episodic narrative algebra of *Wild at Heart* taken by itself, what Sailor's sweet speaking cock--and, by extension, the cocks of Lula's father and quasi-avuncular Pooch--amounts to is unclear. The problem here--and in Lynch's films in general--concisely manifests itself in Lula's articulation of the ultimately deconstructive process of mediation: Sailor "reminds" and his penis is "like" something else, suggesting a pattern of *retrospective* association that underscores the problems of accurately representing or recovering a point of origin for the traumatic chain of correspondences that inevitably ensues in Lynch's films.

The instrumental sign of repetition is the figure of the "speaking penis" that stands in for the problematic relationship between the primal scene and language. It reappears throughout his work, often through very abstract displacements and condensations, and this figure is not, in the end, stable; in fact, it is imbued with often contradictory characteristics and is, thus, Lynch's exemplary symbol of ambivalence and paradox. It is useful to attach the more abstract name "white tube" because it connotes "penis" without restricting it to this meaning alone, yet attaching a name to it recreates the very problems that Lynch identifies in the decaying meat simile. So the issues of how, when, why, and what the white tube says when it "speaks" are ones that must be examined both within the specific contexts of each early film, but also as a culmination of speech throughout Lynch's oeuvre after "realizing what it was."⁵⁴ To understand the white tube as a form

⁵⁴ While beyond the specific scope of this essay, racial associations obliquely inform the "whiteness" of the tubes. By examining the structural importance of racial images in the film, Sharon Willis argues

that represents the constructive, deconstructive, and reconstructive functions of language and incestuous desire, I will begin again by working backwards chronologically--itself, as noted, a problematic proposition--towards a point at which it is difficult to resist "seeing all of Lynch's later work foreshadowed in it"(Chion 14).

Towards the Origin

Reading the white tube "backwards" through Lynch's films is a strictly chronological superimposition of order upon the texts driven by two forces, one more obvious than the other. The first is necessitated by convention: the tendency to understand an artist's work as a "progression" over the course of time. The second force, the primal scene fantasy, is far more subtle and its effects work both with and against the "progress" model, just as--in Lynch's example--the viewer's realization that what he or she once thought was beautiful--or at least banal--is something else entirely radically alters the temporality of perception even as this alteration relies upon chronology to produce its effect. The primal scene fantasy is a tenuous narrative reorganization of seemingly chaotic and troubling events around a point of "origin." In turn, this reorganization has the effect of structuring all subsequent events into its "original" scenario, thus defying chronological temporality in favor of recursive scripting that obsessively repeats and reworks shifting narrative perspectives and time frames. The paradox between the two forces is that, ultimately, they posit the same thing: an "origin" from which all subsequent productions are derived.

compellingly that *Wild at Heart* "inadvertently . . . [exposes] the real dark side of our middle class culture. It is not our perverse subjective fantasies, our personal rewritings of the Oedipal drama, but the ease with which these fantasies are imbricated with the dominant white, middle class's collective social anxieties about sexual and racial difference"(293) that is at stake. What the white tubes say about race throughout Lynch's early films, however, is difficult to pinpoint. While arguments about the figurative presence of racial issues may be made about the early films, explicit representations of non-white characters do not appear until *Blue Velvet*. I refer to the tubes as "white" because, simply, they always are but, following the lessons about the representation and function of non-white sexuality in *Wild at Heart* that Willis's arguments teach, I do not intend to foreclose upon a retrospective racial understanding of the tubes that *Wild at Heart* may produce.

Each film--*Dune* (1984), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Eraserhead* (1978), *The Grandmother* (1970), and *The Alphabet* (1967)--begins with the depiction of a primal scene, which each individual film is concerned with "resolving"--even if this resolution produces more ambiguity and incoherence--by returning to the complex family dynamic staged at the beginning. In this way, each film searches for origins and each film in the sequence is actually a repetition of those that come (either before or) after it. This absence of progression is symptomatic of the incestuous desire inherent in the primal scene fantasy because incest has the effect of collapsing the hierarchical structure of generations and, thus, the passage of time.

Because of each film's reliance upon the narrative "movement" from the primal scene fantasy to this scene's "resolution," all elements of the film ultimately refer back to the beginning by rescripting it. The films only progress towards something insofar as they suggest the necessity of moving backwards to reveal the "origin" of their origins. Hence the structure of each individual film takes the form of an infinite loop: the primal scene fantasy instigates and structures the narrative and the narrative searches for the structuring origin of this origin. It is also in this sense that each individual film functions as a synecdoche for the metatextual structure of Lynch's oeuvre. Taken as a whole, the structure of Lynch's first film, *The Alphabet*, instigates all subsequent repetitions of it, and each of these relies upon and refers back towards the origins of this origin, forming an infinite strange loop. Yet like the eye-of-the-duck that arrests the movement of the viewer's eye around the form of a duck, the strange loop formed by each and all of Lynch's films, is disrupted by the problem of and necessity for the search for the origin of origins. What follows is an analysis of the reperformance of the symptoms of the primal scene fantasy as they take shape in the first half of Lynch's career. Taking the scenes of Sailor's speaking penis as a kind of primal scene itself, I work my way "backward" through the films towards *The Alphabet*, the chronological origin of later origins that

concisely reveals the paradoxes of originless presented in it, the other Lynch films, and the structure of Lynch's films.⁵⁵

The analogue in *Dune* to the speaking penis in *Wild at Heart* is the "Third Stage Guild Navigator." This creature serves as the nodal point for the issues of Oedipal desire, ambiguous sexual identity, and linguistic power in the film. It is a tube-shaped, phallus-like creature with a large head and a red mouth that emits a red gas when it speaks. This creature plays the role of the omnipotent father to Paul that can "kill with a word" in this Oedipal scenario, yet these words are "born" from a mouth that resembles a vagina, a visual trope that has correlatives in the blood that seeps from the witches' mouths, the shot of the premature birth of Paul's sister, the primal scene that begins the film, and every other bleeding mouth or nose in Lynch's oeuvre. The combination of male and female genitalia in the "phallic" white tube is a conflation that Lynch begins exploiting in his earliest films and this form's power is the result of the confusion of the primal scene. The Third Stage Guild Navigator's next appearance is a reperformance of the primal scene that begins the film. This second primal scene begins with a shot of the ship carrying Paul and his biological parents entering a passage that resembles a keyhole in a door. Once inside this womb-like space, Paul's father says that the Navigator will "begin to fold space" and Paul's thoughts are heard: "Far off in the control room filled with spice gas; traveling without moving." These words set the stage for the action of the reperfomed primal scene fantasy, signified by the Navigator "fold[ing] time."⁵⁶ A series of shots represent the Navigator's vagina-mouth masticating (or thrusting) and shooting out (ejaculating) red rays that produce the silhouettes of planets. Blue rings appear and the Navigator appears to move through them. The site, the Navigator's body, the objects

⁵⁵ The primal scene fantasy does not operate in isolation in Lynch's films, but space prohibits me from pursuing the many valences and strange reversals of desire in each film.

⁵⁶ In *Dune*, "folding" and "unfolding" time in the "control room" corresponds to the passage of time marked by the birth of successive generations. The incestuous nature of the shifting identifications in the primal scene fantasy collapses generations and time; thus, "travel without moving."

that it produces, and the actions it performs, are all suggestive of sexual activity witnessed--as though through a keyhole--by Paul. The Navigator's third and final appearance is quite brief. After Paul has swallowed the water of life, he travels without moving and "unfolds time" by seeming to travel through the same blue rings that appear in the primal scene, and he concludes "Now I truly control the worms and the spice." As a result of his ascension to power through replacing the "Father," Paul can now "kill with a word."⁵⁷

Dune opens with a shot of stars--part of the lexicon of tropes associated with the white tube--a shot that picks up almost exactly where *The Elephant Man* leaves off. In fact, the first moments of *Dune* are like watching the last moments of *The Elephant Man* played backwards. More than simply stitching the two films together, the stars signal primal scene content in each individual film.⁵⁸ The stars are like the "cloud of spice" in which the navigator folds time. An abrupt cut from the stars to a close-up of a woman's face interrupts the intertextual implications of this primal scene, only to reinforce the primacy of origins: "The beginning is a very delicate time," she says. Her statement has no referent in the action that is to follow, but refers to the birth of the story itself and, obliquely, to the last words in *The Elephant Man*: "Nothing ever dies." The "folding" and "unfolding" of time throughout the film is associated with the power to create--or conceive--and what the viewer perceives in this first scene is the story's own conception--a folding and unfolding back towards an incestuous origin. Whereas Paul learns to "kill with a word"--an act of (sexual) aggression that corresponds to the perceived aggression

⁵⁷ Paul's biological father "kills with a word" when he bites the poisonous tablet, but this act is reactive and suicidal rather than aggressive and Oedipal in nature.

⁵⁸ Throughout Lynch's films, clouds of dust-like material, such as stars, more often than not represent sperm, or the male action during the primal scene.

of the father during the primal scene--the "birth" of the word is the primal prerequisite to the word's destructiveness.⁵⁹

The obtuseness of the primal scene fantasies in *Dune* is perhaps the result of the well-documented problems that plagued the film's production and that culminated in the widely held opinion that *Dune* is Lynch's worst film. The point of the primal scene content in *Dune* is even more elusive and confusing than Lynch typically cares to be, especially when contrasted to the comparative clarity of his previous film, *The Elephant Man*. This film ends with stars and a statement of immortality, which serves as a "resolution" to the primal scene fantasy that begins the film. The film begins with a shot of the portrait of John's mother that he carries with him. The next shot is of a group of elephants from the side, and then two male elephants from the front, focusing specifically on their heads. The shot that follows is of John's mother falling onto her back and screaming as she shakes her head back and forth. The speed of the cuts from a single elephant shot from below and a counter-shot of John's mother from above become quicker in pace.⁶⁰ The camera begins to narrow its focus upon the single elephant's white tusks and trunk. The scene reads more like a sexual violation of John's mother than a trampling.

This scene then cuts to Dr. Treves at the carnival who, in the most frequently reproduced still from the film, is shown at the far left of the screen pausing next to a plaque that reads "The Fruit of the Original Sin." This shot forms a bridge between the primal scene fantasy and the secondary Oedipal scenario John will be involved in and then "resolve" over the course of the film. To the right of the plaque is a portrait of a

⁵⁹ The beginning of the film as moment of conception is reinforced by the next scene, where a male voice lists the planets, and the depiction of them is similar to the creation of silhouettes by the Navigator. These two scenes combined form the first primal scene fantasy in the film.

⁶⁰ The angles and pacing of these shots are strongly reminiscent of those of Lula and Uncle Pooch after her molestation in *Wild at Heart*. The shot sequences mark the shifting identifications within the syntax of the primal scene fantasy.

nude female with her genitals covered by ivy. To the right of this portrait is a jar containing a deformed fetus. The mise-en-scene constructs a sexual economy in which Treves is a kind of Adam, the woman in the portrait is Eve, and the fetus is the symbolic marker for original sin: an incestuous crime as well as a transgression of God's edict. When linked to the primal scene fantasy, Treves's aggressive countenance is equated with that of the elephant, with his ascot as trunk and white collar as tusks; the portrait of the woman is the portrait of John's mother; the deformed fetus, with its enlarged head and atrophied limbs, is John himself. The aggressive paternal role in the primal scene and towards his male "child" set up in this scene is developed and supported throughout the rest of the film.

