

'Designing its own shadow' – Reading Ann Quin

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'Designing its own shadow' – Reading Ann Quin

Ann Quin (1936-1973) is a little known and little read British writer, and this thesis is the first comprehensive response to her oeuvre. It is driven by the questions: What is it like to read Quin's writing? Why should we read it? How might reading it help us reconsider the purpose and effect of experimentation in 1960s and '70s British fiction?

In response, the thesis provides extended and in depth readings of Quin's books, short pieces, manuscripts and letters to demonstrate how these by turns overtly experimental, allusive, chaotic and frustrating texts are also carefully crafted, replete with clues and motifs, and in conversation with their time and place. Aware of the need to somewhat 'introduce' the writer, my readings draw out and consider locations of resonance and discord between her writing, life and cultural contexts. In addition, engagement with specific sources – from George Eliot to Beckett, Woolf to Sartre, Jane Harrison to William Burroughs, Dostoevsky to Alain Renais – reveals how Quin's writing responds to, interrogates, encompasses and transcends these. Where relevant, the thesis is also informed and extended by a more theoretical approach. Indeed, my distinctive methodological approach reveals the points at which life, writing, historical context and theory are productively interwoven. Throughout, I argue that while the writing seems anachronistic by being immersed in earlier literature, it is precisely this immersion which energises its resistant rebellion to and ironic interrogation of the dominant ideologies and literary practices of its time. In this, Quin's is writing both of the shadows and designing its own.

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Timeline

- 1936 Ann Marie Quin born in Brighton on 17th March, to Montague Nicholas Quin and Anne Ward (formerly Reid).
- 1945 - 1953 Attends a Roman Catholic convent school in Brighton.
- 1955 - 1961 Writes *A Slice of Moon* and *Oscar* – neither is ever published.
- 1964 *Berg* published by John Calder.
Quin awarded D.H. Lawrence Scholarship from the University of New Mexico and Harkness Fellowship.
- 1965 - 1967 Living and travelling in America on Harkness Fellowship.
- 1966 *Three* published by Marion Boyars.
'Leaving School' published in the *London Magazine*.
'Every Cripple Has His Own Way Of Walking' published in *Nova*.
- 1968 'Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails' published in Mexico by *El Corno Emplumado*.
'Tripticks' published in *Ambit*.
'Living in the Present', co-written with Robert Sward, published in *Ambit*.

Writes 'Eyes that Watch behind the Wind', which is published posthumously.
- 1969 *Passages* published by Calder and Boyars.
'Motherlogue' published in *Transatlantic Review*.

Writes 'Ghostworm', which is published posthumously.
- 1970 Hospitalised after increasingly severe psychotic episodes, first in Stockholm, then London.
- 1972 *Tripticks* published by Calder and Boyars.

Begins studying at Hillcroft College.
- 1973 Continues at Hillcroft College.

Begins to write *The Unmapped Country*.
Writes 'Matters of the Heart'.
Writes television plays.

Walks out to sea at Shoreham and drowns. Is pronounced dead on arrival at Southlands Hospital on 27th August.

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Preface: Why Quin?

In 1973, her contemporary B. S. Johnson named Quin as one of a small group 'writing as though it mattered, as though they meant it, as though they meant it to matter'.¹ These writers were in antithesis to popular fiction, he said, because they refused the 'stultifyingly philistine [...] general book culture of this country' and sought refuge in the imaginary of the continental avant garde.² Whatever one makes of his bombastic tone in this piece, the sentiment is persuasive: Johnson wanted to rescue British fiction from stultification, and to foster a literary culture where experiment and risk were better allowed to flourish. And, while there has been some renewed interest in others of these writers, including Johnson himself – with, for example, Jonathan Coe's *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (2004) – many of them, Quin included, remain largely overlooked and under-read. Despite some more recent appraisal – for instance, Giles Gordon's 'Ann Quin' in *Context 8*, Philip Stevick's 'Voices in the Head: Style and Consciousness in the Fiction of Ann Quin', and Brian Evenson and Joanna Howard's, 'Ann Quin' in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* – there has not yet been a comprehensive, detailed response to the oeuvre.³

Of course, this is partly to do with the availability of her writing, with the limited initial print runs of the books as well as their being out of print between the 1970s and early 2000s, when Dalkey Archive republished them. Indeed,

¹ Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?* London: Hutchinson and Co, 1973, 29. Johnson includes: Samuel Beckett, John Berger, Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, Anthony Burgess, Alan Burns, Angela Carter, Eva Figs, Giles Gordon, Wilson Harris, Rayner Heppenstall, 'even hasty, muddled' Robert Nye, Ann Quin, Penelope Shuttle, Alan Sillitoe 'for his last book only, Raw Material indeed', and Stefan Themerson, 29-30.

² *Ibid*, 29.

³ However, there are several theses-in-progress featuring Quin as one among several other writers, which confirms that reassessment of Quin is timely.

some of the texts I read in this thesis are still to be published or collected. It could also be bound up with Quin's gender. In their introduction to *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (1989) Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs suggest that women's experimental fiction – far more than men's – subverts dominant narrative forms by refusing such things as authority, plot linearity and closure, and refuses the structures of patriarchal culture.⁴ Anxiety about this more insistent and disruptive subversion, they claim, has led to the neglect of women's experimental fiction. However, despite Quin's being included in their book, it is not helpful to define or limit her writing or its neglect wholly in terms of gender. This is not to negate its engagement with and interrogation of some of the gender issues of its time, but to acknowledge that the writing is not itself confined to and in fact, I would hazard, in some ways deliberately refuses, gendered terms.

To my mind, the main reason for the neglect of Quin's writing is bound up with the wider attitude to fiction writing in Britain identified by Johnson above. For instance, while including a short section on 'experimental' writers, Malcolm Bradbury comments, seemingly without much regret, that many of these writers are now rarely read, because what he calls the 'serious 'literary' novelists' became part of the fictional mainstream.⁵ More usefully, critics like Alan Sinfield and Bernard Bergonzi offer an explanation for this trajectory in their comments on the marked difference between Britain and America, particularly regarding an openness to the legacies of modernism.⁶ Recently, Gabriel Josipovici identified

⁴ Friedman and Fuchs (Eds.), *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, 3-4.

⁵ Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1993, 367.

⁶ Sinfield, 'Reinventing Modernism', *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Athlone Press, 1997, 182-202; Bergonzi, 'Beyond

similar limitations in the contemporary context in *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010). Now, Josipovici says, at the start of the twenty-first century, is the time to reconsider the story of twentieth century British fiction. What we find, he argues, is a book culture that remains disappointingly mundane, where modernism's legacy of risk has been largely ignored by the essentially conservative and anti-continental nature of 'the prevalent English view', 'fuelled by anxiety rather than anything else'.⁷ Most significantly for placing Quin, Josipovici laments how this has led to the neglect of fiction genuinely interested in experiment.⁸ Such writing has been ignored by many critics, and Josipovici calls for a reassessment of this era to include a 'whole web of stories [...] thus to restore a sense of history being made' rather than already established.⁹ In this way, the story of British writing in the twentieth century would expand to include 'the blind alleys' – or shadows – rather than only spot-lighting the 'achieved successes'.¹⁰

My desire to redress the neglect of her writing then, as well as to contribute to a wider web of stories about British fiction of the 1960s and '70s, are two of the answers to 'why Quin?' But perhaps a more compelling one lies in the kinds of 'blind alleys' and shadows Quin's fiction leads us into. Here, rather than suggesting that the writing be spot-lit, I propose that it is precisely its

Fiction?' *The Situation of the Novel*, London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1979, 188-213.

⁷ Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010, 178. Josipovici himself was one of the fiction writers included in Gordon's *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, Hutchinson and Co: London, 1975, which also included Quin.

⁸ The British context remains one where experimental fiction is largely marginalised, despite Tom McCarthy's 1960s-style experimental 'C' making it onto the 2010 Booker shortlist: this is unusual and most such fiction, for example, Stewart Home's *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess* (which declares itself as writing in the tradition of Quin) is independently published and not widely read.

⁹ Josipovici, 182.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

position both in and of the shadows that makes this writing worth reading. Not only was the writing at the shadowy edges of the British fiction of its time, it is also an oeuvre steeped in the shadow of writing that went before, for example, of Greek myth, realism, modernism and the nouveau roman. However most significantly and productively, this is an oeuvre that creates and proliferates its own shadows; writing which utilises and activates the literary power of foreshadowing, repetition and allusion to shape, energise and liberate its texts, and to interrogate some of the significant issues of its time. The effect that these shadows have on reading and the possibilities they open up for writing are the main concern of this thesis.

Introduction: Designing shadows

Sometimes it is enough to watch the rain walk designing its own shadow. Hear the desert wind thru trees absorbed by that yet being raped by the mind's eye into another landscape; emotions; limbs long, want the ocean. See the ocean. Ah that point that opens for the magic usage of things.¹

The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro.²

Thus, it is apposite that the writing of a specific shadow provides this project with a way in to reading Quin. A little earlier in this 1968 New Mexico letter, the writer tells her reader, in this case her then lover the American poet Robert Sward, about the 'what' of her writing – 'I'm concerned more in 'how it is' not with how it should/could be' – and the 'why' – 'I have yet to make peace with myself, all the selves'. The extract above concludes with the 'how' – the act is transformative, open to and performative of 'the magic usage of things'.³ However, it is the sentence 'Sometimes it is enough to watch the rain walk designing its own shadow', which figures a further, more potent description of Quin's writing process; one that is also a performance of it. For example, the sensory sublimation of watching the rain is in fact not 'enough'; it is instead 'captured', transformed 'into another landscape' of 'emotions', and re-formulated

¹ Letter: Ann Quin to Robert Sward, 18th July 1968. Olin Library Collection, Robert Sward papers, Series 1.1, box 10.

² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, (Trans.) Richard Miller, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, 32.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* also terms our way of seeing the world as charged with emotion and meaning 'magical'. Quin knew Sartre's work well: 'I used to come across writers like Sartre, and even Camus in the library in my teens'. Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 14th October, 1963. This and all subsequent letters from Quin to Carol Burns: Carol Burns Papers.

as words on the page. Here, what is seen is translated into what is said and representation is substituted for perception. In this, the letter is more preoccupied with (re)enacting a verbal construction and with thus imbuing the particular description with a special significance, than with the original seeing act – which has already faded into and been transformed by rewritten memory. As such, the description of the rain's movement is also a description and performance of the writing process itself 'designing its own shadow'.

For, as Sward himself would surely have noticed, the phrase echoed throughout writing to him at this time – 'the way the rain walks designing its own shadow'; 'see the rain walk designing its own shadow.'⁴ What is more, to the attentive wider reader, the phrase ripples further: for instance, in letters to long-term friend Carol Burns; 'the rain literally walks' and 'Rain walks designing its own shadow', as well as in the 1969 book *Passages*; 'Rain walked designing its own shadow'.⁵ This rewriting of 'a moment' of perception is clearly not the record of immediate experience, but is instead an ever distanced and edited recollection through repeated rewriting. The enactment of the drafting, patterning and play with articulation transforms the experience into a writing process, a literary construction, a pleasing phrase. Here then, the writing's claim to representation has a conscious double-sense: it is real and imaginary at once; both at one time and apparently still in some ways mimetic, yet also always self-consciously crafted and performative prose.

The duality and disconnect of this writing effect can be illuminated by Jacques Derrida's wider meditation on artistic representation, which he claims

⁴ Letter: Quin to Sward, 26th July 1968; untitled poem written for Sward in Iowa in 1967. Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 9.

⁵ Letters: Quin to Carol Burns 2nd July 1965 and 18th July 1966; *Passages*, Chicago and Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003, 7.

must always take place during 'the suspension of the gaze'.⁶ He reminds us that during the act of drawing or writing about something the gaze does not and cannot remain on it, but instead that it is the drawn/verbal and not the actual image we look at. Derrida's thinking here helps us account for the focus on verbal construction as opposed to the seeing act which takes place across the examples of Quin's writing. But further, for Derrida, the suspension of the gaze, literal in the act of winking or blinking ('cligner'), is the 'moment of blindness that ensures sight its breath'.⁷ In other words, the interruption of the present of visual perception is in fact wholly necessary – not only for the continuation and rejuvenation of the process of sight, but also for enabling the processes of memory and articulation to take place. He likens the momentary gap in presence to amnesia, a self-reflexive process of removal or distance that allows for representation but in turn insists on the impossibility of ever actually ascertaining the initial moment of perception. Similarly, in the repetitions above, the kind of looking the writing does is always partially an amnesiac and circular process of deferral. There, the object of the gaze in the initial seeing act is the point from which the already distanced and conscious act of representation spirals out as it becomes further and further distanced in what seems like a paradoxical attempt to get closer to and better 'capture' the vision in language through adjustments in the repeated phrasing. This movement is exemplified by the metaphor itself – 'the rain walks designing its own shadow' – which begins as an attempt at representation and in turn becomes a construction that designs its own shadow across the writing of the time.

⁶ Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, (Trans.) Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 117.

⁷ Ibid, 32. The French verb, *cligner*, can be translated as either.

Moreover, the implication of 'shadow' as 'design' here is foundational for thinking about Quin's associative and highly determined writing process as a whole. As friend and fellow writer Alan Burns identifies:

Ann's writing contains areas of shadow, inhabited by shadow images, areas of association, which slip further and further away from the text. She has this talent for throwing off ripples of association, and that's very fine, it's her best quality, her subconscious quality.⁸

Here, shadows are identified as the elusive, slippery, slipping-away property of the writing; at the same time shadows throw off ripples of association which shape and determine our reading process. A shadow is something both there and not there, it is a glimpse or suggestion of something, the thing that prevents us from seeing clearly, or evidence of substance elsewhere/to come. While in common parlance the idea of a shadow is often used to indicate a level of removal or reduction – as in the shadowy cave of Plato's allegory – in literature, and more specifically in Quin's writing, the oblique and partial figuring of shadows have a more complex and positive relation to the whole, by signifying both absence and presence at once.

Furthermore, and bound up with the process of perception becoming words, the phrase the 'rain walk[s] designing its own shadow' empathically presences the form of literary construction where an idea or image either (fore)shadows or prefigures what is to come or shadows something that was once there. This proleptic shadowing is bound up with the appreciation of divergent repetition and design: it is writing that does what it says, drawing our attention to Quin's pleasure in the interweaving of idea and action; it is also a

⁸ Alan Burns, 'Blending Words with Pictures', *Books and Bookmen*, July 1972, Volume 17, Number 10.

complement of form and content, where writing about shadows creates them. This happens across the oeuvre: the letters, short stories and books are crafted out of numerous and far reaching divergent repetitions within and outside of themselves. These are indeed texts full of ‘ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds’, shaped by shadows, but also for example, by other images such as the repeated presence of birds, the sea, madness and myth. In this, Quin’s texts are haunted by other writing and source texts as well as figures and obsessions from across her own. As Roland Barthes – one of the key thinkers for this project because, I propose, this writing necessitates both his reading methods and his understanding of the text as a multidimensional, reverberating space – reminds us, texts ‘need’ their shadows. These shadows are the necessary bits or traces of representation that signify a double-sense, a chiaroscuro of contrast between dominant forms, ideologies and subject-matter, and those challenging, unusual, difficult forms which are necessary to subvert them.

What is more, that the word ‘shadowing’ itself ripples across the writing – we also find it in the 1968 story ‘Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails’ where ‘cloud shadows [gather] speed across the valley’, as well as elsewhere – acts as a theatrical ‘wink’ to what is going on in the writing of such texts.⁹ It is evidence of Quin’s sense of the absurd:

Marion Boyars tells a relevant story of finding Ann in her office, intent apparently on destroying it, raging, but at one moment in this otherwise sad confrontation, Marion recalls, to her own amazement, that Ann winks at her. That wink, one wants to say, was her absolute and dear trademark.¹⁰

⁹ ‘Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails’, *El Corno Emplumado* 27 (July 1968), 8.

¹⁰ Robert Creeley, ‘Ann Quin: A Personal Note’, unpublished manuscript, Carol Burns Papers, 1.

Here, poet and friend Robert Creeley's anecdote evidences a simultaneous desperation and humour: before trashing her publisher, Marion Boyars' office, the writer pauses to wink at her. Similarly, one of the significant traits of the writing is a simultaneous sense of anguish and knowing performance. Despite the serious preoccupations of much of the oeuvre, the shadows and repetitions across the prose simultaneously figure – even if often obliquely and almost hidden – a knowing humour: a wink. However, this humour is something that can be hard to find in the writing, especially in the later books. Here, as Anthony Blomfield rightly points out, what is more evident is the: 'scream of desperation; [and only] beneath it, the grin mocking the scream'.¹¹ This grin is not quite humour. It is instead the writing's sense of the absurd, not only in the allusive and often even stereotyped, parodic prose, but also in the carnivalesque disgust of the overly close detail, which I go on to discuss. There is even a shadow of it, although it becomes more of a grimace here, behind Leonard's mime of suicide in *Three*, or the terror of the silent and inarticulate screams of *Tripticks* and *The Unmapped Country*.