Unlike *Dune*, *The Elephant Man* is more overt about the presence of a primal scene fantasy, but it is less so where the trope of white tubes is concerned. John's body itself is the white tube, and a recurring system of entrances and exits from often ejaculating orifices, most especially in the form of speech from John's mouth, marks his body as the ambiguously sexed white tube. His secondary "father," Treves, forces John to speak. This forced exteriorization of John's interiority is contrasted by the movements of the camera immediately prior to and during John's dreams. In the second dream, the camera tracks from an "exterior" shot of him sleeping into the eyehole of the mask. During this dream sequence, the primal scene fantasy is repeated and superimposed upon a tracking shot--symbolic of John's birth--out of a dark hallway. A group of men walks towards him (as the elephants moved towards his mother) and one of the men holds up a mirror so that John--now as a young boy--can see his reflection. This sight causes him to scream in much the same way as his mother screamed during the primal scene fantasy. The next shot is of an elephant's eye, mouth, and trunk in extreme close-up alternated with inserts of John's face. The men in the dream beat John, a shot that again places him in the same relationship to the men as his mother is to the elephant in the primal scene fantasy.

The camera again tracks from the "exterior" to the "interior" prior to John's third dream, immediately following his decision to commit suicide. The shot lingers over the portraits of John's mother and Mrs. Kendle, who look like sisters, and then tracks through the window of his room and towards the stars in space. Thus, when plotted by his dreams, the loop-like course of the film moves from the extreme and undefined interiority of the primal scene fantasy to the exteriority/interiority of the mask's eyeholes, to the movement from inside John's room to the undefined, exterior, fantasy space outside the room. By choosing to die, John breaks the secondary Oedipal tie to Treves by replacing him in the scenario set up by the "Original Sin" shot. John chooses to be with his mother and aggressively replaces his original "father." With stars as backdrop and within a halo (or tube) of light, Mrs. Kendle states "nothing will die." The reference is to John's suicide, but also to his reperformance of the fantasy of his mother's death/sexual violation in the primal scene.

If the last scene ties *The Elephant Man* to *Dune*, it also serves as a bookend to the first scene in *Eraserhead*. *Eraserhead* also begins with a primal scene fantasy, and the rest of the narrative is concerned with reenacting this primal moment. In the "language" of white tubes and the incestuous tangling of familial desire, *Eraserhead* is a tightly structured text whose tropes evolve through repetition. Almost every aspect of the film, from the technical devices of lighting, editing, sound, and shot selection to narrative and thematic elements, is related to Lynch's enunciation of this "language," yet these elements work both with and against one another over the course of the film. What makes this process--and the film as a whole--so frustrating for the viewer of Lynch's oeuvre is the *familiarity* of everything they see.

The film and primal scene fantasy begin with a shot of Henry--whose still body, including hair, is tube shaped--superimposed upon a planet. As he floats in space (surrounded by stars), he opens his mouth as though screaming and "gives birth" to a long white creature like his and Mary's baby and similar in shape if not size to the Navigator in

Dune. The mise-en-scene establishes the absence of distance between these characters, and the rest of the film is concerned with their lack of difference from one another. This creature falls into a pool of water and then either falls into or arises out of a hole in the ground surrounded by a hair-like substance. The strange sexual connotations and conjunctions between organic and inorganic, male and female, subject and object, and interior versus exterior in this scene proliferate over the course of the film and, retroactively, perform "readings" of the primal scene fantasy that makes them possible.

One such reading is that Henry's and Mary's baby symbolizes sexual difference for Henry. He aligns its horrifying otherness with his perception of women's seemingly endless power to reproduce. At the same time, he recognizes the baby as a product of himself, and he attempts to destroy that which upsets the division between self and other (and male and female) both in his dreams and in reality.⁶¹ During his last dream sequence, and after he has thrown the baby's innumerable siblings against the wall, the lighting in the film becomes tightly focused on a hanging wall cabinet. A tracking shot moves the viewer into the cabinet where a claymation white tube enters and exits holes in a surface resembling the planet from the beginning of the film. A hole appears in the end of the tube and the camera tracks into the opening to find Henry alone in his room. When the claymation tube is understood as a manifestation of the worm-like babies, and when this scene is read in conjunction with the primal scene fantasy, a dizzying series of displacements and condensations intertwines the baby and Henry so that the line between self and other is erased. The rest of the film is concerned with the ramifications of this conflation. After his decapitation (symbolic castration), his baby's head replaces his head from inside of his own body. The decapitated head falls into a pool of blood, is found by a child and then taken to the eraser factory. Afterwards, a reformed Henry repeats upon

⁶¹ In *Dune*, Paul pursues a similar struggle, attempting to arrive at an interior space "terrifying to women" where they "cannot go." His project is similarly confounded insofar as this "place" is figured as the womb and it is the domain of the ambiguously sexed Navigator.

his child the symbolic castration he has just experienced: Henry cuts the baby's bandages, its neck and head expands to become the planet's surface, and the planet/head explodes, showering Henry in a cloud of white dust (eraser remnants-spice-stars-sperm). The film ends with Henry-baby poised to repeat the primal scene with the lady-in-the-radiator, but with the difference that they are washed in blinding white light, not unlike the last seconds of *The Elephant Man*, and as though inside of the white tube-baby.

The Grandmother pursues the analogy drawn in all Lynch films between language and incestuous desire where the power of language to construct is witnessed as operating within the pantomimed utterances and desires of family members. The traumatized protagonist of *The Grandmother* finds an escape from his parents by going to the attic of his house and planting a seed that turns into a tree and which gives birth to his grandmother/child, with whom he then has an incestuous relationship.⁶² This basic plot line is made far more complex by the animated sequences of the film. The nearly complete lack of spoken language in the film reinforces the film's desire to underscore how non-verbal incestuous desires operate like a language. *The Grandmother* is a nightmare about the sexual fear and trauma associated with reproduction and desire within a family structure.

The film opens with an animated primal scene fantasy sequence that details the births of both parents, their copulation, and the birth of the boy. After his son's birth, the father physically attacks his child. This aggressiveness on the part of the father continues throughout the film, and it is also present in the mother, who attempts to sexually seduce her child; when she is refused, her approach to him becomes physically aggressive.⁶³ The ambivalence between violence and desire is consistent throughout the film, but manifests

⁶² The protagonist looks like a childhood version of Henry. The boy as zygote is reminiscent of the baby in *Eraserhead* and the Navigator from *Dune*. The tree here returns in *Eraserhead* both on the nightstand and in Henry's decapitation dream.

⁶³ Michel Chion notes that the ambivalence towards and from the child regarding women is a motif laden with incestuous desire (21).

itself differently from the conventional primal scene fantasy. The boy's fantasies differ significantly from the traditional valence of the Oedipal complex in that both incest and murder are directed at both parents at the same time. Two animated sequences depict the murder, (re)birth, and second murder of the parents.⁶⁴ The implements used for both murder and birth are tube-shaped. The conflation of male and female in the white tube and the combination of life and death effected by the tubes has a parallel in the red spot on the bed that moves in such a way to suggest this complex combination of desires in the boy. The spot becomes larger, moves onto the floor, closer to the downstairs area where the parents spend all of their time, but it also squirts up towards the attic where the grandmother is hidden. If the second floor bedroom of the boy separates him from both his parents and his grandmother (who is always already his child), and the conventional western hierarchy of top-to-bottom is reversed, the red pool conflates these structures (and their reversals). By occupying all positions in both the primal scene fantasy and the generational and temporal confusion that is the result of incest, the boy himself symbolizes both the loop-like movement of Lynch's narratives and the eye-of-the-duck that both reinstigates and suspends this movement.

After the second destruction of his parents, the boy turns his attention to the grandmother and, between them, they recreate the relationship that existed between parents and child. She and the boy have established a relationship of caring for one another, yet this relationship also has an aspect of aggressivity when they poke one another; their poking ends with an incestuous kiss on the mouth from the grandmother, thus reversing the events of the seduction scene with the mother and reperforming the primal scene fantasy. After the incestuous kiss, a very abstract series of animated scenes begins that reinforce the boy as the concatenation of all desires present in the primal scene fantasy. The grandmother is shown digging a hole in the ground into which the

⁶⁴ See David Breskin's interview with Lynch on the ubiquitous presence of birth images in his films.

boy falls. At the bottom of the hole a form resembling labioscrotal folds appears. Out of the hole grows a form similar in appearance to a rose, but with a tube-shaped head upon it, and the grandmother figure grows a white tubular shaped head which sprouts from her face. A sprinkler arm comes from the rose and waters the ground. These acts are similar to the acts of creating the grandmother that the boy went through. Out of the watered spot a long tube shape comes and enters the head of the rose. The boy flies from the head of the rose and is next shown lying prostrate next to an abstract form that resembles the tree from which his grandmother sprouted. A long white tube grows from his face to the tree. The tree then grows another tube which then shoots a cloud of white specks--like sperm--into the air. The scene then jump cuts to the live action grandmother choking, a problem from which she dies. A cycle of incestuous creation and destruction is completed by the boy with his grandmother/child.

Reconfiguring the Alphabet

The point which operates as a primal scene to the narrative of chaotic similitude present throughout Lynch's films, *The Alphabet*, has been described by Lynch as "a little nightmare about the fear connected with learning"(qtd. in Chion 12); specifically, according to his first wife, Peggy Reavy, a fear of how subjects are "dictated to by language and things like language"(qtd. in Nochimson, emphasis added 3). The film deconstructs and reconstructs the relationship created by the conjunction "and" between "language and things like language." "[T]hings like language" are the primal fantasies that constitute the film's content.⁶⁵ The primal scene fantasy is foregrounded in *The*

⁶⁵ Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis define the connections between all the primal fantasies in the following manner: "If we consider the themes which can be recognized in primal phantasies (primal scene, castration, seduction), the striking thing is that they have one trait in common: they are all related to the origins. Like collective myths, they claim to provide a representation of and a 'solution' to whatever constitutes a major enigma for the child. Whatever appears to the subject as a reality of such a type as to require an explanation or 'theory,' these phantasies dramatise into the primal moment or original point of departure of a history. In the 'primal scene,' it is the origin of the subject that is represented; in seduction phantasies, it is the origin or the emergence of sexuality; in castration phantasies, the origin of the distinction between the sexes"(332). While all three are connected to the search and need for origins, and all three are represented and connected in *The Alphabet*, as they are throughout Lynch's films, I primarily focus upon the primal scene fantasy.

Alphabet, and I intend to retell this nightmare by focusing upon the strange confluences and conjunctions that form the basis for the film's "fear connected with learning."

Primal scenes fantasies, as with *The Alphabet* and the alphabet, are fragmentary in nature. Similar to the action of the "meat" simile, they are perceived "too early" and reconstructed "too late" (Silverman 165) so that the implications and ramifications of each are all (only) retrospective reconstructions that gesture towards a posited but unrecoverable lost moment, a moment that instigates desire. In this sense, the narrative the dreamer constructs and the narratives constructed about her will always be incomplete and fragmentary. A "both/and" paradox is thus created: "it is the subject's life as a whole which is seen to be shaped and ordered by what might be called, in order to stress [the] structuring action, 'a [f]antasmatic'" (Laplanche and Pontalis 317). The structuring action of the primal scene fantasy creates narrative wholeness for the subject from visual and auditory fragments that are constantly being reconstructed. The paradox is that "wholeness" is never achieved and that this whole structuring process is without a tangible origin--it remains a fantasy in itself.⁶⁶ In *The Alphabet*, "learning" corresponds to reconstructing the structuring action of the primal scene fantasy, and this "original" narrative provides the basis for those of language acquisition and sex.

The narrative of *The Alphabet* is difficult to put into words because of its abstractness. Briefly, what the film represents is a female having a nightmare that features animated images of letters reproducing and the construction and destruction of an abstract, almost human-faced figure that is a representation of herself.⁶⁷ The film ends with the dreaming female awakening and then bleeding from her mouth. This simple plot line and description is belied, however, by the complex and fragmentary temporality of the

⁶⁶ For more on the absence of origins in fantasy, see Laplanche and Pontalis's "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality".