The humour of the writing is something most clearly present in the writing's askance way of looking at things – a position made explicit in 'Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails': 'The women looked down at the men from the corners of their eyes'.¹² The significance of this oblique stance can again be illuminated by reference to Derrida, whose thinking is pertinent to reading Quin chiefly because of his method of circling and returning to textual obsessions and knots. Here, not only does the wink recall his comments on the

¹¹ Blomfield, 'Reasons for Existence', unpublished manuscript, Carol Burns Papers, 3.

¹² 13. Also, Alan Burns to Nonia Williams Korteling: 'she was noticing out of the corner of her eye. Her glance, her own particular vision of world', face-to-face interview, 14th April 2009, 11 am – 1.30 pm.

impossibility of 'pure' perception by the interruption of the gaze by blink or wink, but its askance, slippery direction and intent can be usefully thought about further in terms of his comments on the oblique. He admits that he has often made use of the word 'oblique' and offers an account that helps to illuminate Quin's writing's askance position. With typical paradox, on the one hand he dismisses the term as disruptive and crude; on the other he claims it as his own position: 'one can reject, as I have done, the word 'oblique'; one cannot deny the destinerrant indirection [...] as soon as there is a trace'.¹³ He apparently rejects the word, while at the same time admitting that the sideways shift or predominance of the indirect that it implies is inescapable.

The oblique, then, can be thought of as another manifestation of the shadow: the 'other side' or alternative to what is dominant, obvious or direct. In addition, given Quin's performance in the anecdote above, it is noteworthy that elsewhere Derrida qualifies this sidestepping as 'the ruse of an oblique or indirect gaze. A ruse that consists of sidestepping rather than meeting head-on'.¹⁴ Here, the oblique is also a symbol for an avoidance or tricky behaviour that is simultaneously a performance. Indeed, Quin's writing as a whole adopts such a position: not only does it describe performance as avoidance but it performs its subversion and politics in an oblique manner, in parodic and tricky narrative forms, rather than head on – in the refusal of conclusive endings across the oeuvre, for example, and the slipperiness of the third/first-person narration.

¹³ Derrida, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering' (Trans.) David Wood, in David Wood (Ed.), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1992, 24.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 87.

In addition, as my readings below corroborate, the writing compellingly performs its slipperiness by the patterning of its narrative surface which often seems to represent and point to something in the world outside it, but more often than not points more to the patterns and shadows of its own making. This is evident in the detail of the over-writing at word level, for example:

Thunder stirred over the distant mountains. A sirocco wind spiralled sand in the desert. Three spirals on their own, that approached, joined up into a whirling tower of sand. Stilts of rain came slowly down the mountains, faster over the valley.¹⁵

This description is a site of resistance as much as of fascination: it gives unexpected, odd detail and its realism is made strange. The distant thunder, spiralling wind, whirling sand, and stilts of rain move now slowly, now faster, to reach a noisy climax. The onomatopoeic 's's – stirred, sirocco, spiralled, sand, spirals, stilts – demand that we listen to the words. In this, the word 'stilts' is a particularly interesting and dissonant example. As a visual metaphor, it simultaneously suggests and dissolves the idea of rain as a solid or supporting structure. This quality admits the description is a written one; as does the insistent repetition of consonant sounds. But, more interestingly, these soft yet insistent 's's are dissonant with and performative of the stiling, stuttering attempt at and failure of articulation in the metaphor, figured by the 'st' of stilts. The pause or gap in comprehension that results again recalls the necessarily interrupted quality inherent to Derrida's understanding of representation above.

The effect of this unusual and insistent patterning of articulation, which is a proliferate and essential quality of Quin's writing, can be further illuminated with reference to Gilles Deleuze, who analyses the effect brought about when a

¹⁵ 'Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails', 11.

linguistic variable is placed in such a way that it interrupts the grammar or sense of a statement. In this, he claims, the sequence and sounds of the words 'stutter': not because a character stutters in speech, but because the writer becomes 'a *stutterer in language*'.¹⁶ Deleuze asserts that, in writing, when roughness and disruption replace smoothness and flow new meanings are being made rather than pre-existent meanings invoked. Thus, a straining of the language takes place which is largely to do with sound patterns, but also meaning patterns: this is syntax in the process of becoming. He also observes that stuttering often comes about as part of the attempt to capture unfamiliar or foreign experiences in the writer's own language in such a way that it makes the description come to life, and draws on the example of T.E. Lawrence who he says: 'made English stumble in order to extract from it the music and visions of Arabia'.¹⁷ Not only is this fitting for Quin's method of attempting to describe the unfamiliar New Mexico landscape, but also for beginning to articulate exactly how her writing both reaches for and generates a renewed articulation precisely through the stuttering repetition and reformulation of its shadows. In this, Deleuze offers a pertinent frame for thinking about the ways in which, at word level, the disrupted and disruptive quality of Quin's descriptions are exactly when her prose is 'being made', and where it 'comes to life'.

Indeed, throughout the writing, the associative patterning of the prose evidences a stuttering 'glossomania' based as much on sound repetition as sense.¹⁸ This has the effect of denying the narration transparency and insisting

¹⁶ Deleuze, 'He Stuttered', *Essays Critical and Clinical*, (Trans.) Daniel Smith and Michael Greco, London and New York: Verso 1998, 107.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 110.

¹⁸ Louis Sass discusses glossomania as an aspect of language generated by sound, rhythm and association patterns rather than sense, in 'Languages of Inwardness', *Madness and Modernism*:

on the materiality of its linguistic surface. In some ways the excess of this writing technique – and by this I mean a proliferation of patterning at both word and structural level in a way that over-determines the writing to the point where it can become difficult to see its sense – is too demanding. Indeed, Sward says of Quin that she asked: ‘only and essentially that one pay full attention... Ann’s life was so full and dense and limited too and narrow, drawn many times very close in on itself, haunted and with demons, marked and worn with the past’.¹⁹ The writing, too – especially the later works – is ‘full and dense and limited too and narrow, drawn many times very close in on itself, haunted’. It disregards ordinary boundaries, asking ‘only and essentially that one pay full attention’. In this the narratives often seem to ask too much, of reader, author, words and narrative structures. They demand that it is precisely to the detail that we pay attention: to the difficult, oblique, stuttering, proleptic, repetitive and allusive writing that nevertheless, I propose, is also distinctively Quin’s.

Reading Quin

she was fascinated by ways in which the ‘seriality’ of prose, the mode of its continuities, might be altered, and these later books are tests of that possibility in part [...] Had she lived – sad and useless phrase now – I am very sure that her later work would have resolved entirely the division between her conscious experiment and that intrinsic gift of initial story-telling, which was hers in every possible sense.²⁰

Evenings spent in reading; half-heartedly doing homework, preferring to explore books discovered in the Public Library: Greek and

Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought, London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994, see 174-181; see particularly 178-180.

¹⁹ Sward, piece in memory of Quin, unpublished manuscript, Carol Burns Papers, 1.

²⁰ Creeley, ‘Ann Quin: A Personal Note’, 2.

Elizabethan dramatists. Dostoievsky [sic] (*Crime and Punishment*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* made me aware of the possibilities in writing). Chekhov, Lawrence, Hardy, etc.²¹

My reading of the New Mexico letter in the first part of this introduction began by working closely with Quin's prose; from there it drew connections across her other writing, included aspects of her life, and was extended by instances of theory which mirror and further the kind of thinking the writing is already beginning to perform. Consequently, the reading above functions as an introduction to the writing itself at the same time as an introduction to my methodological approach throughout the project, which works closely with texts to reveal the points at which life, writing, historical context and theory are productively interwoven. Now, before analysing the main texts of the oeuvre, I reflect more broadly on the question of how to read Quin by assessing how the writing has been read and placed so far, as well as by providing a more detailed description of my own reading method.

As the excerpts from both the letter and 'Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails' included in that opening section suggest, the stuttering prolepsis of the writing resists as well as suggests interpretation. Moreover, not only is much of the writing in the oeuvre startlingly unusual, in places it is so familiar it becomes cliché. While to my mind the use and thus subversion of such cliché is a success of the writing, as I go on to demonstrate, for many of its contemporaneous reviewers such qualities were its downfall. Those responses place the writing on a negative trajectory: the increasingly conscious experiment and explicit inclusion and repetition of source texts found in, for example,

²¹ 'Leaving School', *London Magazine*, July 1966, 64.

Passages and *Tripticks*, is interpreted as a failing that marks a lack of authenticity. These later books were criticised for being overly derivative of the: 'new-wavers its author had obviously read in her own publisher's translations', evocative of 'self-indulgent' directors such as Antonioni, and 'just the thing for the French'.²² While *Berg*, and more cautiously *Three*, had been seen to evidence a compelling and instinctive storyteller, this later prose, precisely because of its increasing experiment and escalating intertextuality, was claimed to put off and alienate the average reader, who was often disinclined to carry on.

But, while Quin was on the one hand criticised for following fashion, on the other she was praised for it. As well as the example of Johnson's praise in the preface above, Alan Burns places her among counter-cultural British writers 'riding the crest: not earning much and not successful in monetary terms, but we felt we were the heart of the matter'.²³ This 'we' was the 'Writers Reading' 'collective': Paul Ableman, Alan Burns, Carol Burns, Barry Cole, Eva Figs, B. S. Johnson, Jeff Nuttall, Ann Quin, Alan Sillitoe, and Stefan Themerson. Although diverse, this group were united by 'a profound interest in prose as a form of expression and not simply as a medium for story-telling'.²⁴ More broadly, Gordon positively places Quin in terms of 'Beckett, Burroughs, Creeley, Duras, Claude Mauriac, Henry Miller, Pinget, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute'.²⁵ He sees this American/European context as one in antithesis to mainstream British fiction,

²² Respectively: Robert Nye, 'Against the Barbarians' in *The Guardian*, 27th April 1972; Helen Lucy Burke, 'People Wandering' in *The Irish Press*, 8th April 1969; David Benedictus, 'Books' in *Queen*, 30th April 1969.

²³ Alan Burns to Nonia Williams Korteling, face-to-face interview.

²⁴ Alan Burns and Johnson, introduction to *Writers Reading*, London: J & P Weldon Ltd, 1969, 1. Stevick identifies this impulse as a rebellion 'against 'story-ness'', introduction to *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction*, New York: The Free Press, 1971, xv.

²⁵ Gordon, introduction to *Berg*, Chicago and Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001, ix.

which Gordon calls a 'working class vernacular posing as social realism' limited by 'parochialism'.²⁶ Indeed, despite (or maybe in part because of) her own working-class – and from the age of ten, single-parent – origins, Quin wanted to distance her writing from the content and plot driven 'angry young men' and social realist vogue: 'Then there's W.B.O & Co., (Wesker, Braine, Osborne) and they frankly stink with their dumb 19th century prose. Ugh'.²⁷

Creeley's appraisal of Quin's writing (cited above) voices the perceived 'division' between 'initial story-telling' and 'conscious experiment' which influences both praise and criticism here. As Johnson rightly observes: "Experimental' to most reviewers is almost always a synonym for 'unsuccessful'".²⁸ But, rather than dismissing Quin's experimentation with similar value judgement, Creeley's response provides a more precise way of reading it, which pinpoints the writer's fascination with pushing at the boundaries of written form and technique – her writing's desire to interrogate how 'the 'seriality' of prose, the mode of its continuities, might be altered'. By praising the later writing's motivation, as being 'tests of that possibility', Creeley makes a useful and important distinction between process and outcome. Indeed, as the avant garde composer John Cage remarks more generally: 'the word 'experimental' is apt [when] understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown'.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid, viii.

²⁷ Letter: Quin to Sward, 31st January 1966, Robert Sward Papers, series 1.1, box 8. Also: 'She was bored of conventional social books', personal correspondence; letter: John Calder to Nonia Williams Korteling, postal date, 13th November 2008.

²⁸ Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?* 19. He adds: 'I object to the word *experimental* being applied to my own work. Certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are hidden away'.

²⁹ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, London: Calder and Boyars, 1968, 13. Marion Boyars claimed that 'if any influences are to be found in her [Quin's] later work, it seems [...] appropriate to name Robert Creeley and John Cage', Gordon (Ed.), *Beyond the Words*, 251.

Crucially, this experimental artist is shaper rather than maker, an observant 'tourist' whose creative process is 'inclusive rather than exclusive'.³⁰

While both sets of readers above understand the experiment of the writing as either 'success' or 'failure', my reading of Quin employs Cage's suspension of judgement and emphasises instead its inclusivity, openness to risk and the unknown of its outcome. Therefore, I consider the experimentation across the oeuvre in terms of the processes, techniques and effects of the risk-taking, while avoiding reductive value judgements. Throughout, the "seriality" of [the] prose, the mode of its continuities' is understood as the writing's transgressive impulse – of its innovative formal experimentation and cultural ambiguity – as well as its resistance to reading and interpretation. In this, allusion and reiteration are understood as integral to the writing's ironising and interrogation of literary precedents, sources and cultural contexts. In other words, it is precisely by enacting and generating intertextual continuity and seriality through reiteration that the writing also subverts, interrogates and alters familiar images, figures and techniques.

The significance of this intertextuality demands that the thesis also pay attention to Quin as a reader. As such, I consider how the writing responds to, interrogates, encompasses and transcends some of those writers read in the Public Library above – for example, Dostoevsky, Woolf, Hardy – as well as others whose presence is also insistent – including George Eliot, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Resnais. What becomes clear is that to dismiss Quin's prose as derivative is to misunderstand the subversion of its method,

³⁰ Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 13.

which rips sources out of their contexts to make them new, as in the violence of the rape performed by the mind's eye in the New Mexico letter. These processes are indeed still crude and experimental, and perhaps because of the writer's early death, never fully developed. But, to me, this is precisely their value: to read this writing is to see prose forms being made. In this way, rather than merely being in the shadow of other writers and writing, the oeuvre begins to create new patterns and shadows out of the old.

Thus, to read this writing properly is to allow the shadows and ambiguity to remain.³¹ Here, the oblique position of the writing demands a similarly oblique response, which Derrida identifies as (fittingly) 'a strategy that is still crude'.³² This approach simultaneously avoids being 'an approach', by allowing the nature of the writing to shape reading. Indeed, as my response to the New Mexico letter above and the following excerpt suggest, the writing's shadows are not only designed to be noticed and anticipate a pleasure of reader response, they also lead on as well as frustrate how they are read:

But Christ what need have we for fabricating when it's all there: can't wait to take a bath at your new place and be dragged out of there by the feet. We must try Mescal some time taken from the appropriate place (this just to puzzle our future biographers and all those students at Buffalo!)³³

Here, Quin jokes about and anticipates a scholarly readership at the same time as admitting the 'planting' of confusing and resistant material, put there precisely to be noticed and to lead the reader on. This performs a double-sense

³¹ For further thinking about the connection between reading and shadows, see Alberto Manguel, 'Reading Shadows', *A History of Reading*, London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996, 26-39; delightfully, this includes an illustration of the shadowy shape of brain activity as we read, 38.

³² Derrida, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', 13.

³³ Letter: Quin to Sward, September 1966, Robert Sward papers, Series 1.1, box 8.

in which the patterns of the prose seem tangible, mappable even, at the same time as they resist the readerly desire for meaning.

This tension figures the key question of how we might read a writer who, as it becomes clear here, so consciously figures – and therefore seems to have already provided a reading of – her own shadow. Indeed, throughout the oeuvre the readings that the writing invites, for example an oedipal interpretation of *Berg*, have already been done by the narratives themselves and therefore seem redundant. This presents a difficulty of interpretative position, and inevitably calls to mind Maud Ellmann's method (not least because of the title of her book) in *Elizabeth Bowen: the Shadow Across the Page* (2003). Bowen's fiction, Ellmann claims, 'constantly outsmarts the interpretative methods brought to bear on it'.³⁴ Her response is to 'attempt to shadow some of Bowen's most significant addictions' and to listen to and account for its peculiarities.³⁵ I find myself in a similar situation. This thesis seeks to offer a reading of Quin not already written or outsmarted by the author herself: a nuanced account of the writing's 'peculiarities' without explaining them away, which follows her processes without attempting to fix them, but also one that investigates her shadows without being designed by them.