⁶⁷ While the general theme of language acquisition's negative effects upon a subject is easily identified in the film, the primal scene exceeds easy thematization (Laplanche and Pontalis *The Language of Psychoanalysis* 317).

narrative contrasted with the repetition of forms and sounds that tenuously piece together the short film.⁶⁸ Significant shapes, such as the now familiar white tube-penis-vagina, and sounds, such as children chanting the "abc" song and the voices of "parents," structure much of the narrative. *The Alphabet* appears to be scripted chronologically but is, in fact, often atemporal because of the nature of dreams, incest, and the problems of being both "too early" and "too late." In order to make narrative sense of how language and the structuring action of the primal scene coalesce to reproduce one another, an interpretation must begin not with the beginning of the film, but the beginning of the dreamer's fantasized moment of conception, continue through to the end of the film, and then return to the important first group of shots. Ultimately, I will demonstrate how the shot featuring the white tube embodies the coalescing process in this reconstruction of a primal scene fantasy.

The fantasized moment of biological conception of the dreaming subject herself occurs during the shot of white balls moving in channels that form a "T" intersection. The larger ball is an egg that makes its way to the uterine intersection; the smaller white balls are sperm that meet the egg to (re)produce the subject and the next scene. The logic of the dream-work in this nightmare, however, introduces ambiguity into this simple scene. If the "T" represents an abstraction of the female reproductive system, then the egg-ball is traveling "backwards" and the sperm-balls appear to be moving down the fallopian tubes. This reversal of expectation extends to number as well: the typically multitudinous sperm become singular and the typically singular eggs become plural. What this ambiguity introduces is a blurring of the biology of male and female. The two traditionally binary poles seem to overlap so that they become one. This moment of biological reversal and conjunction sets a pattern for the rest of the film and, in

⁶⁸ Michel Chion is the only critic who describes Lynch's early films in detail. The complexity of these early films is revealed by the different descriptions that Chion and I produce; at times, it is as though we have watched different films altogether. This phenomenon should suggest caution; I make no claim to have described every detail of this film, and recommend that my description be compared to that of Chion.

retrospect, the entire oeuvre. The ambiguity of biology here is similar to the "permutations of roles and attributions"(Laplanche and Pontalis 318) that are available to the observer-participant of the primal scene.⁶⁹

This paradoxical "wholeness" or "oneness" that is the product of permutations manifests itself in Lynch's films in the now familiar representation of a reproductive organ, similar to the pre-Enlightenment "one-sex" model of biological sex. As the historian Thomas Laqueur has argued in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, "For thousands of years it had been a commonplace that women had the same genitals as men except that . . . 'theirs are inside the body and not outside it' In this world the vagina is imagined as an interior penis, the labia as foreskin, the uterus as scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles"(4). What Lynch does is abstract even further this imagining by representing forms external to any body that serve both male and female reproductive purposes. Thus, the white tubes do not ever function solely--biologically or symbolically--as male reproductive organs. They also represent the "inversion" of male organs and operate as both biological and symbolic female reproductive organs. Lynch's return to a "primal" understanding of sex is like the "reversal" that occurs when a subject retrospectively "re-reads" the primal scene, where the "primal scene encourages identifications which are in excess of sexual difference"(Silverman 165).

Lynch frequently realigns sex and sexual identification through the structuring action of the primal scene in the movement of the narrative itself. The jump cut from the white balls to the black letter "A" metonymically moves the dreamer from a biologically interior, microscopic fantasy world that exists in the body of the mother and the mind of the dreamer to an exterior world outside of the mother and from a position where the dreamer views herself being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed within the primal scene fantasy through the vehicle of language and "things like language." The

⁶⁹ On the variety and complexity of roles available to the fantasizing subject, see Freud's essay "A Child is Being Beaten" and Laplanche and Pontalis's "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality".

figure around which much of this disorientation is centered is the white tube that appears after the switch from interior to exterior--in numerous senses--and which is also marked by and metonymically connected to language by the appearance of the letter "A." A series of displacements literally takes place as the "A" sprouts the tube and the tube gives "birth" to the twin lowercase "a" letters. A crossroads is formed between the actions of displacement and condensation and their linguistic counterparts, metonymy and metaphor, as a result of the conjunction between language (the alphabet) and things like language (primal scene fantasy) that the white tube embodies. An incestuous paradox is the result of this conjunction: the many heterogenous elements that come together in the figure of the white tube produce homogeneity. The "A" incestuously reproduces itself.

The many possibly meanings of the white tube exist simultaneously but they are not equitable. They play upon the "one-sex" model, but they also extend the number of possible strange inversions, reversals, and conjunctions. The dreamer witnesses the biological, sexual, and socio-linguistic construction of herself, and these transformations represent the problems of sexual identity and identification that are the result of the ambiguous and ambivalent sexual sources of reproduction. The abstract, roughly female form that appears midway through the film has a white letter "a" as its head and then its sexual and linguistic markers transform into male genitals. The fluidity with which the figure transforms its sexed configurations are produced from within the subject itself. The substances which pour from the orifice have the effect of erasing-castrating the genitals and producing in the next scene a more fully-realized human form.

The ambiguity and fluidity of the sexual identity and function of bodily orifices here is underscored by the two quick cuts that follow. First, the skeletal face gasps in horror after having the "abc" letters and fluids from the labioscrotal folds ejaculated into its head. The labioscrotal folds, the "seminal" fluids, and the ordered letters "abc" are products of the figure's own body. The folds are another conflation of biological sex that serve the same symbolic functions as the white tube even in its absence. The subject here

gives birth to a form which produces language; she acts upon herself as an agent of language via her own ambiguous sexuality as much as she is acted upon by the structuring actions of language and the primal scene. Second, the film cuts to a shot of the woman gasping in fright in front of a mirror, and this shot then cuts to the mouth on the undistinguishable and upside-down face which utters this reminder: "Please remember that you are dealing with a human form." The key term in this cue to the viewer-dreamer ("you") is "remember" because it reveals the retrospective mise-en-scene of desire in the fantasmatic process, the problem of interior versus exterior influence upon a subject, and the root word suggests the subject matter for much of the dream itself: the destruction and reconstruction of the members of the body. The word "remember" suggests reconfiguration as an act of replacement of something "lost" and thus desired.⁷⁰ The one use of a fade-in and -out rather than the abrupt cut after these two shots illustrates "re-membering" in this film because of its radical difference from the typical fragmentation between images produced by the abrupt cut.

The relentless repetition of the sexual processes that produced the dreamer are re-performed, much as the boy in *The Grandmother* re-performs the primal scene over the course of the film. The figure reproduces with the productions of her own bodily form: the labioscrotal folds. This incestuous self-reproduction and, in turn, reproduction with the self, results in the destruction of half of the figure's head. She embodies the Oedipal triangle within her solitary self. The ordering power of language as self-reproducing disease within the self is linked to sexuality by the blood that comes from the dreamer's mouth, and the many other mouths and noses in Lynch's films.⁷¹ The narrative reveals

⁷⁰ See Jacques Lacan's "The Mirror Stage" for the after-the-fact (re)construction of an infant's members and the desire that is this moment's result.

⁷¹ Thomas Laqueur argues that an aspect of the "one-sex" model was the linking of all the bodily fluids and orifices. For example, even into the nineteenth century, "metaphorical connections between the throat and the cervix/vagina or buccal cavity and pudenda [were] legion"(36). These metaphorical connections resulted in such "prognostic signs" as "a woman vomiting blood would stop if she started to menstruate"(37). Lynch is less concerned with reproducing a pre-Enlightenment conception of biology than he is with remaking the modern, static conception of biology, sexual difference, and structuring action of language. The physiological metaphoric connections that ancient medicine insisted upon are reworked

the bleeding mouth of the woman as a sexual sign not only of femininity, but also of male ejaculation, speech, and waste, just as the white tubes in all of his early films are signifiers of male and female biology and gendered characteristics. Lynch makes the psychological production of the white tube in the primal scene fantasy physical. His metaphoric and metonymic algebra works in the following manner. The sights and sounds of the primal scene, specifically the father's "white tube," are translated into multiple symbolic sexual functions. The structuring action of the primal scene--figured by the white tube--produces language. Language, in turn, restructures the primal scene fantasy in a reciprocal relationship that produces the subject--symbolized by the trope of "learning" her ABCs. The products of her fantasy are disseminated throughout her own body, which leads to a "one-sex" model that ultimately deconstructs and reconstructs the conventional and contemporary understanding of the relationships between sex and language because she incestuously reproduces them within herself.⁷²

This gesture towards an other both within and without the self represents the crux of *The Alphabet*. The shot of the woman in ecstasy immediately precedes the shot of biological conception: the white ball (egg) leave the woman's mouth as her mouth opens and closes in sexual ecstasy. This woman is the dreamer's mother, suggesting that the male voice in the third shot is the unseen father. Yet the "mother" and the dreamer look alike (the credits list only one character). In this scenario, the dreamer has replaced the mother in the primal scene fantasy and is, then, seduced by her own father and, subsequently, witness to the conception and birth of herself *by herself* in the scenes that follow. She embodies both the ambiguously phallic white tube and the capital letter "A" that produces this tube through this conflation. This biological and linguistic self-reproduction is decidedly incestuous in nature.

by Lynch to underscore the effect of the cultural upon the physiological so that the physiological is revealed as a cultural construction.

⁷² I intend the "seminal" pun; the analogue to the stars-spice-dust-sperm trope is shown late in *The Alphabet* in the form of the dots that cover the screen and the dreamer's sleeping body.

This incest and its products are metaphorically represented in the "overture" shot that precedes the shot of the mother's ecstasy. The images and sounds presented in this shot are overwhelmingly concerned with fertility, specifically with agriculture. Agriculture as metaphor serves to underscore the film's interests in order, reproduction, and the often blurry division between nature and culture. A complex process of displacement and condensation occurs in this shot when the order of agricultural rows is linked to the male voice and the order of the alphabet in a row: "ABC" Within this scene and throughout the rest of the film this nexus of conventionally male power through metaphorical ordering is undone. The dreamer's adoption of both her mother's and father's role in her own conception and birth via the white tube's conflation deconstructs the power of the prohibition of incest. As exemplified by the fear of and desire for the letters of the alphabet at the end of the film, language is figured as something produced both within and without the subject, a process of structuration that undoes even as it makes.⁷³

Please Remember that You are Dealing with a Structuring Action (without Origin)

The Grandmother and *The Alphabet* feature protagonists whose identities transform in excess of conventional sexual difference. Each film performs its own strange sexual confluences and combinations, and the creation of a strange, looping narrative is effected by the ultimate interiority of the narratives. The figure of the white tube and what it signifies is parlayed throughout Lynch's films and assists in the creation of the in(finite) loop structure that defines his work. After *Dune*, Lynch returns to the radical interiority of the early films in the notorious *Blue Velvet*. This film has, by far, received the most critical attention of any Lynch film, but what critics have not considered is how the structure and subject matter of *Blue Velvet* is a repetition of the concerns of earlier

⁷³ During the overture itself, as consumed as it is with "rows" and "growth," the letters of the alphabet more often than not defy conventional, linear representation.

films.⁷⁴ What the earlier films tell us about the complex figure of the white tube adds a degree of complexity to the film that has been overlooked to this point and which exemplifies the primal scene issues in the oeuvre.

With *Blue Velvet*, a significant shift in how Lynch represents the white tubes occurs. Gone are the monstrous creatures, claymation, and animated figures which simultaneously represent phallic power, vaginal danger, and reproduction; instead, these attributes are now found in the form of fingers on significant hands. These fingers sign the language of sexual conflation and combination in the primal scene fantasy. Yet this shift from the representation of the radical exteriority and difference of the abstract shapes being uncomfortably introjected--as in *Eraserhead*--to the representation of the symbol of complex confluences being a "member" of one's own body does not radically alter the pattern of symbolization. Frank Booth is like a version of Henry at the end of *Eraserhead*. *The Alphabet*, *Eraserhead*, and *The Elephant Man* reveal the white tube as a production of the self in the narrative of a nightmare that confuses interior and exterior, dream and "reality." *Blue Velvet* repeats these issues and structures. At the beginning and end of the film, the camera tracks into and then out of an ear revealing, perhaps, that all the events are the products of Jeffrey's imagination--a dream. The dreams within dreams meta-structure of Lynch's narratives is by now a familiar technique, and one expects to find a primal scene featuring white tubes that refers back to, disrupts, and structures the dream, the film, and the oeuvre simultaneously.

Jeffrey's father's seizure precipitates and allows for the connections between language and sexuality made during the extended "dream." While watering the lawn, the phallic hose the father uses becomes constricted and appears as an external manifestation of the seizure that lands him speechless in the hospital. As soon as he passes out on the lawn.

⁷⁴ The essays by Lesley Stern, Laura Mulvey, and Jane M. Shattuc are some of the best examples of *Blue Velvet* criticism. Rather than repeat their insights about the entire text, I focus only upon the specific figure of the white tube in the film.

the hose's flow returns, which functions as a sign to the viewer/Jeffrey that the incestuous "language" that will follow will not be restricted by the presence of the father. If the father's hospitalization allows Jeffrey freedom, in an extremely oblique way his strange encounter with Double Ed serves as an oracle that foreshadows the white tubes. Jeffrey experiences "too soon" both a premonition of the future and insight into the past with blind Double Ed, an employee at his father's hardware store and an odd manifestation of Teiresias. The game they play together involves Jeffrey holding up some fingers while Double Ed guesses how many there are. Double Ed(-ipus?) is the radical psychological interiority of Jeffrey made physically manifest. Double Ed's insight despite his literal blindness prefigures Jeffrey's insights during the primal scene; the "darkness" of the events between the ears allows Jeffrey to "see." After the primal scene, Jeffrey can "see" (his own) fingers for what they symbolically are, and he is no longer blind to incestuous desire.

Frank Booth's fingers take center stage for Dorothy, Jeffrey, and himself during the "primal scene." After silencing Dorothy with the swatch of blue velvet, Frank uses his fingers to penetrate her and then, leaving his pants on, he briefly and quickly imitates sexual intercourse. When finished, Frank looks at his hand with disgust and horror, as though it was not a part of his body. He then hits her with an open hand and flexes his fingers repeatedly, fully extending them and then making a fist. He ends this scene by saying "now it is dark." In the moments that follow, Dorothy begs Jeffrey to hit her, too, and within two days time he fulfills her request. As in the "meat" simile, Jeffrey's realization "after the fact"--or "too late"--of what the fingers symbolize is produced in the viewer of Lynch's oeuvre as well; only after understanding the function of the white tubes in the earlier films can the viewer "see" these fingers for what they are. The problem of what they are is similar to the conundrum of Sailor's speaking penis: it is a reminiscence based on similitude that underscores the absence of origin even as it posits the tenuous structuring action of the primal scene fantasy. As a result, this realization functions as

the eye-of-the-duck scene that instigates, suspends, and structures the looping narratives. Frank's fingers are not simply a penis, but a representation of the ambiguous conflation of sex which, in turn, represents the power of language to construct and deconstruct sexual identity when combined with the ambivalent, shifting identifications of the primal scene fantasy. Frank's and Jeffrey's jouissance is the incestuous recognition of the other within the self. For Jeffrey, Frank's fingers are his mother, father, and himself embodied in a symbol of a one-sex model that speaks a familiar and repetitive language in Lynch's oeuvre.

The fingers in *Blue Velvet* only point to an "origin"; they do not reveal it. The problem lies with the primal scene fantasy as fantasy, and the many relationships of displacement and condensation--relationships of similitude--that articulate it. While its effects--strange reversals and inversions "in excess" of conventional sexual identification--can be traced, the fantasy's quality of being simultaneously both "too early" and "too late" irrevocably obfuscates the "true" origin, so it recreates its own in fantasy form. In this way, Lynch's two models of reading combined accurately describe the primal scene fantasmatic. Its effects are like the movement of the viewer's eye around the duck, where the eye-of-the-duck functions as the problem of origins that both arrests movement and reinstigates it in an endless loop. This looping structure, in turn, creates the problem of narrative time because it is (in)finite. Like the viewers of decaying meat, recognition of the problems of origin reconstructs their original perceptions. The primal scene fantasy's ability to incorporate this recognition into its endlessly expanding script dooms the subject to the endless reenactment of this process of recognition. This pattern of recognition, incorporation, and reenactment appears in each individual Lynch film and in the structure of his oeuvre. They do not progress in either sense so much as they direct the viewer's eye "back" towards an origin that does not exist and which instigates desire. All Lynch narratives are about a process of returning, and this process always involves

the revelation--to the viewer, listener, or characters--of the concealment inherent in revealing.

The Incestuous Sequel: The *Taboo I - XVIII* Films

The following arguments about incest are meant in part as a sequel to the discussion of *Taboo* in the mother-of-all moving-image hard-core pornography analyses: Linda Williams's *Hard-Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*.⁷⁵ Like many sequels, my narrative picks up where Williams's original leaves off. The moment I wish to extend is Williams's potential solution to the troubling conventional representations of male and female sexuality in hard-core. Pornography, she claims, can be an area of social change if it overturns conventionally gendered roles, "especially if it is a pornography that can combine the holding and nurturing of motherhood with sexual representation"(259): one "real-world solution to the representation of desire . . . concerns the social construction of mothers as sexual subjects. Since mothers actually *are* sexual subjects (though hardly ever in movies), such a solution is not beyond the pale . . . both in the real world and in our representations"(259). In principle, I agree with and support Williams's call for change.

What I wish to call attention to in Williams's analysis, however, is the blindspot of incest and the deconstructive work that this blindspot produces. Williams acknowledges the mother-son incest in *Taboo* (Stevens 1980) earlier in her book, but her own close-reading of the film disappears from the call she later makes about representing mothers as sexual subjects. The context of *Taboo* destabilizes the optimistic plausibility of Williams's assertions and underscores the reliance upon normative family structure prohibitions in her assertion by not recognizing the desires in *Taboo* as part of a continuum of sexualized motherhood. *Taboo* represents the very "holding and nurturing"

⁷⁵ Anne McClintock notes that "so much has been written on the question of pornography (as if it were one thing), and so little on the myriad types, texts and subgenres that makes up porn's kaleidoscopic variorium"(115). The status of Linda Williams's study rests on being the admirable exception to this absence. To a degree, Chris Strayner's *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies* and Laura Kipnis's *Bound and Gagged* are two extended analyses that follow the trail blazed by Williams.

of motherhood and sexual representation that Williams calls for, but escapes inclusion because it combines these qualities in one subject. Williams's oversight--despite her close attention to the film--reveals the frequently "unspeakable" and "unthinkable" aspect of incestuous desire inherent in family structures.⁷⁶ *Taboo* makes this conventionally suppressed incest graphically manifest. In fact, in the early films of the series, the practice of incest is celebrated for producing female sexual freedom in both heterogenous as well as homogenous relationships. Hence *Taboo* exemplifies what Teresa de Lauretis has called the most exciting contemporary work in cinema and feminism because it "is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it"(157).⁷⁷ The social and psychological question of what constitutes a bad object choice is foregone in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Regardless of the "real world" impossibility of *Taboo's* solutions, the film does violence to the paradigms of the Oedipal scenario.

What is more, *Taboo* frequently repeats and varies this violence, giving birth to seventeen sequels so far and serving as the origin for what has become an incestuous dynasty for the past nineteen years. The first section of this essay produces a re-reading of *Taboo* that concentrates on incest and its ramifications for Williams's call. The second section maps the narrative "progress" of the incestuous sequels. This second section asks and answers the following questions: does the series maintain the deconstructive paradigm apparent in its original or does it recuperate the original's transgressiveness into more conventional representations? How is incest related to the nature of sequels themselves? And how might the incestuous sequel be related to the calls for change regarding representations of motherhood made by Williams? Both sections address the

⁷⁶ See Kaja Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (42) for an extended discussion of "inherent" incestuous desire in family structures.

⁷⁷ *Alice Doesn't* makes it clear that de Lauretis would not find it possible for the genre of pornography to produce this result. I borrow her arguments despite this.

following central paradox: if incest precipitates narrative "death" by foreclosing the conventional Oedipal drive of narrative, then what explains the reproductive "life" of so many sequels from an incestuous origin?⁷⁸

Deconstructing the Origin

Taboo follows Barbara Scott's transition from a bad marriage signified by "bad" sex to personal fulfillment, signified by "good" incest with her high school-aged son, Paul, and her more empowered sexual relationships with non-family, or "heterogenous," people.⁷⁹ The film opens with Barbara performing oral sex on her husband, Chris, in their darkened bedroom. Chris insists on turning the bedside light on so that he can see what she is doing. This desire to watch has been present for "many years" in the marriage, and for many years Barbara has told Chris that she "can't do it with the light on." Chris forces her until the camera goes slowly out of focus and then cuts to an in-focus close-up of genital intercourse, which proves to be unsatisfying for Barbara. In this first scene, the problems and pleasures of hard-core spectatorship are explored. Certain related dichotomies, such as pleasure/unpleasure, light/dark, and scopophilia/exhibitionism, are set up in a system of binary signification whose "either/or" limitations Barbara ultimately overcomes through incest with her son. The path towards pleasure in looking and showing is one the viewer also follows. Without the light on--which is the signifier for "bad" sex in this scene--it is impossible for the viewer to look at or be party to the sexual performance, good or bad. Chris is the figure, however distasteful his words and actions

⁷⁸ The sequel is a more common phenomenon in hard-core than even contemporary Hollywood cinema, but the economic motivation is essentially the same. The economic success of the original explains the presence of the sequel; however, in addition to *Taboo's* economic success, the incestuous content suggests there is conceptually more at stake.

⁷⁹ Linda Williams, borrowing Richard Dyer's terminology for categorizing musicals, names *Taboo* an "integrated" narrative, by which she means a type of film that often represents the difference between "good" and "bad" sex, but that "offers a patently facile solution to the real problems of power in patriarchy, with solutions ranging from the utterly simplistic . . . to a more subtle give and take of power and pleasure"(HC 171). Williams's naming *Taboo* integrated is partially accurate, but classifying *Taboo* as solely integrated oversimplifies the significance of the deconstructive work of incest in the narrative. Additionally, I make no claim to be able to account for all possible viewer identifications, so I often put subjective terms such as "good" and "bad," "perverse" and "normal" in quotes to signify their indeterminacy.

are, the viewer must identify with because they want the lights on, too. Over the course of the film, the viewer is made to switch from identification with the "bad" sex of Chris to Barbara's "good" sex with Paul.

The "lights-on" desire establishes the viewer as *the* point of reference for *Taboo*. About the spectator of (straight) film, Teresa de Lauretis argues

[The] binding of fantasy to certain representations, certain significant images, affects the spectator as a subjective production. The spectator, stitched in the film's spatiotemporal movement, is constructed as the point of intelligibility and origin of those representations, as the subjects of, the 'figure for,' those images and meanings. In these ways cinema effectively, powerfully participates in the social production of subjectivity. (53)

This emphasis upon the spectator as subject, object, and origin of the film is significant for the hard-core genre in general and the viewer of graphic films about incest, in particular. Whereas Laura Mulvey has argued that the female viewer is sadistically made to identify with both a male principal and principle on the screen, pornography critics often make this enforced sex/gender mutation prior to the projector lights being turned on.⁸⁰ This bias has a profound effect upon how pornography is discussed and this bias is present in Williams's call for the sexual representation of mothers in film because it presupposes three things: first, a stable, static identity of the contemporary viewer of film; second, that the vertiginous complexities of how a viewer goes about identifying with (or against, or around, etc.) a film can change simply with an increased number of "positive" representations; and third, that motherhood and desire are stable, identifiable things that are "good" (not incestuous). Thus audience as well as incest work hand in

⁸⁰ Even the most casual reader of pornography criticism—whether mainstream or more academic, pro- or anti-censorship—will quickly notice the tacit assumption made by most critics that the viewing audience of hard-core is male, even if the author elsewhere cites percentages of female viewers.

hand as blindspots in the theorization of *Taboo* as a hard-core text. The *Taboo* films often undo these presuppositions by speaking directly about incest and its effects.