Furthermore, as the extract from the letter above suggests, and pertinent to a thesis aware of the need to somewhat 'introduce' the writer as well as writing, Quin herself believed there was a relationship between writing and life.

To all the correspondences, parallels, echoes she would at times attach a significance that appeared almost superstitious. Her books,

³⁴ Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: the Shadow Across the Page*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

the characters and events in her books, or so she seemed half to believe, were anticipatory of her own experience.³⁶

It was not only that, as in the 'autobiographical' piece 'Leaving School', the writer read mythic and literary significance into her life – 'I saw myself as Antigone'; 'I sold my soul to the devil for a Heathcliff'³⁷ – but that her own writing itself seemed somehow to shadow, pattern or echo life events – for example the suspected suicide by drowning in *Three*.³⁸ Indeed, when, in the spring of 1970, the writer was moved from a psychiatric hospital in Stockholm to the Atkinson Morley Hospital in London, it is noteworthy that professionals from both hospitals wrote to Marion Boyars to request copies of Quin's books:

Thank you very much for sending me Ann Quin's edition of 'Passages'. I would be grateful if you could let me have the promised copies of 'Berg' and 'Three' as soon as possible because comparison between the books is important in order to follow the course of Miss Quin's thinking.³⁹

And throughout the readings that follow, as my beginning with a letter suggests, I too provide a reading of the oeuvre which considers her life as one of several intertexts (rather than the source) of the writing, as well as looking to the texts in order to 'follow the course' of Quin's thinking. However, at the same time the project is careful to avoid a reductive biographical interpretation or explanation of texts. Instead, while I refer to Quin's letters as well as the memories and

³⁶ Blomfield, 'Reasons for Existence', 1.

³⁷ 'Leaving School', respectively 64 and 65.

³⁸ Also, for example; Letter: Quin to Meredith at Calder and Boyars: 'Strangely enough last week spent in Mexico City was like parts of Passages', Lilly Library Collection, Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 2.

³⁹ Letter: Dr. Toms, senior registrar at Atkinson Morley Hospital, to Marion Boyars, 11th March 1970, Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 4: see. See also; Letter: Boyars to Dr. Harnjd, 23rd January 1970, Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 4.

narratives of close friends and fellow writers throughout the textual analyses, these are considered and treated as paratexts rather than causes.

The clearest examples of this kind of material in the thesis are the paratactic passages of text entitled 'Illuminations'. These narrate particular aspects of the writer's life as separate texts intended to consolidate, clarify and open up, rather than close down, interpretation of not only the writing itself, but of the writer too. The juxtaposition of these 'Illuminations' with the analyses of an oeuvre patterned on shadows does not banish them by clarity or spot-light, but instead insists that perceived connections between writing and life must always be read obliquely, alongside and complicated by the presence of multiple texts as well as cultural contexts. Read together then, rather than in a supposed hierarchical order, the 'Illuminations' and analyses proliferate rather than reduce the writing's psychological, historical, and literary intersections.⁴⁰

The analyses themselves provide extended, in-depth readings of Quin's writing – primarily focussing on *Berg*, *Three*, *Passages*, *Tripticks* and *The Unmapped Country*. These are in chronological order so that the reader might better be able to chart the evolution, degradation and not-quite dissolution of the writing as a whole. My first chapter, '*Berg*, 1964: To be is to be perceived', assesses a narrative pitted between oedipal determinism and unresolved procrastination, between sexual desire, and the nauseous disgust and ambivalent realism of the overly-close detail. More specifically, my reading considers the effects of relocating the Oedipus myth to a seedy seaside town, and argues that this

⁴⁰ See Cheryl Walker's concept of the 'author-persona' which 'may be related simultaneously to the biographical data available about the author and to other cultural and literary voices', 'Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author', William Epstein (Ed.), *Contesting the Subject, Essays in Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1991, 114.

seamy setting compellingly restates the myth and interrogates Brighton novel precedents. I delineate the absurd, transgressive humour of this narrative – which ends with the father as witness rather than corpse – as well as demonstrating how its narrative surface is bound up with and inextricable from engagement with and exaggeration of avant-garde styles. This first chapter identifies some of the main qualities and tropes of Quin's writing: the self-conscious performance of its method; its simultaneous surrender and resistance to the determining role of its intertexts; the figure of the voyeur, which ever signifies and presences the reader; the import of uncertainty as performed by both the slipperiness of the third/first-person narration and refusal of conclusive endings.

In 'Three, 1966: Role play in the shadow of death', I consider the writing's critique of marriage as well as the class tensions of the time. Here, as across the oeuvre, greater engagement with the world coincides with an ever increasing narrative experimentation, evident in the various journal forms – particularly the aural journal – which figure both writing and reality at once. Quin further develops a paradoxical distinction and elision between the depiction of reality itself and the patterning of literary realism in this narrative's drive towards death. In *Three*, this death is the central and absent event of the book. The reading also considers the transgressive effects of the possible marital rape, the vandals' attack, and the portrayal of suicide. Further, whereas the first chapter only briefly engages with the intertexts of Greene, Beckett and Sartre, the reading here – to reflect the writing's greater engagement with cultural as well as social contexts – provides a more extended assessment of parallels between *Three* and one of its main intertexts, the film *Last Year in Marienbad*.

'*Passages*, 1969: The transgressive resistant paradox' further assesses the potential connections between the patterning of the narrative, sequential readability and cultural ambiguity in Quin's writing. An example of this is the inclusion of direct extracts of its main source text – Jane Harrison's *Prolegomena to the study of Greek Religion* – which seems to immerse the book in the past, but in fact, I suggest, simultaneously functions to complicate and invigorate the reading process. The increasing complexity of experimentation here – for example myth as marginalia to the journal sections – requires an increasing complexity of response. Thus, my reading here engages with thinkers such as Barthes, Deleuze and Felix Guattari. I also assess how *Passages* disturbs cultural norms by its representations of both the female voyeur and the Jew.

In '*Tripticks*, 1972: Seeking the centre', I argue that the irony created by this book's excessive reiteration enacts the writing as a whole's simultaneous refusal of postmodern assent and its residual longing for the real.⁴¹ This book, which moves the writing beyond the Mediterranean travels of *Passages* and into an American road trip also enacts the oeuvre's most frenetic and unstable experimentation. My reading demonstrates that not only does the book's silent scream enact a distinctly modernist angst, but that the narrative as a whole also interrogates both mainstream American culture and the counter-culture supposedly in rebellion against it. Throughout, the various cut-ups enact a simultaneous repulsion from and desire for these cultures, as well as generating an immersive and performative prose that speaks the words of these cultures,

⁴¹ This distinction is something I illuminate with reference to Alan Wilde's understanding of irony: *Horizons of Assent – Modernism, Post-modernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1981.

in order to figure their meaninglessness. In addition, I establish that its insistent echoes of contemporaneous thinking make this book the most politically engaged as well as the most unstably and challengingly experimental.

Finally, in '*The Unmapped Country, 1973: Too close reading and writing*', I argue that this last book interrogates the structures and very possibility of the meaning of writing itself through its representation of madness. My analysis here considers Shoshana Felman's claims in *Writing and Madness* that madness is outside language, to propose that Quin's writing goes further to not only demonstrate language's failure to write madness but to reveal a madness deep within the structures of narrative itself. Further, I argue that it is precisely the detail of its reiterating and over-determined prose that activates not only the writing's madness, but also its realism. Here, as throughout, the writing emerges as predicated on and energised by binaries and tensions which drive it forward into a seemingly mapped but also ever unmapped territory.

Throughout, my readings demonstrate that while Quin's is always writing immersed in and reiterative of earlier literature, it is precisely this immersion which energises its resistant rebellion to and ironic interrogation of the dominant ideologies and literary practices of its time. This writing not only theorises its own experimental processes as it performs them, it also coincides with and participates in the literary and cultural theories of its time. In this, it is indeed writing both of the shadows and designing its own.

Illumination 1

Quin ‘sleepwalked through’ her convent school years in Brighton, preferring voracious public library reading and Saturdays spent ‘queueing [sic] up for a seat in the Gods at the Theatre Royal’.¹ In 1953, at seventeen, she left school and got a job as an assistant stage manager. There she dreamed of becoming an actor, but instead gathered props, scrubbed the stage, sewed, made tea and attempted to be knowing, laughing at ‘camp jokes I didn’t understand’.² However, when opportunity came her way, nerves sabotaged a RADA audition, and with hopes of the stage dashed she vowed instead: ‘I would be a writer’.³ For money to live on, she took a secretarial course and got a job in London.

It was during this period, while living at home with her mother in Brighton, commuting to work, and trying to write, that Quin suffered her first breakdown. She says she dug holes in the garden, lay in them weeping and woke up screaming; ‘convinced my tears were rivers of blood, that my insides were being eaten away by an earwig that had crawled into my ear’.⁴ But, this time, she decided to ‘climb back out of madness’ because ‘the loneliness of going over the edge was worse than the absurdity of coping with day to day living’.⁵ She recovered, and in the time that followed finished her first two books – *A Slice of Moon*: ‘about a homosexual, though at the time I had never met one, knew very little about queers (maybe I had read something on Proust?)’ and a ‘book about a man called Oscar, who kills his monster child – a book that developed into

¹ ‘Leaving School’, 64.

² Ibid, 65.

³ Ibid.

⁴ ‘Leaving School’, 68.

⁵ Ibid.

telephone directory length of very weird content, without dialogue'.⁶ Both failed to find publishers.

1959 found Quin living in Soho and working part-time for a law firm. She enjoyed watching prostitutes from her window, but longed to be able to buy books and clothes, a nice place to live in: 'a tower, facing the sea. I'm never so happy as when by the sea'.⁷ Instead, she got another secretarial job, this time at the Chelsea College of Art, and moved to Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill – 'an attic kind of place, a small skylight, gas ring; partition next to my bed shook at night from the manoeuvrings, snores of my anonymous neighbour'.⁸ The combination of paid work and writing was not ideal. As she later complained to John Calder: 'What I don't want to do is to begin worrying about some bloody office job when I'm in the middle of or towards the completion' of a book.⁹

It was Calder who accepted *Berg* in 1963. Not only did this ease Quin's financial angst, but once the book was published in 1964, it also meant some critical acclaim: a D.H. Lawrence Scholarship from the University of New Mexico and a Harkness Fellowship to spend time living and writing in America. Most crucially, as she had recognised while writing it, this book would open the way for writing to come:

it's been a good exercise, something anyway I had to write, not so much 'to get out of my system', but more as a sort of map I had to plan out, find several routes, and arrive at a point, an area, so to speak, that would open on to other areas, other routes.¹⁰

⁶ 'Leaving School', respectively 66 and 68.

⁷ Gordon, introduction to *Berg*, Chicago and Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001, xii.

⁸ 'Leaving School', 68.

⁹ Letter: Quin to Calder, 20th November 1964, Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 2.

¹⁰ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, August 1962.

***Berg*, 1964: To be is to be perceived**

A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb,
came to a seaside town intending to kill his father. . . .¹

So *Berg* opens on a separate page before the narrative begins. Like a chorus in a Jacobean drama, it proclaims the fundamentals of the story to come. It is, as Dulan Barber, Quin's editor, says: 'incredibly well designed to lead the reader in and on' and does, in brief, state 'the plot and essence' of the book.² In the narrative that follows, the protagonist, a man called Alistair Berg but posing as one named Greb, does go to a seaside town supposedly intending to find and kill his father, Nathaniel.

This parricidal drive, motivated by the desire to please or win his mother, Edith, clearly echoes the basics of, for example, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, where Oedipus fulfils a prophecy that predicts he will kill his father in order to impress and marry his mother. But, while in Sophocles' play Oedipus' actions are, most crucially, unconscious, in *Berg* the parricidal drive instead consciously motivates the text, as Quin herself recognised:

I came across (oh yes, of course, in the Oresteian Trilogy – thank you v. much, a delightful surprise!) the fact that Oedipus means sore feet. Do you remember at the end of *Berg* the father is going to take up chiropody? One could say Jung's collective unconscious at work here I suppose. But the truth of the matter was – my own father, when I last saw him, said he was going to be a chiropodist...³

¹ *Berg*, prologue, unnumbered page. Subsequent page references will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

² Barber's afterword to *Berg*, London: Quartet Books Limited, 1977, 169. This opening still has the power to impress and intrigue: it has been hailed as highly impressive, iconic even, by the writer and critic Lee Rourke in recent articles for *The Guardian*, 8th May 2007 and *The Independent*, 27th August 2010. In the latter he writes: 'I only had to read the first line to become hooked'.

³ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 29th January 1963.

This letter both suggests and disavows the notion of an ‘unconscious at work’ in the autobiographical and oedipal parallels of *Berg*. The overlap, which connects the two fathers’ intended chiropody practice with ‘the fact that Oedipus means sore feet’, is in part construct, in part happy coincidence. In this, Quin’s tendency to seek intertextuality between life and writing finds an oedipal tenor across the book and into her own life. Her simultaneous belief in and play with this is clearest in her response to her father’s death in 1973: “He’s gone... What a pity, I had intended doing him in myself!”⁴

Oedipus casts inverted shadows elsewhere in Quin’s writing, with the father as the symbol of sexual desire: ‘At eighteen I went up to London to spend Saturdays with my father (he had left my mother when I was ten) and pretended he was my lover’.⁵ The adolescent writer looks to her father and fantasises a lover, a hero, to rescue her from mundane existence.⁶ This incestuous desire is evidence of Quin’s fascination with oedipal taboo, the simultaneous repulsion and desire of which she explores further in the story, ‘Every Cripple Has His Own Way Of Walking’ (1966). This is purportedly about ‘my childhood in a house nr. the downs, with two old cranky aunts, and an invalide grandma’.⁷ It tells of a young girl who lives in a stale, cluttered house with strange, ailing and

⁴ Carol Burns’ piece in memory of Quin, unpublished manuscript, Carol Burns Papers, 5.

⁵ ‘Leaving School’, 64.

⁶ Calder describes Quin as always: ‘fixated on her father’, personal correspondence; letter: Calder to Nonia Williams Korteling, postal date, 13th November 2008.

⁷ Letter: Quin to Sward, 16th February, 1966. Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8. She goes on: ‘while writing it I was way back twenty-five years, in this house at Ovingdean, hearing the wind howling round, and suddenly became aware of how the wind had risen here, and it seemed the very wind I had conjured up, the whining, moans, screams of the three old ladies all there, it continued until I finished the story, then as suddenly as it had risen it died down – felt a real ol witch then’. Here, the act of writing is seen to conjure up the past in a way that has palpable effects in the present moment. It is a particularly vivid example of Quin’s belief that present life and writing are always shadowed and shaped by past, as well as vice versa.

ancient aunts of almost monstrous appearance. Throughout, the girl waits for her father to visit, in the hope that he will take her away with him. But when he comes, while she is drawn to him – particularly by his musty aroma of leather and tobacco – she is also frightened and repelled. His predatory presence jars with and disturbs her innocent fantasy: ‘Little bird eyes raised towards the man who held on. Graped. Fondled. Clutched. The child struggled’.⁸ This ambiguity figures both the repulsion of and longing for the father.

Indeed in *Berg* too, despite the gender shift to male protagonist, the oedipal quest is obsessed with not only a longing to kill, but also somehow to have – and even become – the father. Having arrived at the seaside town, the disguised ‘Aly’ Greb finds himself an attic-room (next door to, it emerges, and divided by only a thin partition from, his father and father’s lover, Judith). Here, living in squalor and on a pittance, he procrastinates a never carried out plan to kill his father. Instead, he listens to the lovers arguing and having sex, tries to befriend them in increasingly bizarre ways and fantasises about having Judith for himself. In place of Nathaniel’s death are a series of hesitant, agonised parricidal failures, where Berg instead kills Judith’s cat, Seby, possibly strangles Nathaniel’s budgie, Berty, and actually does ‘strangle’ his father’s ventriloquist’s dummy in a farcical case of supposed mistaken identity. He also, again supposedly, mistakenly identifies a drowned dead man as his father. This endless deferral of action is exacerbated by Berg’s dwelling on various troubled adolescent and childhood memories, and becoming caught up in existential agonies and increasingly surreal fantasy.

⁸ ‘Every Cripple Has His Own Way Of Walking’, *Nova*, December 1966, 135.

Indeed, in *Berg* fantasy, as well as farce, dominates the narrative surface. The language is never transparent, but always waxy, eccentric and vivid. Its protagonist is first encountered as ‘a body’ which ‘rolls upon a creaking bed’, a:

fish without fins, flat-headed, white-scaled, bound by a corridor room – dimensions rarely touched by the sun – Alistair Berg, hair-restorer, curled webbed toes, strung between heart and clock, nibbles in the half-light, and laughter from the dance hall opposite. Shall I go there again, select another one? A dozen would hardly satisfy; consolation in masturbation, pornographic pictures hanging from branches of the brain (1).