The morning after bad sex with Chris, Barbara and the viewer begin their journey towards good sex. The flirtatious dialogue and the lingering shot/reverse-shot looks between Barbara and Paul contrast sharply with the representation of the problems of communicating and looking the preceding evening. Each of their scenes together develops and reinforces their desire, and the soon-to-be-conventional scene of bedroom voyeurism introduces incest's sexual and social benefits. Paul is shown peering through his mother's bathroom door as she takes a shower. After initial surprise, Paul quickly shows interest in his mother's activities. When her shower is over, Paul retreats behind her bedroom door in order to watch her prepare for her first date since Chris left. This dressing in front of a mirror while being watched by a son is a moment that becomes a staple in the early *Taboo* films. Barbara reveals her discomfort in both showing and looking during sex by wanting to keep the light off, but in the bedroom scene the spectator finds the light in the bedroom to be on, and that Barbara is discovering the joys at looking at her own exposed body in the mirrored wall. This is the second step in a "progression" of changes that occur in Barbara's attitudes about showing and looking throughout the film.

After watching his mother, Paul has a visible erection in his pants, and as he hurries back to his girlfriend, Sheri, to avoid being caught by his mother, Sheri says "Oh God, Paul, you're always so horny." Barbara leaves for her date and Sheri and Paul begin to have intercourse, at the end of which Sheri notes, "Gee, Paul, you never fucked me like that before." Paul responds with a surprised "Yeah?" The film then cuts to Paul's memory of Barbara watching herself in the mirror, and he says with an embarrassed reticence "Oh, yeah, you really turn me on, honey." This is the one instance when Paul feels some trepidation about his desires for his mother. Yet the significance of his use of fantasy is positive: his fantasizing produced the best sex that Sheri has ever had with

Paul. A "normalizing" meaning produced by and for the spectator is that the production of incestuous fantasy, if not its realization, is a way of exploring and fulfilling desires with little or no social consequence.

The role of fantasy is the driving force behind the problems of audience mentioned above. Ann McClintock writes of the character of sexual fantasy and pornography that

The pornographic imagination shifts libidinally: I am the watcher/watched; I am the pleasurer/the pleased. The masturbatory imagination is incoherent: bits of memory, trauma, pleasure, anger, recalled for pleasure The pace of porn--the swerves in scene, the switches of persona, the rehearsal of variety within the structure of compulsive repetition--mimics the floating, chaotic structures of masturbatory fantasy, an obscure logic about which we know very little. (125)

Pinpointing the fantasizing viewer as the point of intelligibility during the obscure logic of a represented fantasizing subject is an exceedingly difficult enterprise, but the meta-commentary the film produces for and about the fantasizing subject suggests two things: fantasy is uncontrollable and beneficial. Paul's fantasies during sex with Sheri and Barbara's sexual fantasizing in her darkened bedroom after returning home from her date at the orgy-party represent the shifting, chaotic activity that McClintock describes. Barbara imagines herself as the center of the sexual attentions of all the people at the orgy that she decided not to participate in, and the viewer is shown the improvisation of her fantasy life as she creates scenarios the camera did not capture for the spectator. The embarrassment and reticence she felt during the party is transformed in her fantasy, so that she mimics her son's experience the same evening. The lighting in her fantasy has changed from the brightly lit "real" orgy to an off-lighting of a reddish hue. Her restlessness overwhelms her and she heads to the kitchen, but on the way there she passes Paul's bedroom and overhears him having a bad dream. She asks if he is alright, but when he does not answer, she continues to look at him and becomes aroused by the sight of his naked body. Thus begins a sequence of shots that, like the dressing scenes,

become a convention of the series. The quick cuts to shots of her fantasy during these actions become longer in duration, and she shows signs of reticence about her sexual feelings, making motions to leave the room three times. Eventually, her desires overpower her and she begins tentatively to fellate Paul in his sleep in a shot that mimics a scene from her fantasy.

Williams' argument that Barbara's fantasy concerns a single, "not quite discernible mate"(HC 148), and not the many people that actually appear, simplifies the complexity of Barbara's fantasy, for in it she is both the watcher and the watched, the pleased and the pleasurer; the reddish hue during the fantasy signifies a transitional state between the light/dark dichotomy of the first scene; her activity during the fantasy and her flirtations with Paul mark a "reversal of character" from somewhat prudish and demure to more openly desirous. Williams's reading of Paul and Barbara's intercourse also makes it appear that only Paul plays the active role and that Barbara remains passive. Rather, it is Barbara that makes the initial move and who straddles Paul and places his penis inside of her. Williams argues that it is Paul who places his penis between Barbara's breasts (HC 149), the position in which Paul orgasms, but because of the abrupt cuts the film does not specifically represent who desires this sexual position. This indeterminacy avoids the problem of "guilt" and allows for the free play of fantasy to operate.

For narrative reasons, this scene is the dramatic if not thematic "climax" of the film, and it paradoxically both transgresses and observes generic conventions. Williams says of the genre in general that "What counts is not the intrinsic content of the sexual numbers, but how they are played (that is, performed, lit, shot, edited)"(HC 149). But the sexual content of the scene between Paul and Barbara *is* as intrinsically important as the playing of the scene. Paul's fascination with his mother's breasts throughout the film culminates with their using her breasts to achieve his orgasm. The representation of the orgasm on the mother's breasts is highly significant because it underscores, with perhaps more force than at any other moment in the film, the acknowledgement of "the

inadequacy of its [the genre's] conventions even as it observes them"(HC 292 n. 5). The external cum-shot is a generic convention, but in the context of this incestuous narrative the external cum-shot is *also* an avoidance of representing what would be narratively too transgressive, too abject, and with too many possible social repercussions: to "show" a son orgasm inside of his mother.⁸¹ Convention requires that the cum-shot be external, but this particular cum-shot has to be because an internal cum-shot would threaten the end of the fantasy and narrative "death." The "perversion" of external cum-shots is welcome here given the potential repercussions of "normal" intercourse.⁸² Thus the taboo which *Taboo* is unwilling to represent is intrinsically important to both the narrative and the genre in general. The safety in swerving away from the "normal" sexual aim so the relationship may continue with no biological--and therefore social--consequences extends the "life" of the narrative. The fantasy need not end for the characters or viewers because the "unthinkable" is avoided even as incest is graphically shown.

Jacques Derrida, examining the kinship studies of Levi-Strauss, argues that because all philosophical conceptualizations are related to the nature/culture binarism (253), they are designed "to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing which makes this conceptualization possible: the origin of the prohibition of incest"(254). *Taboo*, with its graphic representation of incest, creates a "rupture"(249) by explicitly representing this "unthinkable thing," but in the process the film creates another "unthinkable thing." Teresa de Lauretis, after a very complex series of arguments about the Oedipal movement of narrative (79), argues that "If narrative is governed by an Oedipal logic, it is because it

⁸¹ The external come-shot has received much attention in theory about pornography. Ann McClintock (123-4) and Williams (242-3) offer the most interesting discussions of the phenomenon; my discussion differs from theirs because of its limited, incestuous scope in the *Taboo* series.

⁸² Later in the film, when Barbara confesses her relationship to her friend, even the sexually adventurous Gina cannot or does not want to consider Paul cumming inside his mother. Gina asks graphic questions about their sexual activities in order to excite herself: "Did he eat you, did you let him eat your pussy? . . . Did you suck his cock? Did he cum in your mouth? Lots of it?", but she does not ask questions about the most "normal" of heterosexual aims.

is situated within the system of exchange instituted by the incest prohibition, where woman functions as both a sign (representation) and a value (object) for that exchange"(140). *Taboo* is governed by an Oedipal logic in its narrative, but this Oedipal logic is Oedipal with a vengeance because it also subverts that logic through its representation of the very transgressive thing that makes its logic possible.

This paradox is enabled and enhanced by the privileged and deconstructive position fantasy holds both in the film and in the genre. As Anne McClintock, Elizabeth Cowie, Linda Williams, and others have stated, pornography offers the spectator the possibility of multiple and surprising identifications: pornography is "acting out the impossibility of fantasy realized" (Stewart 170), limited only slightly by the array of contexts the narrative supplies (Cowie 141). The possibilities de Lauretis suggests for the work of the genre of film are present in *Taboo*:

If the masculine-feminine polarity can be disrupted to open other spaces for identification, other positionalities of desire, the work of the film should be on these problems: how to address the spectator from an elsewhere of vision, how to construct a different narrative temporality, how to position the spectator and the filmmaker not at the center but at the borders of the Oedipal stage. (83)

Taboo addresses its viewers from an "elsewhere of vision" by enacting and promoting the chaotic and shifting libidinousness of incestuous fantasy. This use of fantasy is at the "borders of the Oedipal stage" because it foregrounds the incestuous desire inherent in family structures and then transgressively celebrates it as being central to the production of "good" sex. *Taboo* fulfills de Lauretis's third requirement by disrupting the conventions Williams also wants to change. Incest offers the means for a "different narrative temporality" because it suspends conventional means for marking the passage of time. Reproductive incest--the "unthinkable thing" present in its absence in *Taboo*--conflates generations, making the ability to differentiate conventional cultural positions impossible. Rather than being able to plot familial positions on a vertical or even

horizontal axis, the axes are destroyed, leaving only a point without spatiotemporal reference.

The rest of the film's narrative progress is paradoxically conventional and concerns itself with resolving the problems that incestuous desire causes, and *Taboo* would have it that the disruptions outlined above are neither alarming nor destructive but liberating and, so, normal--even natural. Lip service is paid, however, to conventional prohibitions. The next morning Paul awakens in his bed and finds a letter from his mother: "we lost our heads last night. What we did was terribly wrong." When Barbara returns home from work, she finds Paul in her brightly-lit bedroom wondering why she is "keeping [her] lover waiting." Barbara explains to Paul that what they did was "entirely" her fault, and that Paul should not feel any guilt about it. Paul responds that it was something that he also wanted and Barbara concedes that "it was lovely, though, holding my darling boy in my arms again." The wistful naiveté with which Barbara delivers these lines is disturbing because it has the effect of retroactively sexualizing the mother-infant relationship. Paul then makes advances on her and she says "No" because "The law has a dirty word for this." The law, of course, is what makes incestuous desire possible, and they proceed to have sex in the brightly-lit bedroom.

In accordance with a generic rule of hard-core, women are not punished for their sexual desires and activities. When Barbara tells Gina of her relationship with Paul, Gina celebrates the news rather than punishing Barbara. Gina's advice to Barbara is "Don't fight it," and the possibility for any "law" to disrupt the incestuous desire is negated. If anything, Gina makes explicit to the spectator the pleasure in the incest fantasy as a way of achieving sexual gratification: "Imagine fucking your own son!" she exclaims to her two partners during sex. Her exclamation is rhetorical because it describes her own fantasies, and it serves as a model addressed to the spectator as the constructed "point of intelligibility and origin of [the] representations"(de Lauretis 53) in the film. The radical potential of *Taboo*, then, is that the spectator, too, fantasizes a relationship both

"unnatural" and "uncultural"; one that is outside of, prior to, yet predicated on the nature/culture dichotomy.

At the end of the film Barbara has sex with her new boyfriend, Jerry, in her well-lit bedroom. She watches him pleasure her, and she watches him being pleased, all of which attests to Barbara's sexual "growth" in the sense of her acceptance of being seen and willingness to show. Rather than signifying acceptance of Chris's "bad" desires, Barbara's newfound behavior reflects her insistence on remaining outside of the patriarchal system of exchange. She tells Jerry that "from now on, my life is my life, and I'm going to do things my way, and part of my way is keeping you as my lover." The other part of "her way"--her incestuous desire for Paul--further deconstructs the system of exchange and results in more freedom for Barbara. Analogously, the fantasy for the spectator can continue unfettered because no narrative closure is provided to the incestuous relationship even though the film has ended: chaotic fantasy maintains desire, and chaotic desire continues the fantasy.

Maintaining this new paradigm over seventeen sequels, however, presents problems for *Taboo's* narrative. As with the first film, the crux of the problem of the series as a whole lies at the intersection between the repetition and variation that are the calling cards of fantasy and the monolithic normativity that is the Oedipal drive of narrative. The cartoon-like world the *Taboo* series creates where characters in vaguely real situations and settings do socially unacceptable things to one another with little or no social consequences allows for "different positionalities of desire"(de Lauretis 83) that reconfigure "real world"(Williams 259) concerns. And herein lies the greatest problem with Williams's assertions: her reliance upon a correspondence between representation and the "real world" delimits the kind of "real world representations" she can consider. De Lauretis opens up this relationship by positing the viewer as the subject and origin of representations *regardless of their content*, thus acknowledging and placing the *possibility* of incest--however cartoon-like--into the realm of "reality." Understanding

and including incestuous desire as a potential aspect of sexualized motherhood radically deconstructs the "reality" of gender and sexual constructions. But maintaining life on the border of the Oedipal stage becomes increasingly difficult as the conventions that the series itself creates take on their own monolithic character.

Exhausting Possibilities

Fantasy, by staging action or events, *implies* a "resolution" to the fantasy, and thus the "inexorable drive of narrative, with its beginning, middle, and end"(Cowie 136). At the same time, a conflict arises between the drive of narrative and the staging of desire: fantasy wants to postpone the ending and is concerned with the "continuing-to-happen" of the scene, whereas the narrative's conclusion brings the fantasy to an end. Avoiding this end, fantasy *defers* conclusion through "endless repetition, with the same scene or series of scenes reproduced over and over again, and [where] *the variation is subordinate to the repetition*"(Cowie 137 emphasis added). The *Taboo* series occupies the ruptured space between the drive of narrative towards closure and fantasy's desire to postpone through repetition. Because the advent of incest foretells the "death" of the narrative, the incestuous sequels necessitate foregrounding variation over and in addition to repetition. The need to vary in order to create new narrative "life" even as the sequels repeat and, thus, engage their own narrative "death" is a paradox. The act of incest turns hard-core conventions on their head, and this is the story behind the *Taboo* series.⁸³

⁸³ We have already witnessed this with *Taboo's* incestuous cum-shots, but it also occurs on the soundtrack. In the first four films Linda Williams's otherwise useful adaptation of musical genre categories is upended. She rightly asserts that, in the hard-core genre in general, as with the musical genre, "Narrative informs [sexual] number, and number, in turn, informs narrative"(130) so that the "episodic structure of the hard-core narrative is something more than a flimsy excuse for sexual numbers: it is part and parcel of the way the genre goes about resolving the often contradictory desires of its characters"(134). In addition to exemplifying this visual paradigm, the *Taboo* series often incorporates non-diegetic musical numbers that accompany incest scenes. These songs attempt to provide coherence to the unincorporatable--if not always to the film's narrative, then always to the normative cultural narrative--sexual numbers. The generic descriptions of love and passion found in these lyrics, as with all the other lyrics in the songs featured in the *Taboo* series, avoid any specific mention of the transgressively graphic nature of the sexual acts they accompany.

The series must innovate in order to continue, and this necessity is most easily accomplished between *Taboo I* and *Taboo II* (Stevens 1982). Kay Parker reprises her role as Barbara Scott, and the film begins with a montage of quick shots that reestablish the incest narrative from the first film, but her role in the second film is limited to serving as a bridge between and a model for the second installment. Stitching together the series with flashbacks of major characters, especially from *I* and, later, *IV*, often becomes the main means for the series to maintain its coherence. Substitution is also frequently employed in the first five films to create coherence and substitution always denotes repetition. In the first sex scene, Barbara, her friend Gina, and Greg McBride Jr.--Sheri's brother and a friend of Paul Scott (who has inexplicably gone to live with his father)--have sex. Gina constructs an incestuous fantasy during their sexual experience, making sure that Barbara and the viewer realize that Junior is a proxy for Paul: "Is his cock like Paul's?" After Gina tells Junior about Barbara and Paul, a quick cut to the McBride household establishes another substitutive transition. Joyce is revealed to be sexually frustrated and unsatisfied by Greg Sr. When Greg Sr. makes a wish while blowing out the single birthday candle, she mutters "I know what I'd wish for." An argument about Junior ensues: "You're always jumping to his defense. He's not a kid anymore", to which Joyce responds "He's just a baby!" The scene then jump cuts back to Barbara, Gina, and Junior, whose penis (candle) occupies the center of the frame while Gina and Barbara "blow" him. Incestuous and homoerotic possibilities are certainly present between Greg Sr. blowing out the candle and Jr.'s candle being "blown."⁸⁴ Gina agrees with Joyce: "Mmmm, what a baby! Tastes just like Paul. It's just like Paul's cock. For goodness sake, Barbara, tell me it's just like Paul's!" Barbara assents to what Gina wishes she knew herself, and what this scene suggests is that the lesson learned in *Taboo I* will be the

⁸⁴ An allusion to King Laui's "snuffing" out Oedipus before he can sleep with his mother and kill his father seems present as well. See below for a longer discussion of homoeroticism and incest in the series.

lesson repeated in *Taboo II*. As though Junior had seen--or been--the original, he orgasms on Barbara's breasts.

Both repetition and variation fill *Taboo II*. After sex with Barbara, Junior conceives an incest fantasy with his own mother, a major plot line in the film. Joyce's unsatisfying sexual life is fulfilled by her sexual union with Junior, where sexual technique and the physical pleasure associated with it overrule the prohibition of incest. In a replay of Junior's scene with Barbara--and of the first scene of mother-son incest from *Taboo I* and the flashbacks that begin *Taboo II*--Junior uses intercourse and his mother's breasts to bring himself to orgasm, which inspires Joyce--as though *she* had seen or been the original--to say "I just remembered how good it can be." Repetition dominates these moments from the film, but variations are introduced through Sheri's desires, even though she appears in both films. The relationship between Jr. and Sheri is the second of *Taboo II*'s three major plot lines and it is what allows for the third--father-daughter incest--to occur. Junior uses what he learns about Barbara and Paul to extort minor sexual favors from Sheri. She is upset by what she learns and tells Joyce she "never wants to hear Paul's name again." The taboo surrounding Paul's name establishes one pole of a continuum of emotions Sheri feels early in the film about familial desire: her often ambivalent attitude towards Junior lies in the middle of this continuum, with her open desire for her father later in the film being the opposing pole. As the film progresses, this continuum radically conflates as a result of incest with Junior. After her initial shock and rejection of him, her pleasure makes her "mad at myself" for not giving in long ago. Before their second sexual experience, Sheri expresses reservations about committing incest and Jr. counters with "That's what makes it so good." Sheri capitulates and says "You know, if we ever get caught . . . you know, you're really evil . . . I guess I'm evil, too." Sheri's playful acknowledgement of her perverse desire causes a mental and, apparently, physical transformation in her.

When Barbara meets Sheri at an orgy she says "There's something different about you." She responds, "I didn't know it showed!" Like joining an exclusive club, the experience of incest seems to hang a sign around one's neck only other "members" can see. As the orgy progresses, Sheri and Barbara have sex. Her intragenerational incest with Junior liberates Sheri to use the quasi-maternal Barbara (via Sheri's previous relationship with Paul) to prepare her for intergenerational incest. Now that the taboo surrounding Paul's name has been lifted, Sheri can pursue her real object of desire: her father. In response to her passes, Greg Sr. says "I don't know what's gotten into you." At this point, he cannot read the sign. When alone, Greg Sr. soliloquizes: "My God, I don't know whether to cry or get a hard-on." This dilemma is resolved later that night when, in an almost exact repetition of Barbara's first incest with Paul--except with the roles reversed--Sheri is alone in bed and sexually frustrated when she gets up and heads towards her parents' room. Like Barbara, Sheri at first tries to stop herself from molesting her father, but eventually she begins to fellate him as her mother sleeps in the same bed.⁸⁵ Immediately following his orgasm, Joyce rolls over and puts her arm around Greg. Sheri leaves and, still excited, Greg Sr. turns on the light (picking up the theme from *Taboo I*) and begins to perform cunnilingus on Joyce. She wakes up and, inspired by the sex that follows, claims that "You never fucked me like this before! I love the new you, but what made you change? No, I don't want to know." Besides nearly plagiarizing her own daughter's lines with Paul in *Taboo I*, the personal empowerment through sexual fulfillment via incest all the McBrides experience is similar to the empowerment that Barbara feels at the end of *Taboo I*, and so *Taboo II*, while expanding through variation

⁸⁵ To this point in the series, the meaning produced for the viewers by Barbara's and Sheri's big scenes is that women desire incest as much as men, but they have to think about it a little longer than men do. The effect is that men--traditionally conceived of as incest instigators--are situated as "guilt-free" participants. But these meanings are undone by *Taboo IV* and *V*, which both reverse the conventions that the series creates in the first three films.

the scope of incestuous relationships, still fits comfortably within the anti-Oedipal template established by *Taboo I*.

Whereas the narrative gap between *Taboo I* and *II* is traversed with little difficulty because of the bridge that Barbara and Sheri form, and the narrative continues because of the variety of family positions still left to combine, the transition to *Taboo III: The Final Chapter* (Stevens 1984) is much more difficult, and it represents the first time in the series that the incestuous content threatens to destroy the narrative continuation of the series. The subtitle reveals this problem: by ostensibly sticking to the limitations of "heterosexual" hard-core, *Taboo I* and *II* have exhausted the incestuous possibilities in the Scott and McBride family. To further the narrative in *Taboo III*, Barbara and Joyce reprise their roles, but both have had to generate spontaneously new, never-before-mentioned sons--Jimmy and Brian, respectively. With very few exceptions, *Taboo III* is a combination of *Taboo I* and *II*, including flashbacks to both films, repetition of dressing and walk-down-the-hall sequences, and "empowered" endings. What makes *Taboo III* interesting is its attempt to foreground a non-incestuous plot line about the music industry. While this plot is nearly incomprehensible, what makes its presence important is the tacit acknowledgement that the incest narrative begun in *I* has exhausted itself by the end of *II*, and this effort to introduce narrative and sexual heterogeneity in the "Final Chapter" reads as a desperate attempt to create new narrative "life" where incest has wrought "death." *Taboo III* illustrates how incest exacerbates the rift between the drive of narrative towards closure, fantasy's desire to repeat, and the necessity for variation.

Sensing the narrative death immanent in *Taboo I* and *II* and the failure of the attempted new plot line of *III*, *Taboo IV: The Younger Generation* (Stevens 1985) introduces a significantly different and comparatively complex plot that is also, paradoxically, a return that maintains two of the characters from the original. Whereas the subtitle for this installment suggests that the plot will follow the children of the first three films and, perhaps, their offspring, this is not the case. If Barbara Scott is the

matriarch of the first three films, then *Taboo IV* introduces a patriarch for the series and a new emphasis upon the psychopathology of incest. Dr. Jeremy Lodge is a "psychologist, lecturer, leading authority on incest, and author of the bestselling Incest: The Family Taboo." During a radio interview, he blames "today's permissive society" for the increase in cases of incest and states that in his forthcoming book he attributes "adultery as the primary cause of incest": "Women who cheat on their husbands are the primary causal factor for fathers who turn to their daughters as a means for getting even. On the other hand, many wives turn to adolescent sons as substitute lovers for either errant or inept husbands." As though Dr. Lodge had become an expert by watching *Taboo I* and *II*, the "truth" of his thesis is again supported by the narrative of *Taboo IV*, revealing that the sequels cannot escape the imprint of the original.