This is a repulsive, inhuman creature, ‘a body’ ‘fish without fins, flat headed, white-scaled’ with ‘curled webbed toes’, that ‘nibbles in the half-light’. It is also a man named Alistair Berg, hair-restorer, an unremarkable seedy salesman selling dubious, almost comical, vanity products. This seediness is heightened by the references to getting a girl from the dance hall opposite, masturbation and pornographic pictures. The juxtaposition of highly-crafted, strange and disconnected language with ordinary and even sleazy detail is characteristic of the way the book jumbles so-called high and low cultural tropes: it is also a characteristic of the later prose which Quin begins to map out here. Similarly, the ‘experimental’ narrative technique of eliding speech marks to blur internal and external worlds is typical. The switch to the first-person voice in the second sentence with the question ‘Shall I go there again?’ implies Berg is speaking or at least thinking the words, but it is unclear whether the comment that follows – ‘A dozen would hardly satisfy’ – is his own, or the aside of a third-person narrator. This slippage questions the source of the storytelling voice, an issue dramatised and complicated by the shifting narratorial position throughout the book. In this, while Berg’s turbulent and spontaneous perspective dominates at

word level, the larger structures of the narrative drive always remain in the shadow of the opening oedipal statement.

Given this, it is surprising that much critical response to *Berg* to date considers the oedipal frame in passing, if at all, before moving on to peculiarities of style and form.⁹ To me, an attentive reading of this book, and indeed of Quin's appropriation of myth across her oeuvre, resists such separation of form and content. Instead, the presence of oedipal tropes is both in tension with and inextricable from the highly crafted and stylised, chaotic narrative structures and facades. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the foreshadowing determinism of Oedipus is not only a site of narrative resistance; it is also in fact the mode of signification, or the type of speech, across the book as a whole.¹⁰ In illustration, I would like to offer an account of the opening sentence which extends Barber's comments on the sentence's function as a narrative hook. It seems to me that the formation of the opening declaration is just as significant as its content. Not only is the sentence incomplete and without dénouement, as also the book itself, but while the protagonist, Berg, and his father are named, the motivating force behind the intended murderous act – his mother – is not. This absent figure dominates *Berg*, and this is crucial. What is missed out, the '...', is the absence that complicates and reshapes the implied line between intended pursuer and victim. It is the shadowy third and then fourth of the love triangle that obsesses

⁹ For example: Stevick, in 'Voices in the Head: Style and Consciousness in the Fiction of Ann Quin', focuses on the narrative's rendering of mind and consciousness; Evenson and Howard, in the *Berg* section of their article 'Ann Quin', detail the irregularities of the book's various forms; Judith Mackrell, in her *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry on Quin, looks at the effects of fantastical language and evaluates the success or not of characterisation.

¹⁰ Here, Quin uses the Oedipus myth as a *type of speech*, in a manner similar to Barthes' description of myth as form rather than idea in his chapter 'Myth Today', *Mythologies*, 109-111. Quin's *Passages* also employs myth as structure as much as content as I demonstrate below in 'Myth in the margins'.

the narrative, the absent but defining and designing fifth that lies behind it. In turn, this absence dramatises the deferral and, in the end, absence of oedipal fulfilment. As such, the writing continually and indivisibly pits notions of freewill and determinism, desire and decision, against each other.

Throughout the narrative, oedipal tensions are reworked and distorted in terms of existential procrastination, bawdy ‘camped-up’ theatre, and the setting of a seamy and out of season ‘seaside town’. In this, the book tells the story of an ambiguous, epicene desire for the father, as well as an existential search for a self beyond the determinist (and gendered) terms of the oedipal frame. Indeed, I contend that such tensions are precisely what interrogate Oedipus as narrative determinism. The validity of this structure is further complicated and interrogated by the over-encoded, nauseous and disturbing detail of Quin’s strange and ambivalent realism – for example, in descriptions of Judith’s appearance – which, rather than being a ‘powerfully covert version of the reality effect’, is instead a powerfully *overt*, excessive and transformative one.¹¹

To kill his father

Berg is an uncompromising, a ferocious Oedipal statement. It is not a retelling of the Oedipal story. I do not believe such an obvious reliance upon past models, no matter how great, would have occurred to or have interested Quin.¹²

¹¹ This citation forms part of Victoria Coulson’s definition of James’ ‘ambivalent realism’, *Henry James: Women and Realism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 16. Coulson’s term is a useful starting point for thinking about realism in Quin and is one I return to more fully in my chapter on *The Unmapped Country*.

¹² Barber’s afterword, 170.

Nevertheless, Barber goes on: 'the prime source of interest lies in the Oedipal bones of *Berg*. True, they are familiar bones, but set together with such astonishing individuality that they positively rattle for attention'.¹³ It is the form and manifestation of the oedipal 'bones' of *Berg* – the forms, manifestation and motivation of Berg's desire to kill his father – that concern me here.

The narrative hangs on a determining frame, 'a skeleton', where the theatrical exaggeration – the excess and over-signification if you like – and ultimate failure of oedipal fantasy are set together. This frame works to dramatise that of traditional and causal narrative structures: Berg is initially driven by a desire to kill Nathaniel in order to revenge Edith. However, what seems to be a linear quest emerges instead as circular reiteration: no matter how hard he tries, Berg is unable to rid himself of his father's presence or mother's dominance. Thus against the despair of the seeming oedipal 'trap', the book pits another in its repetitive, absurd humour. Take its very starting point. Reversing the letters of Berg's name so that the invented Greb takes his place means that he enters the text as a back-to-front and already parodic subject. This act of reversal is reminiscent of theatrical comedy, a case of mistaken identity or character substitution: indeed, the name 'Greb' is ridiculous, like a nonsense word from a child's rhyme. Berg-become-Greb then is an example in miniature of the wider narrative's play with an old idea. Throughout, on the one hand the narrative vernacular of the English seaside town refuses the poetic, brooding tragedy of the Oedipus story; on the other, the narrative's exposition, its 'ferocious Oedipal statement', is that while the release of a classical dénouement is impossible, so too is escape from the determining frame. By the

¹³ Ibid.

end of the book, rather than killing his father Berg has instead *become* him: the grim rub of the narrative is that both the parricidal obsession and his father are ultimately impossible to escape.

This simultaneous repression and perpetuation of the oedipal drive may all sound rather Freudian. Indeed, it is impossible to discuss Oedipus in *Berg* without acknowledging Freud's influential interpretation of the myth. While some critics, including Barber and Mackrell, claim that Freudian ideas are 'unconscious' or 'instinctive', Quin was in fact already a reader of Freud by this time.¹⁴ However, it is significant that Berg's approach to killing his father remains more reminiscent of the play than of psychoanalytic appropriation: the book utilises and exaggerates the dramatic irony, rather than unconsciousness, of Oedipus' actions in *Oedipus Rex*. In the play, Oedipus' ignorance juxtaposed the audience's knowledge (a classical Greek audience could be assumed already familiar with the myth), but in *Berg* familiarity with Oedipus is not only assumed in the reader, it is made explicit by the protagonist himself:

Such an absurd, fantastic idea: To take his father's corpse back home to Edith – the trophy of his triumphant love for her! In a Greek play they'd have thought nothing of it, considered to have been a duty, the final act of what the gods expected from their chosen hero (106).

Yes, Berg desires his father's corpse to demonstrate triumphant love for his mother and thereby become the hero of his own life, but, the narrative implies, while in a 'Greek play they'd have thought nothing of it', here, the idea cannot be taken seriously. The protagonist is aware of the temptation to interpret his

¹⁴ Barber's afterword, 170, and Mackrell, 'Ann Quin', *British Novelists since 1960, Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Ed. Jay Halio. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983, 609. Actually, in 1962 Quin had at least read some of Freud's collected papers – for example, 'no. 7 volume 1, on anxiety-neurosis, obsessions and phobias etc.', Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 31st March 1962.

own 'story' in terms of Oedipus, but exposes such a reading as 'absurd, fantastic'. In this the narrative simultaneously 'speaks' and denies the legitimacy of a psychoanalytic appropriation of Oedipus: of using elements of the myth as a universal frame with which to read and interpret an individual's unconscious motivation.

Rather than requiring a psychoanalytic process to tease such drives out, Berg himself consciously names and thus refuses and dismantles the usefulness of Oedipus as a psychoanalytic tool – it is very clearly not the unconscious but the consciousness of the text. In this, the narrative refuses psychoanalytic interpretation: for Freud, as Rachel Bowlby points out, it is absolutely crucial that oedipal drives are unconscious.¹⁵ Contrastingly, in *Berg* it is essential that Berg himself, as much as the reader, recognises and appreciates the absurd and fantastic oedipal 'joke'. This joke comes from the refusal of Oedipus as the norm concurrent with the inability to escape from it. Arguably, the 'type of speech' represented by the Oedipus myth in *Berg* is the foreshadowing structure of realism. In this way the myth, as a knowing re-enactment of a re-enactment (etc.), offers a frame for reading – a chain of signification and mode of continuity – at the same time as it is exposed as a limited interpretative tool.

Further, in *Berg* it is the mother who drives the parricidal quest, not the son. At the time and place of narrative events, although Nathaniel is present and Edith (at least bodily) absent, it is her voice and influence that permeate.

¹⁵ 'Oedipus gave Freud not just, perhaps not even primarily, the two crimes of incest and parricide, converted in his theory to universal infantile wishes; it also gave him the unconscious': Rachel Bowlby, *Mythologies in Freudian Mythologies; Greek Tragedy and Modern Identities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 6.

This dominance serves to evoke her presence.¹⁶ Edith is the shadowy other (the third and, once Judith is involved, the fourth) that haunts *Berg*. Her chatter – in her letters as well as the block quotations that disrupt and disgruntle the narrative – invades and attempts to shape Berg’s childhood memories, just as the mother in Quin’s ‘Motherlogue’ (1969) dominates and maddens with her talk. There, the attempt to dominate is made literal. The story takes the form of a phone-call: the repetitive and virtually unpunctuated prose gives only one breathless side of a supposed dialogue. In it, the mother’s talk veers between assumption, moaning, gossip and judgement, and continually returns to her listener’s father. Here, descriptions of his visits are in fact wishful thinking: ‘I have the feeling if given half the chance he’d hang his hat up here and oh dear you know how soft I can be and then he tried to kiss me when he leaves but I always turn my cheek the other way’.¹⁷

In *Berg*, Edith, too, is obsessed with Nathaniel. No matter how much she denigrates him, it is Nathaniel her words are full of. Fantasised and real man are pitted against each other: Edith’s patently enduring affection juxtaposes with the callous and fickle person encountered in the narrative. When Nathaniel writes that he wants to visit, she is immediately and painfully keen: ‘I think he needs me’ she writes to her son, ‘he seems to be in some sort of trouble, I can always sense it, even though he doesn’t actually mention it in his letter’ (159). Both fathers here, we suspect, are taking advantage, both mothers willing to be used. The mother remains obsessed with the father, despite and because of their abandonment.

¹⁶ It is perhaps in order to convey this that the film *Killing Dad* includes Edith’s actual, corporeal presence.

¹⁷ ‘Motherlogue’, *Transatlantic Review* 32 (1969), 102.

However, Edith is no victim, and the mother-child relationship in the book is both dominating and persecutory. She continually harangues and guilt-trips Berg, resulting in his ambivalent, love-hate stance towards her. Her words and his memories describe a childhood hued with shame, chastisement and unhappiness. The complexity of their relationship, and the dominance within it of guilt and remorse, brings to mind the situation between Raskolnikov and his mother, Pulkheria Alexandrovna, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.¹⁸ Both mothers take the position of the needy oppressor of (whether in imagination or reality) a violated and victimised child.

Moreover, in *Berg*, this dominance is sexualised: the child's incestuous and oedipal desire for the mother is reciprocated. In a particularly vivid example of this, once, after Berg knocked off her 'Sunday-best hat' with a 'huge snowball, made entirely by yourself', Edith 'produced the leather strap, the buckle end for you, for naughty boys who never love their mother'. Then, punishment with a belt:

The white arms with veins, dimples and wrinkles at the elbow; you static over her knees, she rhythmically moving, the pleasure in her eyes, the pleasure that was yours. The sheer delight of not giving in to a single cry, and afterwards running out, blinking back the tears, whistling, splashing yourself with water. Later her sighs, her soft kisses covering the bruises, the wiping away of blood that took longer, far longer than the cause (121).

¹⁸ Although it is *The Brothers Karamazov* and not *Crime and Punishment* which Freud names as one of three key parricidal texts in his 1928 'Dostoevsky and Parricide', the latter provides the more useful literary parallel for the ambivalent closeness of the mother-son relationship in *Berg*. 'Dostoevsky and Parricide', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*, (Trans.) James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 1961, 177-194. Relevantly, Quin had recently been re-reading *Crime and Punishment*, Letter: Quin to Alan Burns, September 1961, Carol Burns Papers.

The unpleasant and characteristically close focus here – the imminence of the ‘veins, dimples and wrinkles at the elbow’ – concurrently conveys the horror and intimacy, the repulsion and desire of the scene. The ‘bruises’ and ‘blood’ focalise the brutality of what happens; the shared ‘pleasure’, ‘her sighs’, ‘soft kisses’ and rhythmic movements evoke the intimacy of sexual intercourse.

The desire and disgust of the description here both flouts and refuses oedipal taboo because it comes from both directions. Berg responds to the violent, sexual ambiguity of the contact by distancing himself, from his mother – the ‘sheer delight of not giving in’ – as well as from the child: ‘yourself’ ‘you static’, and ‘the pleasure that was yours’.¹⁹ As elsewhere, the pronoun ‘I’ eludes him even though he is clearly the subject of the recollection as well as the one recollecting. The distance gained by shifting the pronoun to the second person ‘you’ attempts to depersonalise the memory. This wants to deny culpability at the same time as confessing ‘pleasure’. The vivid, intimate nature of this recollection, coincident with the disavowal of agency, strikingly communicates the complex push-pull of desire and repulsion, the closeness and detachment, experienced by both parties in their relationship throughout the book. And, while Berg’s troubling yearning for his mother does indeed initially motivate his parricidal drive – ‘how surprised Edith would be, her caressing eyes, so wide, so opalescent!’ (105) – and seem to confirm Oedipus, Edith’s desire for him inverts and complicates such an interpretation.

¹⁹ As Sara Ahmed reminds us, disgust requires both proximity and knowledge for the recoiling and distancing that follow, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 85.

Came to a seaside town

Here was a working-class voice from England quite unlike any other, which had absorbed the theatrical influences of John Osborne and employed the technical advances of the nouveau roman. *Berg*, to use shorthand, is a Graham Greene thriller as if reworked by a somewhat romantic Burroughs.²⁰

His parricidal pursuit brings Berg to a seedy seaside town, a setting which most startlingly resets and reworks the oedipal bones. While the oedipal frame is clear in the narrative's conscious dramatisation of the myth, especially in terms of Berg's desire to please and win his mother, it is disturbed, refused and somewhat subsumed by the degraded and excessive style of the seaside town. Thus, I turn to the ways in which the 'grandeur' or supposed universality of the myth is (over) particularised and laid low, in particular in the form of Judith as the mother substitute.

Berg, whose outlook is a 'Window blurred by out of season spray' (1), although in a 'minor seaside resort' (116), has been read as set in Brighton, or at least somewhere nearby. Despite the label of 'minor' and the non-specificity of the book's setting, Quin's Brighton origins make it unsurprising that Gordon, among others, assume it is the 'seaside town' of Berg's misadventure. This assumption has of course spawned links with Greene's eponymous Brighton book, *Brighton Rock* (1938). Quin does not specifically mention this precedent, but comparison between the tone and setting of the two, and even some strikingly similar detail, does prove fruitful for thinking about the role and

²⁰ Gordon, introduction to *Berg*, Dalkey Archive edition, ix. While the comment about similarities between Burroughs and Quin has some scope here, his direct influence in terms of the cut-up technique is more visible later, in *Passages* and *Tripticks*. Quin did read Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* in the spring of 1963, but by then *Berg* was already in Calder's hands.

representation of the English seaside town in *Berg*. For example, Berg's attempted seduction of 'some plump piece, only to be too late, or defeated by best friend's giggles' (45) is undeniably reminiscent of Hale's attempted pass at 'a fat spotty creature' whose pale, bloodless friend 'screeched with embarrassed laughter'.²¹ It is Quin's appropriation and distortion of this setting which speaks the 'working-class voice' 'quite unlike any other', and grounds the book: its kitsch artificiality is a context at once wholly English and unpretentious while at the same time her representation is something far removed from the social realism of the 'angry young men'.