The narrative follows Lodge, his wife, Alice, his brother, Bill, and his two daughters, Robin and Naomi (who turns out to be Bill's biological daughter). Numerous sub-plots and sex scenes are provided by Lodge's group therapy patients, which includes Joyce McBride, who is again living with Junior and continuing their affair, and Barbara, who is a private patient of Dr. Lodge and who appears only in sexual flashbacks from *Taboo I* and *III*. That both mothers are now in therapy goes more or less without comment, despite the endings to each of the previous films. The rehashing of old footage becomes incestuous: these moments are like primal scenes in which the sequels rediscover their origin; they are also incestuous if the sequels are understood as children seducing the "mother" by using "her" to reproduce another narrative.

As the flashbacks incestuously anchor *Taboo IV* to *I*, so does the narrative; many of the patterns formed in the first episode reappear here, but some variations do occur: first, homosexual incest appears; second, internal incestuous cum-shots appear for the first time; and third, more than banal lip service is paid to incest as "unnatural." Whereas *Taboo II* features homosexual incest by proxy (Barbara and Sheri and, to a degree, Greg Sr. and Jr.), *IV* features both literal and figurative homosexual incest. In the first sex

scene of the film, Naomi and Robin have sex with each other at an all-girls school, using Naomi's boyfriend as a mediator. More figuratively, Alice says to Bill, after their longtime affair has been discovered by Dr. Lodge, "Sometimes I think the only reason you ever loved me was because I was married to your brother." While the male homosexual incest suggested in this relationship is implied, it is about as close as straight hard-core ever comes to acknowledging male homosexual--much less incestuous--desire. Although this homosexual, incestuous desire is "new" to the series, it is quickly subsumed by the domineering presence of heterosexual, intergenerational incest.⁸⁶

This male homosexual incest is reinforced--if only tenuously--by the mutual desire between Bill and Naomi. Bill is aware of his paternity, but Naomi knows him as an uncle. If Bill is attracted to Alice because of her marriage to Dr. Lodge, then the attraction is reinforced because of Naomi's liminal relationship between the two brothers. Bill and Naomi's relationship progresses as do most in the *Taboo* series: they have fantasies of one another, watch each other, and then consummate their relationship. Yet their inevitable sex scene is transgressive of the rules that the earlier *Taboo* films have constructed, although a precedent appears earlier in the film. One of Dr. Lodge's patients relates to the group her incest experience with her brother, and the depiction of this sexual experience culminates in an internal cum-shot.⁸⁷ This marks the first time in the series that a male relative has been depicted as threatening procreative sex. Bill and Naomi's sexual scene is the second time that this occurs, and it is the first between parent and child. These internal cum-shots are quite surprising in the context of the earlier films because the internal cum-shot is the "unthinkable thing" that replaces the more

⁸⁶ This "innovation" is easily problematized. "Straight" hard-core frequently stages obligatory "lesbian" scenes, although almost always for a male viewer who eventually participates and recuperates the homosexuality within a "normalized" heterosexual paradigm. In terms of male homosexuality in straight hard-core, it is easy to read any scene featuring more than one male as at least homoerotic. What interests me here is the incestuous incorporation rather than homosexuality per se.

⁸⁷ The typical technical reason for not representing external cum-shots in heterosexual hard-core is the male's inability to orgasm; however, as with *Taboo I*, the incestuous narrative exceeds these technical considerations.

conventional "unthinkable thing" of incest itself. What these internal cum-shots attest to is the strength of the anti-Oedipal conventions in the first three and a half films. As with the Oedipal drive of narrative, the anti-Oedipal drive of narrative has developed conventions that withstand threats to its existence. At the same time, the "unnaturalness" of this moment, both in terms of family structures and in the narrative structures of the *Taboo* films, is played off of a short, odd moment during one of the film's subplots that provides a more effective way of reading the films than Dr. Lodge's theory.

Junior drives Joyce to her weekly therapy sessions at Jeremy's house and it is here that he meets Robin. Junior soliloquizes as he gets out of the car to talk to Robin: "I've got nothing better to do. It could be a good day to get back to nature." This getting "back to nature" does not refer to anything in the scene except sex with Robin because it contrasts with his typical sexual life, which in this film is exclusively with his mother. This brief moment acknowledges the "unnaturalness" of the incestuous relationships in both this film and the others that precede it in a way that the more explicit and obvious statements about the "law" and "society" do not. Junior's comment posits incest as cultural rather than natural. Non-familial, heterogenous desire is thus natural, and so the empowerment of liberating sexuality without prohibition is constructed as unnatural because it is cultural.

The irony is that to "get back to nature" Junior must commit incest with his mother. Robin has become sexually curious about the therapy group as her desire for her father becomes more apparent. She gets Junior to confess his relationship with his mother to her and then she strikes a deal with him: if she can watch him have sex with his mother, then she will let him do anything he wants with her. Junior quickly arranges this event and, as with the proxy relationships that allow actual incest to occur in *II*, this event prepares Robin for the eventual union with her father. When Robin interrupts Junior and Joyce having sex, a frustrated Joyce cries "Oh, I'll never get better!" Her condemnation to "unnaturalness" is the key for Junior behaving "naturally" and Robin developing her

"unnaturalness." Thus *Taboo IV* makes explicit the "domain of the unthinkable" that lies behind philosophical binarisms: the prohibition and transgression of incest.

While Joyce feels doomed to what has now become an "illness," Dr. Lodge is just discovering the now paradoxical joy of incest. In another series of substitutions and repetition, Dr. Lodge plays the role with Robin that Barbara played in *I* and Sheri played in *II* (and then Barbara reprised in *III*). He is sexually frustrated one night, walks down the hall to check on Robin and then, after much hesitation, begins to perform cunnilingus on her. She wakes up and exclaims "oh God, Daddy. I understand . . . I understand." This scene, too, features an internal cum-shot, and reiterates the transgression of the narrative rules for the previous films. After his orgasm, Dr. Lodge performs a kind of marriage ceremony with his daughter, asking her to repeat the devotional vows. The use of the ceremony that ritualizes the exchange of women with his own daughter underscores the "unnaturalness" of incest and reiterates in a new way the anti-Oedipal drive of the narrative by re-situating the system of exchanging women through the prohibition of incest to a system that mimics and undoes the system by allowing incest.

If *Taboo II* suggests that incest causes physical as well as mental transformations, and *Taboo IV* often suggests that incest is something to be pathologized in a therapeutic situation, then *Taboo V: The Secret* (Stevens 1986) establishes that incestuous desire is like a disease that one can catch from one's friends. Contradictorily, this "disease" resists the therapeutic situation, just as the therapy seems to instigate incest in *IV*. In fact, incest is celebrated for its medicinal effects in *V*, adding to the long list of ills incest seems to treat. The main plot follows the story of Mary, a widow and a friend of Joyce McBride (and thus connected to Barbara), who has, as Doctor Lodge calls it, a "split personality" named Maureen. Maureen seduces boys her son Shaun's age, including Junior. She seeks out Dr. Lodge for help, but during their sessions Mary refuses to acknowledge her/"Maureen's" desires. For the first time in the series, Barbara is not mentioned by name, although her legacy lives on in the patterns of the narrative and the presence of

Joyce McBride. In a repetition of all previous *Taboo* films, Shaun slips into bed with his sleeping mother and they have sex. When he calls her "Maureen," she responds with a satisfied grin "I'm not Maureen. I'm Mary. I don't need Maureen anymore." Now the picture of health, Mary's experience shows that many psychological problems result from the absence of incest as much as the presence of it.⁸⁸ This take on therapy would seem to explain Barbara's, Joyce's, and Dr. Lodge's bouts with unhappiness: they are most unhappy when they are not in incestuous affairs.

The "development" in *Taboo I - V* from incest being an act that can transform a poor sexual life into one of empowered fulfillment to incest being a pathological behavior that, paradoxically, only incestuous behavior can address is such that the first five films maintain the deconstruction of the Oedipal drive of narrative by undoing its conventions. At the same time, the series develops its own conventions through the sheer volume of repetition from one film to the next. The repetition of incest, including the constant reappearance of the original film, however, instigates a kind of narrative closure that exceeds the "end" of each individual film. As a result, each film beginning with *Taboo III* attempts to introduce a heterogenous narrative line that will derail the inevitable "end" inherent in incest.

The attempt to represent heterogenous themes within a series devoted to homogenous desire becomes more extreme as the series progresses. Volumes *VI - VIII* work diligently to either provide some new explanation for incestuous desire or to move so far away from the original that they establish a different narrative line altogether. The problem the "progression" of these films suggests is a result of the nature of sequels themselves. A

⁸⁸ Dr. Lodge, without explanation, no longer lives with Robin, but has a relationship with a woman, Satana, who intentionally upsets him by sleeping with black men. Like *III* before it, this subplot is an effort to move away from the homogeneity of the incestuous narrative, but in this case it is also used as a justification for Lodge's second turn towards incest with his other daughter, Naomi, in *V*. She has married a director named Dalton whose acting class she took in *IV*. Since marrying Dalton, she has inexplicably not spoken to either Bill or Alice. Simply put, Mary and Shaun repeat Barbara and Paul's relationship from *Taboo I*, and Naomi and Jeremy repeat with one another their separate relationships with Bill and Robin, respectively.

sequel can be defined as "that which follows as a continuation; esp. a literary work that, although complete in itself, forms a continuation of a preceding one"(OED); a now obscure legal definition includes "descendants" or "successors"(OED). The link between a "complete in itself" work which "forms a continuation" that is like a "descendant" is analogous to successive generations in family structures. The incestuous desire inherent and prohibited in family structures is present in the structure of sequels as well when the "complete in themselves" requirement is unfulfilled. *Taboo I - V*'s constant return to origins suggests incompleteness and, by definition, transgressive commingling between "complete in themselves" works.

Yet, *VI - VIII* work towards heterogeneity. *Taboo VI: The Obsession* (Stevens 1988) follows Dalton from *IV* and *V* and his relationship with his twin sister, Doreen, but makes no mention of any previous action in earlier films. The twins' psychic disturbances are attributed to past-life regressions of previous couplings, and this explanation disallows responsibility for the incestuousness of their desire, a hallmark of the series made explicit in the walk-down-the-hall sequences. With *Taboo VII: The Wild and the Innocent* (Stevens), the most disorienting shift in the series' narrative occurs: this film has no hint of incest; the mise en scene dates the film from the 1970s, but no date of release appears, leading the viewer of the series to assume that Kirdy Stevens made the film prior to the success of *Taboo* and it has been inserted into the *Taboo* sequence for a quick buck. However, this explanation is belied by the narrative of incest the series has propagated up to this point and by the film's position in a sequence with incestuous origins. Incest is present in its absence, and the extreme turn towards complete heterogeneity is undone by the slow return of incest in the films that follow. *Taboo VIII* (Henri Pachard 1990) marks the first time that a director other than Kirdy Stevens makes a *Taboo* film (although it remains a Kirdy Stevens Production). The narrative finds an unattached Dalton at a horse ranch owned in part by his half brother, Frank, who has a daughter named Sunny. What is most surprising about this film is that, while a sexual threat to Sunny by Dalton is

mentioned by two characters, they do not have sex, and so no incest per se appears in this film, either. Yet the reappearance of at least the potential of incestuous transgression indicates the inescapability of the original film and the conventions that it carefully constructed and the audience it attracted. Like the disease passed between friends in *V*, incest is the theme that must pass between sequels because the sequels are inherently incestuous.

Taboo IX (de Renzy 1991) represents a return to origins for the series after its attempts at heterogeneity, and it marks a pattern that the series (*Taboo I-XVIII* so far) is condemned to follow, despite the absence of Kirdy Stevens from this point forward and a revolving door of directors and writers. The matriarch, Barbara Scott, returns, as does patriarchal Dr. Lodge. Forgetting its own history, perhaps as a symptom of incest's distortion of time through conflation of generations, the narrative has Barbara being referred to Dr. Lodge for treatment even though she was his patient in *Taboo IV*. Surprisingly for the series, they do not have sex together, although their conversations develop the therapeutic narrative left off with *Taboo V*. Barbara has a bad marriage to a man named George and still experiences regret over the loss of Paul, who appears in flashbacks throughout the film. During a therapy session, she says that she feels she is being "punished" for committing "acts which myself and my family have never quite recovered from." A flashback to *Taboo I* ensues and she claims "I'm being punished by some strange, evil force." The consequence-free "evil-ness" of Sheri and Jr. in *II* has taken a more serious turn here.