Brighton, scene of an infamous mods and rocker clash in the mid-1960s, was a seaside town in decline. It was a shadow of its former self, a town 'not yet come to terms with the fact that the old type of summer visitors and day-trippers from London were no longer coming to Brighton, but spending their holidays on package trips to the costa brava' instead.²² This decline, together with its geographical position 'on the edge' of England, made it ripe for literary appropriation as a liminal space. The seaside-resort, note Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, is placed 'at the outer limit of civil life' and is therefore an ideal setting for literature containing behaviour that transgresses social norms.²³ This is evident in the literary tradition of the 'Brighton novel', with books such as *Brighton Rock* and Patrick Hamilton's *Hangover Square* (1941). These narratives revolve around mania, meaningless violence and murder; action takes place in insalubrious pubs; characters live in grotty bed-sits; there are desperate, often tarty women, and men in cheap suits. So too *Berg* – as

²¹ Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock*, London: Vintage, 2004, respectively 11 and 12.

²² Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers*, Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1987, 195.

²³ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986, 191.

Blomfield puts it: 'Brighton, its tangy spirit in Berg so potently distilled'.²⁴ It is indeed the assumed Brighton setting which gives the events of the narrative their particular flavour. More specifically, as with the mythic frame, the Brighton novel tropes – specifically cheap clothes and make-up – are vividly reworked to simultaneously both perpetuate their stereotypes and interrogate their veracity.

A prime example of cheap clothes and make-up is Judith, who is not only Edith denied and restated, but also bears a significant allegorical resemblance to an off-season seaside town. Nathaniel's lover Judith is the very opposite of Edith and her respectable Sunday hats. She is 'attractive... in the artificial style' (5), 'her cheap but overwhelming scent [is] like incense' (41), she wears high-heels, and 'behind the dyed hair and the well-powdered face' (13) it is difficult to determine her age. Her first attempt to seduce Berg takes place in a room of high bad taste, cluttered with heavy Victorian furniture, stuffed animals, wax flowers and fruit, and 'draped it seemed entirely in purple velvet, reminiscent of an Egyptian tomb' (16). She goes away to make hot chocolate and re-emerges having:

changed into a housecoat of shiny black material, rearranged her hair, now no longer bound by the net; her eyes carefully outlined into an oriental effect (17).

As with the purple velvet of the room, the colour and texture of the housecoat are important. Both fabrics are cheap; bad taste attempts to suggest opulence, luxury, and to invite touch. In 'Notes for a Theory of Sixties Style', Angela Carter discusses the signification of clothing aesthetics in this time period. She says that: 'Velvet is back, skin anti-skin, mimic nakedness... velvet simulates the

²⁴ Blomfield, 'Reasons for Existence', 1.

flesh it conceals, a profoundly tactile fabric', and that 'satin invited the stroke, a slithering touch'.²⁵ Carter also claims that velvet and satin bring with them the implicit promise of easy sex.

The underlying symbolism of such clothing colours interaction between Judith and Berg. Having an unfamiliar man in her room late at night does not faze Judith. Instead of changing into more modest clothing, she puts on the black, slithering, satiny coat which, presumably could fall open, and even if not is already highly suggestive of nakedness underneath by its very fabric. She has let her 'dyed' blonde hair down, unbound and freed it, a striking contrast to the covering of hair as a (religious) symbol for modesty; she has also outlined her eyes 'carefully' implying time and thought about impact. Perhaps she uses kohl, a cosmetic that, according to Carter: 'had the twin advantages of being extremely exotic and very, very cheap'.²⁶ Her face is 'well-powdered', suggesting she has much to hide, her dyed hair is a flag of artifice, and her scent cloys. These descriptions of Judith's clothes and make-up present them – and therefore her – as false, cheap and tasteless. In this way her pretensions to the status of an assertive sex-symbol – 'women's clothes today [want to] say 'Look at me and touch me if I want you'²⁷ – are refused by the narrative, which reduces her style and seduction technique to the cliché of a desperate, predatory and aging woman. However, despite an initial residue of prudery (a hang-up bound up with his mother) Berg lusts after this tacky flaunting of female sexuality just as much as his father does.

²⁵ Carter, 'Notes for a Theory of Sixties Style', *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*, London: Virago, 1992, 85

²⁶ Carter, 'The Wound in the face', *Nothing Sacred*, 97.

²⁷ Carter, 'Notes for a Theory of Sixties Style', 90.

Some critics have found fault with this kind of stereotyping. They claim that characters other than Berg himself emerge ‘not simply as *shadowy*, but sometimes as highly implausible’.²⁸ This criticism is interesting given my particular interest in shadows as signifiers across Quin’s texts. Not only does the coding of shadows design the reading process, I propose, but shadows as (over)design also figure an ambivalent realism that transforms realistic representativeness into something more excessive and subversive. *Berg* is not a traditional or social realist text, and as such the characters, including Berg himself, are not drawn in that kind of solid, plausible or ‘realistic’ manner. Instead, their representation acts to shadow and announce the uncompromisingly close focus of a different kind of ‘realism’:

He saw the powder on her cheeks had dried into small particles round her nostrils, and her hair, a bloneness that made one wonder what colour she was elsewhere. An imitation pearl necklace encircled her flushed neck, a few of the beads chipped – decaying teeth against three circles of her neck, above these her scarlet mouth that yawned and yawned wider, nearer (83).

The ‘decaying teeth’, the particles of powder, the ‘scarlet mouth that yawned’, are excessive details *made strange*. Such detail denies the reality or intimacy it also seems to want to convey and instead evokes disgust. While the description is clearly a sexual one – the dyed blonde hair questioning ‘what colour she was elsewhere’ together with the gaping ‘scarlet mouth that yawned and yawned wider, nearer’ suggest both Berg and Judith’s lust – it is also repulsive. The mouth extends in a silent, needy scream, ready to devour. Indeed, Judith’s face

²⁸ Mackrell, 610, my italics. For Robert Nye characters in *Berg* sometimes fall prey to a ‘reduction to caricature’, piece in memory of Quin, unpublished manuscript, Carol Burns Papers, 1. See also; Blomfield, ‘Reasons for Existence’ for a more detailed discussion of this effect.

as a whole is seen as if in a fairground, distorted mirror, frame by frame and in extreme close-up, its surface split into ridiculous fragments. Here she becomes a joke, little more than a debased, crumbling surface. Unsurprisingly, her peeling paint and imitation pearls recall an out of season and redundant seaside resort, a cheap, sorry and empty promise of pleasure.

To me, the ambivalent realism of this theatrical and frightening, exaggerated description – for instance, the evocative detail of the ‘decaying teeth’ of the chipped beads against ‘three circles’ of her neck – is bound up with a particularly effective ambiguity. As with Edith’s strapping of Berg above, here again ‘disgust is deeply ambivalent’; it involves a simultaneous repulsion and desire, a lust for contact at the same time as recoil.²⁹ Indeed, Ahmed’s concept of disgust is particularly pertinent for thinking about Judith because, as the lover of both Nathaniel and Aly – as the woman used by both – she figures a stickiness of contact between them which is ‘an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects and signs’.³⁰ Therefore, not only is Judith herself ‘disgusting’, she also disturbs the boundaries between father and son themselves: their contact with her in turn figures a disgusting and ambivalent contact between them. This is evident in the way Berg’s attraction to Judith is actually fuelled by his father obsession, voiced in an unsent letter to Edith: ‘he’s been fucking another woman next door, and probably a dozen others besides... you’re better off without him, he seems a bit worse for wear’ (58). The letter ends with ‘meanwhile – well I’m going to fuck her too...’ (59). Berg’s lust for Judith, as a replacement mother-figure, is inseparable from his father’s: the

²⁹ Ahmed, 84. See also; 84-88.

³⁰ Ibid, 90.

pursuit of his father is not only bound up with a parricidal drive, but also a somehow incestual one.

Indeed, from the beginning the campaign to seduce Judith requires not Nathaniel's death, but his continuing presence as voyeur and witness to confirm, or at least be subjected to hearing, Berg seducing Judith. While she is preparing the hot chocolate and slipping into her shiny housecoat, he slips next door, where Nathaniel lies slumped on Berg's bed after a drinking bout, to check 'had the bastard meanwhile lost all consciousness, cheated me in fact?' (17). The imminent seduction will only have value if his father hears all through the thin partition that 'separates' the two rooms. This symbolic border between them represents the 'sticky' contact zone of their proximity – it signifies that Berg's seduction of Judith is also a seduction of Nathaniel himself.³¹ And indeed, behind the permeable border, Nathaniel lies, to Berg's satisfaction, conscious and 'heaving over the bed, mounds of vomit on the eiderdown, on the rug' (17). In fact, his father's continuing presence is so bound up with the seduction that Berg worries: 'there was the possibility she would not prove so fascinating after his father's death' (66). Judith is the necessary go-between in the erotic tug of war between father and son. This tug of war requires a continuation and complexification, not dissolution, of the Nathaniel-Edith-Berg triangle into Nathaniel-Judith-Berg-Edith to drive plot and action.

As such, this is a theatre of desire where identity is fluid, one which exploits the theatrical technique of mistaken identity – exemplified from the outset in Berg-as-Greb – as well as the transgression that this implies. When

³¹ For Ahmed, the stickiness of disgust has to do with borders being both disturbed and made contact with, see 88-89. Similarly in *Berg*, the partition represents a permeable border that intensifies the sense of contact between Berg and Nathaniel.

Berg finally has sex with Judith the whole act for her is a comparison, ultimately an elision, between father and son. She says: 'Oh Aly make it last, he never could you know' (145) and 'Nathy, oh Nathy my darling' (146) while having sex with the same person (Berg junior). For Judith, the distinction between Alistair and Nathaniel Berg is blurred: she desires both men, or rather, desires them as if they are one man. This confusion between father and son is not only Judith's: Edith too desires Berg to fulfil her fantasies as a better version of his father. But paradoxically, his mother's desire for greater respectability is concurrent with her place as the woman in Berg's life being further and further debased onto Judith. This sense of slippage between the two women is clearest when their words begin to overlap and collide: Judith's 'My God Aly you do look a sight, really you do, what's come over you' is directly juxtaposed with Edith's 'Oh look at your lovely new coat all that muck on your trousers too. Oh Aly I told you not to' (158).

However, the most exaggerated and dramatic case of elision and transgression is the homo-hetero-sexual, near incestual episode, when Berg performs as Judith. Here, the book exploits the theatrical techniques of (pantomime) cross-dressing and the bed-trick to make the sexual tension between Berg and Nathaniel overt. While hiding from the pursuit of his father and cronies, Berg tries on Judith's clothes, enjoying the feel of nylons against his legs, then:

Putting one of his [father's] best auburn wigs on, he patted it into place, and arranged the fringe until it came well over his forehead and met his eyebrows. What about makeup? He went back to their room.

He handled the cosmetics tentatively, then slowly powdered his face, his hands shook so much that at first he made a mess with the mascara (117).

Berg's disguise in her clothes and his father's wig is completed by Judith's make-up, while he fantasises 'if only the navy were in' (117). Indeed, he is 'so taken up with his new appearance' (117) that he does not notice the door open, just as Nathaniel (supposedly) does not notice that 'Judith' is Berg. Instead, he attempts to seduce 'her': 'love come here, take those things off' (118). Then, with Nathaniel's 'fingers running up his legs, further and yet further up' (118) Berg thinks: 'This is how it had been, with Edith, with Judith, how they must have revelled in it, giggling, panting, helping the old man's hands, opening their thighs, unsnapping their suspenders, arching their backs, opening up everything, wide—wider' (118-119). From this fantasising as his mother and lover, Berg then imagines producing 'it [his 'flowerless stalk'] in [Nathaniel's] face... so he'll remember to the day he dies' (119). In this way, the narrative plays with the sticky and 'disgusting' or disturbing notions of performance, incest, transvestism and homosexuality before it recoils.

In this scene then, theatrical and carnival techniques abound. Berg, in auburn wig, powdered and mascaraed – a strange amalgamation of Nathaniel and Judith – triggers the climactic dramatic moment of 'mistaken identity'; his private enjoyment of disguise is interrupted by Nathaniel's dramatic pantomime entrance 'behind' him. This bed-trick substitution employs, sends up and refuses the heterosexual assumptions of the oedipal cliché. Further, layers of appearance and disguise at the level of content are complemented with an extravagance that places the attempted seduction in the realm of a comic carnival or theatrical farce where misunderstandings about gender play a central role. And indeed, gender is an area of radical uncertainty in the narrative

as a whole. Once taunted with: 'he's a cissy, just a common cissy; hasn't got a dad, his mum pawns herself to pay the fees; silly cissy Berg, he's so cold he can't even crap' (10) and a 'Longing to be castrated' (4), Berg is epicene. In this he is well placed in the realm of carnival, which is characterised by an ambivalence which transgresses 'normal' categories and boundaries, allowing 'the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves'.³² Bakhtin's notion of carnival is that it turns the world inside out: it is characterised by ambivalence and opposition, and carnival symbols always include within them an anticipation of their opposite. Thus it is a useful term for describing Quin's techniques here, because of the excess, blurring, inversion and slippage of apparent binaries, and the transgressive humour which enjoys the shock of exposure, of creating discomfort and flouting taboo.

It is this disgust and carnival, evidenced in Judith's crumbling appearance and the mistaken identity of Berg's epicene transvestism, that give *Berg* Quin's distinctive 'tang'. What's more, the subversive humour and discomfort of the narrative, which disturbs boundaries between realism and fantasy, taste and disgust, makes the liminal seaside setting ideal. These qualities refuse a straightforward comparison with Greene's *Brighton Rock*, despite definite similarities in mood and setting. Instead, this seaside town is made strange. The familiar facets of Brighton – the front, the pier, the beach – and of the Brighton novel – the sordidness, the floozy – are all there, but they are re-imagined and re-written. This is why, as Christine Fox puts it; 'It is

³² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 123.

impossible to see BERG as Ann Quin's copy of Graham Greene's precedent'.³³ In that book, she claims, specificity is crucial; the documentary effects provide a realistic backdrop in marked and effective tension with Pinkie's casual violence and strange Catholicism. Quin's minimal geography on the other hand – 'the cliffs, the shore, the façade of off-white lodging houses, the hotels, all discarded props' (29) – recedes well into the background. In this book, fantasy dominates and internal visions are mapped onto the outside world to create a largely imaginative landscape: 'Crossing the park: a subterranean world surreptitiously risen; here a million star-fish pinned on the forelocks of a hundred unicorns driven by furious witches' (132).

Despite the particularity of its seaside setting, Quin's strange and ambivalent realism is not bound by realistic specificity – it is rather perhaps its very over-specificity, its over-encoded detail, which marks it out. The writing's refusal to hold detail in focus without transforming or subverting it resists and trips the reader up, creating a disquieting slipperiness and stickiness of narrative surface. It is this, to me compelling and engaging quality, that Robert Nye misses when he calls *Berg*: 'chiefly remarkable for its evocation of Brighton... its emotional intensity nearer the early work of Graham Greene than the fashionable French new-wavers its author... imagined she was imitating'.³⁴ Thus Nye dismisses the tricky surfaces of the book as derivative and inauthentic. However, as Fox points out, in fact the narrative sends-up issues of authenticity, precedents and sources: 'Can it be that Robert Nye attributed to Ann Quin as an author the lack of authenticity she was in fact defining on the

³³ Fox, 'Ann Quin: Lyrics from the Lacuna', www.pavilion.co.uk/star/AQ.html, accessed 5th March 2010.

³⁴ Nye, 'Against the Barbarians', *The Guardian*, 27th April 1972.

page as the basis of her character's adventure, and misadventure?'³⁵ The book's conscious declaration of its oedipal frame is one clear example of this: the way that the excessive, theatrical detail functions to make the ambivalent realism of Quin's seaside town strange is another.

Who changed his name

Half in the light he stood, a Pirandello hero in search of a scene that might project him from the shadow screen on to which he felt he had allowed himself to be thrown. If I could only discover whether cause and effect lie entirely in my power (48).

The slippage of character outlined above, in terms of Judith as a debased Edith, or of Berg as first seducing and then role-playing Judith in order to become and then have Nathaniel, is a merging and blurring that signifies radical uncertainty about the possibility of defining or articulating the self. The role of this question in *Berg* can be usefully thought about further, as this extract suggests, by considering the problem of what or who Berg is – this man with a changed name and constantly changing personas – to what extent thing and to what extent shadow, whether he or I, determined or free.