Dr. Lodge's experiences parallel Barbara's in this film: he discovers his wife's adulteries and frequently flashes back to his incest with Robin from *Taboo IV*. During Barbara's next therapy session, Lodge repeatedly asks her who her husband is. She gets more and more flustered and eventually says "my son." Her revelation here, combined with the narrative of her bad marriage, precipitates Dr. Lodge's ensuing madness. He dresses as a woman and during sex with prostitutes he flashes back to sex with Robin and

says "I'm a good girl" over and over. After this sex scene, Barbara meets Dr. Lodge on the street and ends their therapeutic relationship: "I need to deal with my past and my problems on my own now." This is the first time that Barbara refers to her incest experiences as a "problem," although it is tacitly represented as such in *IV*. Incest as a problem becomes the driving thematic for the remainder of the series, and it is with these films that the anti-Oedipal drive of narrative of the first films is forsaken for the ultimate recuperation into conventional cultural and narrative codes.

Spoken by a "foreigner," the last lines from *Taboo XII* (Lincoln 1994) best capture the direction of the series from *X* onward: "Sex with a stranger, I think, is much better than sex within the family." This conclusion, of course, is the exact opposite of the lesson taught the viewer of *Taboo I - V*. Very briefly,⁸⁹ the narrative the sequels extend goes like this: *X - XI* (Lincoln 1992, 1994) further the disease theme, although the disease this time around is general madness more than incest; *XII*, as noted above, unambiguously represents incestuous activity as outside healthy "normality"; *XIII* (Lincoln 1994) is a continuation of *XII*, but at the very end it posits an ambiguous conclusion that may refer to Barbara from the early films; *XIV* (Lincoln 1995) begins a new plot line, but the results are the same: those who desire incest are insane; *XV* (Lincoln 1995) returns to a narrative of incest requiring therapy; *XVI* (Lincoln 1996) illustrates self-abusive behavior resulting from incest; *XVII* and *XVIII* (Zen 1997, 1998) again push for heterogeneity by attempting to reinterpret what is taboo within the *Taboo* series: fetish clothing replaces incestuous desire. The viewer of the entire series can anticipate the return of the incestuous theme after this push towards heterogeneity, if not the return of Barbara Scott and Dr. Lodge themselves.

⁸⁹ I limit my discussion of the later films for two reasons: first, their take on incest is *extremely* repetitive; second, almost all of them are representative of the bad filmmaking that characterizes the "one-day wonder" era of the porn industry that began in the late 1980s and continued at least through the mid 1990s. Many of these films are painful to watch, especially when compared to the series's high points of *I*, *II*, and *IV*.

The *Taboo* series exhibits what Anne McClintock has described as pornography's "rehearsal of variety within the structure of compulsive repetition"(125). The early films are repetitive not only in terms of their content, but in their deconstruction of the Oedipal drive of narrative as well. This undoing is not easily produced because it relies upon the paradoxical working of incest to produce its effect. Incest is what reconstructs the seemingly conventional "resolutions" of the early film's narratives. While incest enables this reworking, its use quickly became its own limiting convention that foreclosed the narrative development of the series because of the "death" that incest produces; every effort at introducing heterogeneity within the series has continuously been stymied by the narrative legacy of incest in the original film. The anti-Oedipal drive of narrative becomes its own kind of monolithic, normative force against which the films after *V* ironically--if not paradoxically and futilely--strive to assert the more conventional Oedipal drive of narrative. The act of attempted recuperation is what is compulsively repeated in these later films.

How these two opposed drives operate in a series of sequels is indicative of the problem of sequels themselves. The *Taboo* series radically questions the provision in the definition that sequels be "complete in themselves" *and* a "continuation" of the original. The series underscores the rift between these requirements by conflating them completely. The definition requires two mutually exclusive things, much like the structure of families require exogamy even as they promote incestuous desire within the family. There can be no *Taboo* film that is complete in itself because of its symptomatically repeated incestuous relationship with its precursors.

The surprising reproductivity of the *Taboo* series--in spite of the narrative "death" the individual films and series as a whole so frequently engage--is indicative of the paradox that confronts Williams's call for change that concludes her study and begins my own. The blindspot regarding the possibility of incestuous desire in the plea for more representations of "normal" sexualized motherhood has the effect of repeating the status

quo because it is the "unthinkable" quality of incest that perpetuates the Oedipal drive of narrative. The *Taboo* films show that explicit representations of incestuous desire offer "other positionalities of desire" at the "borders of the Oedipal stage" that simultaneously alter and reinforce--and thus engage the conundrum at the center of all philosophical binarisms--the Oedipal drive of narrative that is the real culprit behind the conventions of gender in the hard-core genre.

Incest, Repetition, Space, and Time: A Speculative Conclusion

I have made arguments over the course of this dissertation that show how representations of incest construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct desire within and between family and kinship structures. Investigating, expanding, and threatening conventional narrative forms and patterns is often what is at stake in choosing to represent incestuous desire. Within individual texts and throughout oeuvres, in novels as well as film, representations of incest reconfigure the Oedipal drive of narrative. The emphasis upon mapping the *borders* of the Oedipal stage and engaging the paradoxical narrative forces of life and death that characterize incest is the result of an unbridgeable divide between representation and "reality." No one, not even the makers of *Taboo*, seems able to indefinitely sustain a narrative that advocates the practice of incest. The reason for this inability is surprisingly simple, but its ramifications are stupefyingly complex: the widespread, real practice of incest is incommensurate with the continuation of culture as we know it.⁹⁰ Without the prohibition of incest, to paraphrase Derrida, the means by which we make and remake the world would no longer exist. Because this ramification is so all-encompassing, it may appear that I am now making an argument for (the prohibition of) incest as the origin of all origins, but it is not. The text's that I have analyzed all point to the (prohibition of) incest "origin" as a structuring absence, a "psychotic kernel" that "originates" only in so far as it detours, decenters, and disrupts every approach.

The question all this chaos begs is one that is familiar to anyone who studies representations of incest, and it is a riddle that to this point no one, including myself, has satisfactorily answered: Why are incest stories constantly retold to an audience who

⁹⁰ This is the first and only time I have made reference to real incest, but even here I intend it only hypothetically. I have hoped that it would go without saying, but in case my arguments about representations have produced the slightest doubt, I believe incest is a terrible abuse of power and criminal prosecution, victims' support networks, and the comparatively recent culture of more openness about its occurrence should be increased.

always already (naturally?) knows their "end"? This question is frequently asked of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, ironically (and often inaccurately) identified as the "origin" of incest narratives. A version of this question and a stab at an answer appears in the first and nearly encyclopedic study of representations of incest, Otto Rank's 1912 opus *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation*. Rank senses that representations of incest have become more explicit and more frequent in number: "modern literature tends most strongly to the undisguised depiction of sexual, especially incestuous, themes"(549). To account for the phenomenon, Rank posits a "model of progressing sexual repression"(xxx) that the author of an introductory essay, Peter L. Rudnytsky, finds nothing short of "bewildering"(xxx) because of the contradiction that exists between sexual explicitness and "heightened consciousness"(xxxi) of what the explicitness signifies. Simply put, more awareness does not translate into less repression: "human beings cannot overcome their 'primitive complexes,' and the 'tragic conflicts and solutions of Sophoclean Athens' continue to resonate even in our post-modern era"(Rudnytsky xxxi).

Rank's answer to the conundrum leads him to the eventual death of art: a point will arrive when self-consciousness will eradicate sexual repression and there will no longer be an "abnormally strong sex drive, precociously demanding activation and fantasy activity"(397) which drives the artist to create. Rudnytsky's apology for Rank's approach is itself problematic because it dodges the incest bullet altogether by offering an object-relations explanation for creativity in general. In short, what Rank and Rudnytsky offer as explanation forms opposite ends of a continuum of approaches regarding the problem of incest's repetition in representations. On the one hand, there is Rank with his ambitious, contradiction-laden, and overly speculative approach; on the other hand is Rudnytsky, who detours around the problem by positing some other issue than incest as "central." Both approaches are symptomatic of incest's ability to create more paradox and contradiction or to deflect directness through displacement. Both approaches yet

again reveal more about *how* representations of incest function than they do about *why* they are repeated. I prefer Rank's speculation over Rudnytsky's rhetoric, and the brief speculation that follows is indebted to the spirit of Rank's project, if not his specific conclusions.

A partial answer to the problem probably needs to begin with Freud's incredibly opaque and quasi-biological repetition compulsion and its attendant death drive that is articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.⁹¹ Risking over-simplification through brevity, the compulsion to repeat is a desire to master, and mastery reduces undesired excitation and produces a physical and/or mental state akin to death. Why the return of the repressed must manifest itself as a compulsion to repeat "clearly unpleasant experiences" that, even if they "were seen as a compromise," do not express the "fulfillment of a repressed wish"(Laplanche and Pontalis 79), points to yet another structural absence. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, paraphrasing David Lagache, suggest that perhaps, in light of this contradiction, a "*need for repetition, . . . being both radically distinct from and more basic than*" a "*repetition of needs*"(Laplanche and Pontalis 79) must be posited. The creation of a prior need is tantalizing because it suggests a simple answer to the problem of repetitious incest narratives: they repeat because they have to.

This tidy approach is ultimately unsatisfying because what each representation of incest tells us is that incest undoes structural paradigms. The dualism between the life (or Eros) and death instincts of Freud's later writing is undone because the act of incest exemplifies all the characteristics of these supposed binaries. Incest combines *and* destroys: "The aim of [Eros] is to establish even greater unities and to preserve them thus--in short, to bind together; the aim of [the destructive instinct] is, on the contrary, to undo connections and so destroy things"(Freud qtd. in Laplanche and Pontalis 103).

⁹¹ The compulsion to repeat is itself something that is nearly impossible to explain, so central is its role in Freud's reappraisal of his earlier work. Like incest, the concept seems to undergird a nexus of complex desires and psychological phenomena, and yet it is always also "ungovernable" and unconscious (Laplanche and Pontalis 78).

Incest defies binary logic and works to undo the logic of all binaries. In this way, representations of incest are themselves paradigmatic of the practice and theory of deconstruction, a theoretical textual practice that both augments and offsets the psychoanalytic understanding of repetition: "Repetition leads to a simulacrum, not to the 'same'"(Spivak lxv). In this sense, incest can, again, never be mastered because it is always a semblance or trace of something else. Notoriously, deconstructive practice leads to *aporia*, an abyss, so that--as is the case with the psychoanalytic line of thinking--one must posit a *need* for repetition that precedes its practice: "We *must* do a thing and its opposite, and indeed we desire to do both, and so on indefinitely"(Spivak lxxviii).

I speculate that--in combination with psychoanalytic and deconstructive theories--comparatively recent thinking about space and time may provide a model that will not only help to further explain *how* incest functions, but will also address the question of *why*. My sense that this is the case and that these are the areas that need further analysis is the result of several twentieth century novelists' explorations of the connection between metaphors of space, time, and incestuous desire. William Faulkner's *The Sound and Fury* and *Absalom! Absalom!*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Steve Erickson's *Tours of the Black Clock* all combine space and time distortions with the presence of incest. The prohibition of incest helps structure the way we think of space and time; it is present in the passage of narrative from beginning to end and, thus, is inextricably connected to the Oedipal drive of narrative. The reciprocal construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction that occurs between incest, narrative, and conceptions of space and time may provide an approach to the problem of incest's repetition that would round out the partial answers provided by psychoanalysis and deconstruction.

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