Here Berg is cast as an absurdist, fantastical Pirandello hero – in other words, again in terms of something or someone else. He looks for a scene, a reality, which might 'project him from the shadow screen' onto which he has

³⁵ Fox, *ibid.*

been thrown.³⁶ This desire to escape is twofold. Not only is he literally placed behind the screen of the partition between the two bedsits, but he is shadowed and shaped by others; a Pirandello hero, a hero in a Greek play, Hamlet, Raskolnikov etc. In this, as in the image of the puppet casting a shadow on the screen, Berg is always one step removed and deferred. Furthermore, the failure of his desire for freedom from ‘the shadow screen’ recalls the larger role of shadows across Quin’s writing as a whole.

What he wants is to be ‘no longer the understudy, but the central character as it were, in a play of his own making’ (77). But, the over-determined, cacophonous and allusive narrative necessarily denies this, as it reminds us here. As a fictional character within an already written narrative, Berg, who figures an existential desire for power over ‘cause and effect’, is pitted against the causal and foreshadowed desires of the text. Indeed, the oedipal frame generates a trap: while he imagines an act that will establish his subject-hood – as if the death of his father could bring forth a heroically liberated ‘I’ from the subjected ‘son’ – parricidal fulfilment would in fact be another way of being determined. As he elsewhere suspects: ‘not even the most indulgent of all actions “I shall kill” can make me declare “I am”’ (27). Paradoxically, he is instead defined by a failure to carry out ‘the most indulgent of actions’ (27).

This endless deferral of both action and self-hood is further underpinned by a narratorial uncertainty which creates a procrastination of narrative perspective. In this, a fluidity of first and third-person perspectives throughout mirrors a shift from the certainty of supposed oedipal universals towards the

³⁶ This opposition between ‘reality’ and the shadows thrown onto the screen inevitably recalls Plato’s allegory of the cave, which insists on the necessity of leaving the world of shadows in order to experience the real.

uncertainty of existential individualism. In *Berg*, 'I' has no fixed referent, it cannot speak the subject:

But I don't belong to anyone, therefore attachment to anything means betrayal, self-banishment, renounce self-continuity, self-transcendence; the ego only there to give significance (32).

In this, narrative names the speaking 'I' as a fiction, only there to give significance, not attached or belonging to anyone. Here, as with the 'you' remembered during the flogging by Edith, 'I' is exposed as a projection, an absence, and instead it is a space where the shifting 'talk' of the narrative happens.³⁷ Berg's cohesive, nameable 'subject-hood' is exposed as imaginary; nevertheless, he is the protagonist of the book and the place and focal point for narrative meaning and interpretation.

However, the speaking voice in and of the narrative is elusive, and at times third and first-person merge so that the reader cannot establish from whose perspective the narrative focalises. What is experienced instead is a confusing proliferation of multiple voices, where both first and third-person make claims to interiority. Berg is 'he', 'I' and 'you' with varying degrees of distance: '*I* must go on, as before as planned. Disclosure of identity now would be fatal. *Berg* took hold of the old man's arm' (12). When anticipating a future guilt for parricide, he imagines court-scenes where the judging voice is another's: '*Alistair Berg*, alias Greb, commercial traveller, seller of wigs, hair-tonic, paranoiac paramour, do *you* plead guilty?'(56)³⁸ The narrative does not disclose whether these various voices are oral (therefore aural), or not, so it may be that

³⁷ As Claude Levi-Strauss describes it: 'I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no 'I', no 'me'. Each of us is a kind of crossroads where things happen' in *Myth and Meaning*, London: Routledge Classics, 2001, 2.

³⁸ The italics are mine, in order to more easily track the pronouns in these excerpts.

Berg hears these various voices in his head. According to Stevick, Berg's talk is scarcely 'inner' at all, it is rather like actual speech acted out in the theatre of the mind.³⁹

Indeed, speech aloud is not normally differentiated within the narrative either, in terms of conventional paragraphing divisions or speech-marks.⁴⁰ This further confuses narratorial position: 'You're both to blame persecuting me like you do, both of you, oh yes I know. I like that, did you hear what he said Mr. Greb accusing us of God knows what' (65). Here, the speaking 'I' shifts seamlessly from Nathaniel's to Judith's perspective, rendering the 'me', 'you', 'he' and 'us' difficult to assign. This muddling is deliberate: the undifferentiated pronouns begin to articulate, or enact, a blurring of boundaries between who is who, what is remembered and what told, what is inner and outer, fantasised and real.

For Berg in particular, as with the dream-like Brighton he inhabits, distinctions between internal sensory experiences and the outside world merge. His thoughts materialise: 'waves of jazz, or a slow waltz crowded in upon the necropolis of cells, like hard-polished beads, one pull, how far would they roll?' (7) as the narrative declares its techniques – 'Threading experience through imaginative material' (7). In this way, subjective experience of the material world

³⁹ He goes so far as to claim: 'quite far from seeming a gratuitous experimentalism, Quin's fictional technique comes to seem a perfectly natural way of rendering a mode of mind that is, in its way, at least as central to the general experience of the last two decades as the benignly assimilative mind of Joyce's Bloom'. Stevick, 'Voices in the Head: Style and Consciousness in the fiction of Ann Quin', Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Eds.), *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, 232.

⁴⁰ As R.D. Willmott charmingly puts it, Quin's: 'prose style, though it is direct enough, is unconventional and goes against accustomed reading habits'. Although he himself thinks 'Quin has something original and worthwhile to offer', he admits the reader 'may feel disinclined to make the effort' of muddling their way through seemingly undifferentiated prose, 'A Bibliography of Works by and About Ann Quin', *Ealing Miscellany, Number 23*, London: Ealing College, 1982, 3.

is so interwoven with fantasy that these become forms of intertextuality that cannot be unwoven. Such experiences happen when the protagonist is alone, mostly with nature, and are often experienced as a comforting depersonalisation, a kind of ecstasy and freedom from the awkward self-consciousness he experiences in the social world. In them, he feels ‘welcomed by the natural order... because everything comprehended your significance’ (11):

Aware of own shell, skin-texture, sun in eyes, lips, toes, the softness underneath, in between, wondering what miracle made you, the sky, the sea. Conscious of sound, gulls hovering, crying, or silent at rarer intervals, their swift turns before being swallowed by the waves. Then no sound, all suddenly would be soundless, treading softly, diving rocks with fins, and sword-fish fingers plucking away clothes, that were left with your anatomy, huddled like ruffled birds waiting. A chrysalis heart formed on the water’s surface, away from the hard-polished pebbles, sand-blowing and elongated shadows (152).⁴¹

Here, the edges of Berg’s imagination and almost of his physical body are experienced as if porous and fluid. The prose is infused with an ‘awareness of becoming part of, merging into something else’ (153). This effect is achieved by sound and image association. Not only does Berg’s ‘shell’ or outer body merge with the shells on the beach, but the soft sibilant ‘s’s both evoke the sea and blur the words and images together, as does the tracking of sound patterns – the movement from ‘swift’ to ‘swallowed’ to ‘waves’ – and part-rhymes – for example, ‘eyes’/‘sky’ and ‘fins’/‘fingers’. The narrative reminds us to listen to it;

⁴¹ The sound and movement of gulls and birds are recurring motifs throughout Quin’s writing. I discuss this further in the chapters on *Passages* and *The Unmapped Country*.

to be 'conscious of sound'. In this way, Berg's mode of mind seems bound up with a poetics of slippage which the mind's eye and ear are invited to track.⁴²

According to Mackrell, the evocation of this immersive and expansive experience is a particularly effective 'technique... to render a faithful impression of the continuous and subjective present of Berg's consciousness'.⁴³ Indeed, this notion of a continuous present is central to the concept of time in the narrative as a whole, which refuses linear progress and hence also conventional notions of time passing. The seeming fluidity here in fact creates a kind of temporal stasis, a 'frozen' and ecstatic moment, where the description bleeds outwards rather than across, and Berg escapes the causal and linear, reductive, frame. Here, then, the extravagant narrative surface allows an escape from the determining structures of the intertexts. Instead of seeing himself in terms of someone else, the protagonist sees himself as without a frame, as dissolved into the surrounding, sensory world.⁴⁴

At the same time, the clear enjoyment of these surreal descriptive passages and their over-written patterning serve to presence an author. In addition, the emphasis on surface both names and effectively enacts the avant-garde fascination with words as beautiful things at the same time as its excess parodies the value of such focus. This is neither the unconscious generation of a modernist *écriture*, nor the supposedly unwritten and transparent vernacular of social realist fiction. Instead, the surfaces and styles of *Berg* accrue emulsifying layers, adding to the several mythic and literary structures woven

⁴² I am thinking here in terms of Derrida's slippage as the vacillating movement of signification, as well as Barthes' discussion of the chain of syntagma. For more on slippage in Quin's writing, please see chapter below on *Passages*, especially the section 'The line of words'.

⁴³ Mackrell, 609.

⁴⁴ This narrative desire for blurring or communion with the world is a technique present throughout Quin's writing – I track it across *Passages*, *Tripticks* and *The Unmapped Country*.

through the text. The result is a thickened and overly emphasised, waxy surface, so evident in the initial description of Berg himself. It is a quality also present in sections that send up avant-garde or nouveau roman language use, where word-combinations declare their writtenness:

He looked round, almost expecting to see someone shadowing him. The street, a ringless finger, curved past the closed doors, the curtained windows. Safe enough, at least for the moment. The leaves were sun-baked lizards stirring towards the sea that churned its chain of silver snakes, which would, if given half the chance, coil round, pull him out of this urban setting, vomit him on dry land (110).

The imagery here is tactile and visually surreal: the reptile metaphors crackle and shimmer with life; the curves of the 'ringless finger', the 'stirring' of the lizards and churning chain of silver are highly sensory. The sound repetitions shadow and wind across this passage to enact the curving of the ringless finger. This elevated language reiterates the mythic framework of the book, it is a literary 'nod' established by allusions elsewhere: in Judith's (parodic) longing to become 'a Ruth, a Helen, Beatrice, Cleopatra. Woman, the mythical creature who warmly welcomes the part her lover hands her' (67), and in Berg's adolescent letters which included 'the exchange of sonnets, in remembrance of Michelangelo, Rimbaud, Valery, Whitman, occasionally Milton; you, Lycidas sleeping in the river valley, head cradled only by grass and the wind; body lulled by sunlight' (136).

However, the word 'vomit' breaks the fairy tale-like reverie, interrupting the elevated and nostalgic tone with an 'urban' vernacular and exposing its artificiality: such nostalgia for the natural world is in quotation marks. This word-level focus signifies a modernist refusal of the assumption that language can be transparent while exposing the focus on linguistic surfaces as a literary 'trick'. It

is 'poetic' language which at the same time sends-up the highly crafted and inauthentic nature of its own narrative surface as stereotype, kitsch. Indeed, the debased artificiality of kitsch – present in the disgust, say, of Judith's appearance or the vomit above, which in turn recalls Nathaniel's drunken vomiting behind the partition – refuses pretension. Yes, the narrative knows modernism: there are references to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with 'the past is an arid landscape' (80), and to 'Proust-like' (136) letters. But, rather than providing a straight imitation of avant-garde style, the narrative maddens and transforms it. The resultant kitsch style – also evident in, for example, the unpretentious English seaside setting and bawdy epicene theatre – marks an effective mix of high and low literary tropes, which acts to resoundingly refute Nye's comment that *Berg* pretends to a literary high ground.

The excess of the writing is precisely the point: it performs the impossibility of linguistic transparency while maintaining the possibility of ascertaining signification. In this Berg's mystical experiences seem to articulate something fundamental about who he is, but simultaneously dissolve him into his surroundings. Moreover, while throughout the narrative such character and linguistic slippage generates a sense of blurring and free-flow, it is at the same time playful and unambiguously crafted. In places, this excessive aesthetic surface has the artificially ornate tone of a send up, a performance, a distraction from real action, as in fact it is. Nevertheless, it also expresses nostalgia for and perpetuation of a modernist angst for a depth of meaning – in this it foreshadows the effects of excessive surface in *Tripticks*.

Intending to kill

ACTION! Even now he was dragging on to the skin that covered the growth; I must tear it apart, bring it into sight, why hesitate any more?

The best opportunity would be when his father was drunk one evening. Yes wait until then, meanwhile maybe a perfect alibi should be worked out, for the perfect crime? No, no, hardly that, a slight mistake over the margin either way, so easy to make a mess of things, one small slip, something overlooked. Remember, nothing, as yet, had been accomplished anywhere near perfection. Consider, reconsider well beforehand, every point, down to the minutest detail, mark out all the angles.

He traced a geometrical design on the peeling wall behind the bed. Strategy definitely is needed, thought before action: hopeless to do anything in the heat of the moment (33).

The narrative procrastination about who Berg is, is mirrored, extended and exaggerated by the continual and ultimately unresolved deferral of his parricidal act – the intention to kill never does become action: in both form and content then, this is a desiring rather than deciding text. To conclude my reading *Berg* and to further refute Nye's charge of imitation, what I am particularly interested in here is how the hesitation and substitution of oedipal fulfilment engages with and extends beyond some of its key intertexts: for example, *Hamlet*, *Nausea*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Watt*.⁴⁵ In fact, as I argue, the book's echoing of these, as well as Oedipus, is precisely what reproduces, participates in and increases the absurd comedy of the repetitive, rippling exhaustion and persistence of Berg's parricidal fantasy.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ 'I would say if I have been influenced by anyone it would be a mixture of Sartre, Beckett and Ingmar Bergman'. Letter: Quin to Alan Burns, September 1961, Carol Burns Papers. The former two influences are relevant here: the influence of European cinema is better placed for reading *Three*.

⁴⁶ In his introduction to *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism*, London and New York, Continuum, 2009, Peter Boxall identifies Beckett's writing as 'at once a poetics of exhaustion, and a poetics of persistence', 1.

In a way that recalls *Hamlet* ('thought before action') – and, indeed, the self-recriminatory blunders of Raskolnikov (the endless fantasising about 'the perfect crime') – Berg wastes opportunities. Rather than 'ACTION!', he remains caught up in detailed fantasies about the murderous act – 'reconsider well beforehand, every point' – moving into the realm of theatrical villain. He tells himself to: 'pull him down, cut out the mole, split the hair, smash the brain, smother him' (12); to facilitate a drowning – 'accidents in baths were not rare; fill up until overflowing, slipped, knocked unconscious against the taps' (51). But, there is a frustrating failure to progress and Berg berates himself: 'Defeat the desire and act' (40). He knows 'that's what it amounts to, decide rather than desire' (41). Here, the narrative admits desire alone does nothing. But, it simultaneously remains stuck in a continual and absurd return to thinking about the difference between theory, or thought, and action, leaving Berg, and the narrative itself, trapped in a limbo of indecision.

Indeed, this procrastination is over-encoded and shadowed by other texts. For example, parallels with *Hamlet* in the failure at parricide are clear when Berg names himself as: 'I a ghost who walks abroad' (60). Hamlet, an archetypal oedipal character, lets chances pass him by while caught in doubt and self-flagellation: Berg, too, misses ideal situations even as he waits for them. This absurdity is dramatised in the narrative: Nathaniel might almost wink at Berg, and certainly at the reader, when he says, 'Here steady old man, nearly had me over then you know' (51). The joke is on Berg's failure to act. He wants to push Nathaniel over; he raises his hands, internally shouts 'NOW!', but nothing happens. Berg remains in a dreamlike state of inaction even when given opportunity to kill his father. This layering of Oedipus-Hamlet as the type

of speech or mode of continuity for Berg's repetition of failed action traps the narrative in a continual return to earlier versions of a similar story. In this way, Oedipus is indeed rewritten as 'an inherited script of early longings, and later prohibitions and forgettings. It refers to desires, not deeds, and it is neither fulfilled nor resisted'.⁴⁷

Hence, it is apt that within the narrative of *Berg* itself the gap between inaction and action is exaggerated and parodied by several instances of part-repetition and deferral. There are three substitutions for Nathaniel's death: Berty the budgie – 'damn you, you know what you've done, killed the only thing I loved' (63) – the ventriloquist's dummy, and the dead 'evil-smelling scar-faced bum' (140) who Berg identifies as his father to the police: 'Yes there's certainly a scar where you said sir' (163). The most drawn out and absurd of these substitutes is the ventriloquist's dummy, which enables a bizarre kind of rehearsal or 'acting out' of the failed parricidal act. Nathaniel is excessively attached to the dummy: it wears one of his best suits and is one half of his double-act; it is a puppet that speaks with his voice and moves with his body. At the end of a frenzied and chaotic, drunken night, Berg 'mistakes' the dummy for 'the old man once more draped over the banisters' (73-74) and resolves that 'this time once in his room definitely this time it would be accomplished' (74), because he knows that 'if I don't do it now I never will' (72). So, he strangles it: 'Accomplished. There he is down there, beside the bed, rolled up in the rug' (75).

At last, then, 'action has supplanted idea and imagery' (75-76) and Berg decides to leave. He gathers his things together, carrying the 'body' rolled up in

⁴⁷ Bowlby, *Freudian Mythologies*, 234.

a rug under one arm, and brushing doubts aside: 'Strange how light the body was, considering – well considering the old man hadn't been just skin and bones' (82). His exit is blocked by a Judith keen to flirt, and a carrier bag containing Berg's 'business materials' – mainly hair tonic bottles – breaks. They slide together, sticky with the mucus-like tonic and Judith takes this delay as an opportunity to stick her tongue in Berg's ear, to bite his neck and lick his fingers, squirming above him in grotesque sexual simulation.⁴⁸ With comic timing, Berg's attempt to wriggle away sends Judith falling across the 'body': 'Soon he heard her hushed voice, that child's tone, intimidated, yet trustful, that twisted something deep inside him... 'What's in it Aly, it feels like a body, it isn't, I mean you haven't—Aly what's under that ghastly eiderdown?'" (86). Both are sexually disturbed, turned-on even, by the thought that Berg has killed Nathaniel. Judith's conclusion that Berg has acted out of love, lust and jealousy renders him a hero in her eyes. However, again Berg is only the 'chosen hero' of this 'Greek play' in so far as the audience appreciates the dramatic irony of knowing (or guessing at least) what the body really is.

A shambling uncertainty in terms of what is known or not known about Berg's 'so-called action' (75) continues the drama. Doubt as to the identity of the 'body' is further sent-up when Judith says, 'Oh dear I nearly trod on it, I mean him' (89) and the person in the left-luggage office, 'cor it's mighty heavy... What's rolled up in it eh – a body?' (101). This humour feels increasingly over determined and in quotation marks. It is nudge-nudged wink-winked to breaking point: to Judith 'it's all a myth' (88), as the narrative declares itself a fiction (in

⁴⁸ The proximity of the (here supposed) death of a father with a love affair with a tenacious and sexually frenzied woman, where the couple later shack up in a sordid bedsit (as Berg and Judith do), calls to mind – though this could not have been intended by Quin as it was still yet to be published – the rather desperate affair described in Beckett's 'First Love', *Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980*, London: John Calder, 1984, 1-20.

both senses) – ‘the old man had never been a flesh and blood character really’ (97). In a pantomime, the audience could shout ‘it’s not Nathaniel, it’s the dummy, have a look’, but here Berg’s (seemingly deliberate) failure to confirm his act generates both amusement and frustration. Further, even once he does admit the body is the dummy and not his father, and has retrieved it from the railway station, part of him cannot escape a need for it to be Nathaniel: ‘I’m still thinking, acting in terms of a dead body, yes, going on as though it had been something real’ (151). In this way the dummy haunts the narrative as a continual reminder of Berg’s failure at parricide, a futile symbol of his misrecognised intentions.

The absurd comedy and futility of Berg’s procrastination is further exacerbated by the narrative’s nauseous disgust.⁴⁹ This is confirmed in the tenor of Berg’s interaction with other people. He is faced with a concurrent desire for and sense of severance from the material, human world, which leaves him queasy: ‘I have complied up to a point, but there’s always been the contempt, the nausea, though hardly recognised as such at the beginning’ (39). Here, not only is the protagonist a ‘Pirandello hero’ struggling with the absurd pointlessness of his existence, he also feels contempt at the pressure to comply with the social world. In this, it is significant that (again) Judith is the site of the greatest repulsion as well as the greatest intimacy: ‘If she [Judith] now speaks the nausea will rise’ (144). This nausea is intimately bound up with ‘an acute attack of boredom, the futility of everything, especially the game of human relationships’ (144-145). Once the obsession with Judith’s sexual allure has

⁴⁹ Quin wrote: ‘Sartre said it all much better in NAUSEA – I mean the futility a man feels about his existence’ and ‘BERG turning out to be a comedy now’. Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 15th May 1962.

begun to fade, their resultant domestic relationship provokes scorn: 'Yes let's have a proper meal, with a proper woman sitting opposite, with a proper plastic table cloth, a proper pink, with proper yellow cups and saucers, and a proper clock ticking over with the proper time' (161). The repetition of 'proper' here bitterly ridicules domesticity, exposing the seeming reality of the detail and the everyday routine as a charade, a fiction. In turn, the unreality of this domestic 'trap' creates a stultifying, sickening atmosphere from which Berg feels desperate to escape, a sense of claustrophobic futility which reverberates in Leonard and Ruth's marriage in *Three*.⁵⁰

As with Antoine Roquentin in Sartre's *Nausea*, Berg's nausea comes from a sense of alienation from other people, as well as disgust at the material 'fact' of his own physical existence: 'Berg scratched his wrists, four fingers that meant nothing to him in that moment' (40). In this, he becomes acutely aware of the absurdity of his physical body: 'every muscle straining forward, each finger tingled with blood; conscious even of the grey hairs, the dirt between toes, the wart near his navel, the mole under his left arm' (31). By providing specific detail the description seems realistic; at the same time the grotesque absurdity of the overly-close focus – as with the gaping Judith – draws attention to its unreality. Thus Berg is alienated from his physical body precisely because he does not have one. It is an alienating nausea named when he looks in the mirror and notices: 'with a slight nausea how yellow his teeth were' (105). Indeed the mirror plays a key role:

⁵⁰ Quin speaks of her own sense of alienation from the 'norms' of: 'certain societies, the sort of social spheres that I found myself in and suffered terribly, had nausea and vomiting,' in conversation with Nell Dunn, *Talking to Women*, London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965, 131.

He saw the reflection of his ashen face through the thick dust – animal fur – that softened the harsh contours (100).

He caught sight of his reflection; Machiavellian to say the least, rather startling to see the surface revealing in fact so much of what he only partially felt. How macerated the cheeks were, fairly sunken in, making his eyes so huge, his neck mottled, stork-like (115).

Such images are dehumanising. The startling ashen face with sunken-in and macerated cheeks; the protruding eyes; the mottled and bird-like neck; the animal fur adorning his face – all alienate Berg from himself and his humanity. They reveal not himself to himself, but a ‘Machiavellian’ reflection – as with the Pirandello and Greek heroes, Berg is again seen in terms of someone else. Although a mirror would appear to instantiate and confirm the myth of a coherent identity it in fact debunks this and instead dramatises the split between the ‘I’ and the ‘not I’.⁵¹ The ‘surface’ reveals ‘what he only partially felt’; its reflected mask contradicts Berg’s view of himself. As such, the image in the mirror is elusive and alienating, somehow removed from the seeing ‘I’.⁵² This split self proliferates the sense of fragmentation in the exaggerated and made strange detail elsewhere – in the disgust of the punishing Edith, for example. The disturbing unreality of the mirror, then, figures the wider sense of fragmentation, reflection, slippage and distortion found throughout the narrative. It also insists that Berg himself cannot validate or confirm his existence.

What Berg needs is to be perceived by another – this recalls the maxim ‘to be is to be perceived’ where being seen confirms existence.⁵³ Throughout,

⁵¹ This inevitably recalls Beckett’s *Not I*, where characterisation makes this split literal. However, the 1972 date of the play means again the echo cannot have been intended by Quin.

⁵² This instability echoes the already discussed slipperiness of first and third person pronouns, where ‘I’ is exposed as a linguistic structure, merely a mythic, universalised label of individuality.

⁵³ To cite Bishop Berkeley, as Pascale Casanova also does in her discussion of what she calls Beckett’s ‘Philosophical Motifs’: she notes ‘numerous references to Berkeley’s most famous

Berg requires a witness to delineate and confirm his presence, to shore-up the boundaries between his blurred edges and the material world. When left alone, his existence is under question: when others perceive him, 'for them at least you exist, that you have done something which is having an absolute positive result, an instant response, from not only one person but three, possibly four' (140). The necessity of this constant surveillance recalls Beckett's *Watt*, for whom the 'perception of another renders existence necessary and hence certain'.⁵⁴

The ultimate, necessary witness for Berg is his father (who in turn of course figures the reader). This witnessing frustrates a sense of time passing by refusing action and confirming the repetitive, cyclical structure of the narrative. Indeed, *Berg* concludes with Nathaniel's watching presence: 'Aly oh no, don't not now, hush, listen, did you hear something? Aly there's someone next door, I can hear them moving about....Aly love what are you staring at?' (167). Both Berg and the audience know who this 'someone' is: 'Funny thing is my new tenant now, the one who's moving into the room you used to have, reminds me a little of Mr Berg [senior]' (166-167). And so, at the book's end, not only is Nathaniel still alive, but he is living and listening in the room next door, just as Berg used to. In one sense, Berg has replaced his father, he has literally 'taken his place', is living where he lived, 'fucking' who he fucked (and in the bed that he did it in). This slippage is foreshadowed by a distorted reflection where: 'he fingered the receiver while squinting into the mirror. The close resemblance to the old man made him nearly drop the telephone' (23). Thus Berg paradoxically

saying – *esse est percipi*', *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, (Trans.) Gregory Elliot. London and New York: Verso, 2007, 68.

⁵⁴ See Casanova's discussion of Berkeley, Beckett and *Watt*, 68-69.

becomes Nathaniel while at the same time requiring his continuing presence as necessary witness. In this, at last as well as throughout, the linear progression implied by the oedipal drive (or traditional narrative structure) is replaced by a symbiotic and cyclical stasis, a failure to progress out of a situation at the same time as slight adjustments to it which render that continuation ever more painful and absurd.⁵⁵

Finally though, and in summary, this witnessing reminds us that *Berg* is about what and how we perceive when we are reading a literary text. More specifically, the book evidences and exemplifies the beginning of Quin's insistence that the processes of reading and writing needed to change in order to respond to the world around them. This is evident in the ways in which *Berg* interrogates and rejects more traditional notions of literary form, structure and characterisation. Thus, my reading throughout this chapter has tracked how the book pits the oedipal frame against existential procrastination and uncertainty, to suggest that in this it tests out the possibilities of determinism and freewill within a narrative structure, precisely in order to contemplate how we might better figure subjectivity or agency. I have also proposed that the book further engages with questions about the possibility of an individual (or writer) shaping their own story by reanimating and playing with source texts rather than either denying or merely being derived from them. Furthermore, my analysis has begun to demonstrate and articulate the energy of Quin's excessive, strange, disgusting, and alluring narrative detail to suggest that, when we pay close attention to it, what emerges is an ambivalent realism that is one of the key ways in which the writing disturbs notions of representation. And, most clearly

⁵⁵ In this sense *Berg* could be said to recall Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

perhaps, both the performativity of the writing and the slippage identifiable in *Berg* across character, narration and description evidence just how, at this point, Quin is beginning to articulate and theorise her own reading effects.

Illumination 2

Although it is a book haunted by a drowning, foreshadowing her own, final, journey into the sea, Quin began *Three* more than ten years earlier, while still living in her turret room at Lansdowne Road and working now as a secretary for the painter, Carel Weight, at the Royal College of Art.

When London became too intense, she caught the train to Axminster, in retreat to the Burns' Swain's Lane cottage in Dorset, just in land from the coast at Charmouth. The cottage had no running water or electricity, but water was drawn from a well, there were oil lamps and a garden with an apple orchard. Here, she fantasised a Mellors in every farm labourer, walked for miles along the coast, holidayed with her then lover Henry Williamson,¹ and spent time with Alan and Carol Burns reading Ezra Pound and talking. However, this friendship was not without the tensions perhaps inevitable between a needy young woman and a married couple. It is revealing that the book was originally to be dedicated to the Burns, but that they refused.² Carol Burns explains it like this:

I was chatting to Alan today about the time Ann and I rode horses along our lane. He said we were riding bareback, but this was not the case. I saw Ann's horse galloping ahead of mine with her saddle slipping sideways. As I tried to slow her down and catch her bridle, I fell off my horse and got mild concussion. In Ann's book, *Three*, she says the woman who fell only looked up when her husband arrived and she needed attention.

Given the fact we started off in great form passing Alan at our wicker gate calling 'Tally ho!' to him, the day was a disaster. In the evening, Alan and Ann sat on either side of my bed tucking into a roast chicken while I had a beating headache and wanted to vomit!

¹ Williamson (1895–1977) – the writer known most famously for *Tarka the Otter*.

² Instead, when published in 1966 it was 'for Bobbie and Bob [Creeley]'.

This was one of many reasons why we didn't want *Three* to be dedicated to us.³

Quin's role as third to several of her married friends' twos – also including Robert and Diane Sward, and Bob and Bobbie Creeley, for example – evidences an ambivalent desire to access and open up the perceived intimacy of two. As Sward wrote to me: 'You ask "What role do you think sexual fantasy played in her writing?" Three, that's it. Three. Three. Three'.⁴

But, Quin's longing for intimacy was in tension with a simultaneous fear of being trapped by domesticity. When talking with Nell Dunn in 1965, she says: 'I would hate to think that they expected me to have a meal there every time they wanted'.⁵ Yes, a something stable and comforting was alluring, but this would, she assumed, inevitably become ordinary and compromised. Worse, a traditional domestic set-up could well interrupt writing: 'I seek stillness, as that is the vital reservoir needed for creating, and only by living on my own am I able to achieve that'.⁶ Nevertheless, she knew that to share 'one's life can bring a whole area of experience. I've often thought what I really need is a wife'.⁷ This joke admits and ironises a continuing tension between the working (female) writer and traditional gender and marital roles, despite this supposedly being a time of greater gender parity.

³ Personal correspondence; email: Carol Burns to Nonia Williams Korteling, 24th May, 2009, 10.09 pm.

⁴ Personal correspondence; email: Sward to Nonia Williams Korteling, sent 17th November, 2008, 12.38 am. Further, as John Hall puts it in 'The Mighty Quin', her prose 'is a landscape strewn with three-corned dances; the shape is the prime figure of Quin's geometry', *The Guardian* 29th April 1972, 8.

⁵ Dunn, *Talking to Women*, 129.

⁶ Letter cited in: Brocard Sewell, *Like Black Swans: Some People and Themes*, Padstow: Tabb House, 1982, 183.

⁷ Dunn, 126.

Three, 1966: Role play in the shadow of death

A man fell to his death from a sixth-floor window of Peskett House, an office-block in Sellway square today. He was a messenger employed by a soap manufacturing firm.

Ruth startled from the newspaper by Leonard framed in the doorway. Against the white-washed wall. A wicker arm-chair opposite the Japanese table. Screen. Sliding doors. Rush matting. A mirror extended the window. Gardens. A bronzed cockerel faced the house.

What's the latest then? Fellow thrown himself out of a window. Ghastly way to choose. But Leon hers wasn't like that—I mean we can't really be sure could so easily have been an accident the note just a melodramatic touch. No one can be blamed Ruth we must understand that least of all ourselves.¹

True to its collage form, *Three* begins with the fragment of a newspaper report about an unnamed 'man [who] fell to his death from a sixth-floor window'.² The fragment itself seems alternately shocking – 'fell to his death' – and absurd – 'employed by a soap manufacturing firm', a mixture of specific and incongruous detail. This is juxtaposed by a narrative giving precise and vivid but isolated physical details of the domestic space that the book's protagonists Ruth and Leonard are in, before it slips – without speech markers, qualifiers or much punctuation – into their interpretation of the man's death as suicide: 'Fellow thrown himself out of a window. Ghastly way to choose'.

From discussion of this death, conversation moves on to 'hers' which 'wasn't like that'. This other death, of an unnamed woman who nevertheless seems significant due to the intimacy implied by the non-specific pronoun, also

¹ *Three*, Chicago and Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001, 1. Subsequent page references will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

² 'My ménage book is bit by bit progressing – in fact it's becoming a collage, from collections of other peoples' letters (that's where you, Alan, Frank, Paddy, Myra and James come in...), receipts, bills, etc'. Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 13th February 1963.

'could so easily have been an accident'. Yet the fact of the note and the anxiety about blame very much implies it was not. From the start then, we are reminded that uncertainty and death inhabit the world outside the narrative as well as within.³ Further, the absence of commas in the phrase 'we must understand that least of all ourselves' momentarily interrupts comprehension as to whether it is the blame that can be attributed to them least of all, or the understanding. Uncertainty and death, then, are the destabilising core of this text, primarily coinciding in the problem of interpretation: 'I mean we can't really be sure'.

More specifically, throughout the book, Ruth and Leonard's conversation and action is haunted by the desire to interpret this particular death: the mysterious death of the book's third protagonist, a character only ever referred to as 'she' or 'S'. Whereas *Berg* continually returns to a fantasised but never carried out parricide, in this book the death has always already happened. *Three* 'begins' when S is dead and 'ends' when she is approaching death. The focus of the narrative as a whole, as with the opening lines cited above, moves between evocative and specific detail of the material world and various modes of reflection on S's life and death. This establishes the pattern of a continual return to S throughout the book as well as on this opening page, which continues:

He shuffled a few shells, pebbles, covered his ears with two. Used to wonder whether it was really the sound of the sea. I knew it never could be. Ever practical Ruthy. We should have gone with her Leon. She liked rowing out on her own. You went with her sometimes. Only once or twice then felt I intruded. But didn't she ask you to go the evening before? We had shopping to do. And it was stormy in the

³ Indeed, much of the recourse to the outside world has a similar death focussed slant. Other references to the 'news' include reports of famine, a tidal wave, the trial of a concentration camp adjutant, and the finding of a murdered young woman on a mountain.

morning even she remarked how the clouds were low-lying mountains couldn't be seen either (1).

Here, Leonard attempts to shut out – he literally covers his ears up with the shells – their worrying about S with a whimsical reference to a childhood idea – ‘Used to wonder whether it was really the sound of the sea’. This is dismissed by the ‘Ever practical’ Ruth who interrupts and deflates the fantasy to bring him back to discussing feelings of guilt and regret about S: ‘We should have gone with her’. Not only is the lack of speech distinguishers reminiscent of similar indeterminacy in *Berg*, but here it is specifically the conversation of a married couple that is written without distinction or space. This creates a sense of symbiosis at the same time as claustrophobia. Each utterance follows so closely at the heels of another that it implies an interaction shaped by interruption or attack, and also one in which things are unclear and need working out. This echoes the reading experience, which is disorientated: the momentum that lack of speech convention and run-on lines create, together with the continual return to worrying at the same event, dramatises the sense in which reading must inversely slow, circle and repeat for proper interpretation to happen.

This focus on S establishes the pattern of the book as a whole. In particular, this third character emerges as a necessary part of the dynamic of the married two: together and alone, Leonard and Ruth are obsessed with S. She plays a crucial role in their marriage, and the mystery of her absence offers an opportunity for a uniting of the two that the third-ness of her presence never could. This happens in their conversations, which continually return to defend against blame: ‘We should have gone with her Leon. She liked rowing out on

her own' and 'No-one can be blamed'. Here, imagined accusation about their role in S's death poses a necessary symbolic threat against which they come together. In this, despite ambiguity surrounding whether she and Leonard had sex or not and the resulting anxiety felt by Ruth, S's role as absent transgressor of their married two-ness in fact operates to glue their relationship together.⁴ Indeed, S is the figure that shadows, the mystery that designs, the narrative as a whole. Throughout, the central preoccupations of the book – the threat of trespass; the death drive; the imprecision and resistance to interpretation, and the intangibility of the past – are focalised in the continual return to S.

It is fitting, then, that to read *Three* is itself to perform a kind of trespass: to read and transgress upon other people's diaries, to 'listen' to tape recordings and watch home-movies. This is reflected in the overlapping collage of different narrative forms.⁵ Here, confused reminiscence is juxtaposed with intensely detailed experience; third-person narrative with journal entries and the free 'poetry' of the aural transcript.⁶ The resulting combination of poetry, prose and lists, with third and first-person narration, are examples of a literary experimentation which moves this book beyond *Berg*. In many ways here the plot is simpler, but the energy of the writing resides in modes more consciously 'experimental'. While the present-absent voice of the third-person narrator, as

⁴ This has a similar effect to the one Ellman identifies of Bowen's geometry: 'The presence of a third party precludes seduction..., yet ensures the perpetuation of sexual excitement'; 'On one level these supernumerary presences pose an impediment to love, but on a deeper level they generate its energy', *The Shadow Across the Page*, respectively 71 and 70.

⁵ This process is similar to the one Dick Hebdige calls 'bricolage' – the adoption of borrowed styles as an expression of a counter-cultural, creative and knowing activity, in *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, London and New York: Routledge, 1979, 102-106.

⁶ I refer to the transcripts as of an aural, rather than oral, journal because they are experienced as *heard*, rather than spoken. This is especially important when considering the line spacing as demarking the periods of silence that interrupt the speaking voice.

an absent transgressor, is directly dramatised by the similarly present-absence of Edith and S, in *Three*, the question of voice and perspective is highlighted by the intercutting of distinctly different narrative perspectives; in each of the three protagonists' journals as well as a third (or rather fourth) person voice.

The journal sections themselves consist of small excerpts from Leonard's diary – in the form of a minimalist record of 'facts' – and a page or so of Ruth's anxious prose, as well as large sections of S's written and aural journals (listened to on tape). Not only are these various narrative forms knit together by their circling around the complexities of the three protagonists' relationship as well as S's supposed suicide, but the inclusion of S's journals ensures that although absent from the narrative, her voice, and in this her presence, dominates.⁷ It is her voice and forms of expression, not Leonard and Ruth's, which prevail. It is also S's journal transcripts that are the most explicitly experimental:

Mountains
appear. Move forward. When one is static.
Retreat when approached.
Fold of hills. Held by shadows. Dead seas. Fortresses
of stone triads.
Armies
of cromlechs. Face east. Sounds of hooves. Marching feet. Through
white flowers
swept
one way. Stones into shee Water endlessly stretches.
Gulls moan. Flap
cry across. But silent near. Around. The house.
Turn up stones.
Separate
plants.
Leaves.
Branches. These stir. Rotate. Forests stride in the night. Neglected
orchards. Where blossom deceives.

⁷ Again, this is an extended version of the way that Edith is able to dominate in *Berg* through her letters and influence, despite being bodily absent.

A composite of silhouettes in a yellow field (24).

Here, line breaks juxtapose and separate ideas or images. But, rather than being motivated by poetic construction – patterns of metre, rhyme or sense – the breaks indicate moments of silence between the sounds Leonard and Ruth hear.⁸ Furthermore, registering the absence of sound with visual space on the page serves to presence S's acoustic voice as well as the lacunae between her speaking. The effect of these pre- or inter-linguistic pauses calls to mind Natalie Sarraute's description of pre-linguistic movements of thought as 'sub-conversation'.⁹ These half-formed thoughts and feelings can only be conveyed to the reader impressionistically, through unusual or repeated word pattern and image, or by focus on the sound and rhythm in and between words. Similarly, S's impressionistic aural journals seem to have a free associative, pre-articulate momentum. In this, sensory impressions are recorded without communicating a recognisably inner self so much as mimicking spontaneous and improvised speech.

⁸ The performative nature of this form calls to mind Quin's admiration of the Black Mountain Poets, who sought to create poetic forms able to communicate direct experience and perception as closely as possible. In particular, she refers to Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, who edited the *Black Mountain Poetry Review*. Quin met Creeley in 1964 at a Calder event, and they remained life-long friends. Andrew Hassam claims that it is precisely Quin's use of the diary form which evidences a broader 'North American influence on the younger British writers of the time' in *Writing and Reality: A Study of Modern British Diary Fiction*, London and Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993, 5.

⁹ Sarraute discusses these 'numerous, entangled movements that have come up from the depths' in 'Conversation and Sub-conversation', *The Age of Suspicion*, (Trans.) Maria Jolas. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1963, 116. Her discussion is particularly relevant for thinking about the aural journal here because she discusses speech rather than writing. Quin read Sarraute in the early sixties. She said, of *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, 'without being too profane it reminded me a little of my own work'. Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, undated letter, 1961.

This method not only perhaps calls to mind the ‘surrealism of contemporary reality’, as Hassam suggests,¹⁰ it is also reminiscent of the automatic writing process of the Surrealists themselves, believed to convey the ‘real’ processes of thought and thereby convey something closer to experience than reasoned and consciously shaped literature. Like automatic writing, in S’s aural journal ideas ‘[cut] into a flow of associations almost arbitrarily’ – for example blossom deceives – and this creates ‘displacements and metonymies which disembody the human and throw familiar objects into ominously unfamiliar perspectives’.¹¹ Sensory impressions are made strange: they shift and metamorphosise – mountains move, forests stride – they are verbally photographed and rendered static – the sea is dead, stones become shee

However, while the supposed ‘free’ association here recalls qualities of automatic writing, the simultaneous insistence on vocalisation maintains that these ideas are also ones articulated and ‘performed’ by the spoken word. The fictional journal here is as an aural piece that is always, albeit in a fractured and transitory form, a constructed verbal performance. Both description – ‘white flowers/swept/one way’ – and instruction – ‘bend closer’ – above demand the mind’s eye of an audience. The definite momentum of the writing here directs the reading eye to stir, rotate and separate leaves and branches, to discover what is behind or beyond the seemingly static image. Thus the conscious performance of this aural journal, which presences the speaking character and her audience, seems in tension with the apparent freedom of its form, as an

¹⁰ Hassam claims that in the writing of, for example, Quin and Eva Figs: ‘the diaries [represented] the surrealism of contemporary reality’ – in this way he also draws our attention to the journal form as one pretending to represent reality, *Writing and Reality*, 5.

¹¹ Peter Nicholls, ‘Surrealism in England’, Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century English Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 400-401.

overly self-conscious, and therefore unconvincing, narrative interruption. In this the disruption of the graphic surface draws attention to the device as device. Yet arguably here the writing also in fact 'operates mimetically' in that the mannered style of this fragmented self-performance is perhaps precisely the point.¹² In this, S's aural journal can be seen to exemplify notions of role-play and performance that are central to both the form and content of *Three*.

Elongated shadows of Marienbad

Went to see Bergman's latest THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY – affected me like hell – felt like death when walking out; incest and ALL THAT BUT beautifully photographed and acted; very Ibsenesque – sins of the father etc., family searching for life/God in each other, through each other, and the twilight or pale sunlight of the Swedish landscape penetrating in its indifference: 'God came and dropped down like a spider'; [I] like the way Bergman uses the mythical to get across the anguish of the present day, tho' at times the symbolism is over-done the spilling of milk followed by a cut finger – the ending a bit melodramatic. Worth seeing if you ever have the chance'.¹³

One example of this performativity is the way in which the narrative figures and engages with European cinema, particularly *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961). As Sylvia Bruce rightly points out: 'with deliberation designed, Three, when viewed from the appropriate distance, resolves itself into a model of tautness and precision (sculptural, yet also cinematic)'.¹⁴ And, as the letter above – among many others – evidences, Quin was an enthusiastic viewer and analyst of

¹² Glyn White discusses a similar effect in B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo, Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005, 97.

¹³ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, November 1962.

¹⁴ Sylvia Bruce's piece on *Three*, unpublished manuscript, Carol Burns Papers, 1.

European art house cinema, and particularly impressed by directors such as Ingmar Bergman.¹⁵ As the following reading demonstrates, the techniques of this cinema – and in particular its ability to render scenery ‘penetrating in its indifference’ – do indeed influence and shadow *Three*, which compellingly mimics them in written narrative not only with the styles and stances of its cinematography, mis-en-scene and precisely directed performance, but also with questions of time, repetition, movement, sound and silence.

As Andras Balint Kovacs identifies in his discussion of such cinema, at this time there was a particularly ‘sharp opposition between art cinema and entertainment cinema’.¹⁶ For many viewers, the aspiration to art – as ‘the cultural Imaginary of the middle-class’ – too often ‘involved an internal distancing from the popular which was complex and often contradictory in its effects’.¹⁷ For Quin these complex and contradictory effects were precisely what appealed. In the letter above, her response is keenly aware of the strange and distancing – but to her pertinent – role played by form, structure and symbolism, for example her admiration of ‘the way Bergman uses the mythical to get across the anguish of the present day’. *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) uses the romantic symbol of a shipwreck to represent fear, illness and loneliness. In *Three*, however, residual mythical tropes – evident in the romantic associations of the fortresses of stone triads and armies of cromlechs in the extract above – are overshadowed by the influences of art house film’s growing interest in representing non-linear time, and in eliding the distinction between what is in and outside a character’s mind. In the latter, the interior becomes exterior and

¹⁵ She names him a key influence to Alan Burns, as I mention above.

¹⁶ Andras Balint Kovacs, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 115.

¹⁷ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 193.

the imaginary overlays the real to create a world changed and shaped by narrative perspective, a preoccupation evident in the imaginary landscapes of *Berg*. In this – to make a crucial distinction – Quin’s writing does not only appropriate late modern cinema’s techniques, but engages with and performs its ideas: the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and the real; the elision of past-present-future; a sense of inescapable role-play.

More specifically, *Three* recalls *Last Year in Marienbad*, written by Alain Robbe-Grillet and directed by Alain Resnais. Quin makes several references to the film in letters to Carol Burns, and dismisses François Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* (1962) (again, as she acknowledges, a narrative of three) as merely ‘a slight skit on Marienbad’.¹⁸ *Marienbad* is on the one hand the result of Robbe-Grillet’s nouveau roman obsession with close detail stripped of temporality, and on the other of Resnais’ new wave – ‘la nouvelle vague’ – continuum between the real and imaginary.¹⁹ *Three* too is compiled of a juxtaposition of the confused momentum of often isolated and overly-close details with a real-imaginary continuum, as is *Berg*. Quin herself put it about the film: ‘a photo holds the image, is static, and therefore imprints itself more firmly by not having side-effects, or the infringement of past and future, isn’t this was [sic] Last Year at Marienbad tried to bring off?’²⁰ Not only does this identify a sense of impenetrability or internal distancing, it also makes a specific connection between the stasis of photographs and atemporality. In the film, performance is

¹⁸ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 26th May 1962. (Hereafter, for brevity, I will refer to it as *Marienbad*.) The film is also named as a key influence – ‘wouldn’t you know it ‘Last Year at Marienbad’ – in Hall, ‘The Mighty Quin’. In her letters Quin variously refers to it by its U.K. title *Last Year in Marienbad* and U.S. title *Last Year at Marienbad*.

¹⁹ For further and highly detailed discussion of this particular split refer to Deleuze, ‘Peaks of Present and Sheets of Past: fourth commentary on Bergson’, in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, (Trans.) Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: The Athlone Press, 1985, 98-125.

²⁰ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 28th September 1962.

so slowed and stylised that it becomes fetishised: in the book, the language itself photographs, plays out and performs, rather than describes, scenes and selves. In both, mimesis is excluded in favour of performance and conversation is staged: both narratives are told through highly ambiguous flashbacks or versions of events, and disorientating shifts of time and location which serve to complicate rather than elucidate.

This sense, not only of more than one competing 'reality', but of a further several ways of representing them, is compellingly evoked in the book by the plurality of narrative and journal forms. The journals not only present divergent realities because of a difference in character perspective, but the very range of forms they are presented in adds to our confusion and prohibits the creation of a coherent or master narrative of events.²¹ Indeed, in both *Three* and *Marienbad* each character's version of events is different and irresolvable. This resists our being able to establish which of the versions corresponds most closely with 'actual' events: thus, the competing imaginaries and voices complicate rather than elucidate. While the perspectives at times overlap and therefore seem to corroborate, they more often than not widely diverge to compete for our credulity. What is achieved is an almost phenomenological faithfulness to the different subjective experiences of the characters as individuals, which fragments, rather than coheres, the overall narrative. Both book and film remain necessarily polyphonic so that 'the factual status of the past event is made uncertain in them and is subject to mental manipulation by the characters': there is a sense in which 'even the "past" and the "trauma" are

²¹ A more thorough examination of the dispersive and disruptive effects and effectiveness of the various journal forms of *Three* can be found in Hassam's *Writing and Reality*, 132-137, where he draws on comparisons with Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), which Quin had read by this time. In particular, Hassam reminds us that written journals always foreground the construction and writtenness of the writing.

created by the mere textual process of the narrative'.²² In *Three*, the central traumatic event is S's supposed suicide. However, the fluctuating narrative modes and disordered chronology mean that the status of this event becomes less and less clear as the narrative progresses: initially termed suicide, it is later possibly accident or murder, and even Leonard is implicated. Yet resolution is not possible because the narrative hinges on the continuation of ambiguity: it is specifically the unresolved nature of the trauma that binds the narrative, as it does Leonard and Ruth, together.

The influence of *Marienbad* is particularly visible in the narrative's strange momentum and uncanny characterisation. Here, the focus on detail slows perception in a splicing of movement, to the point where, as in Zeno's paradox, there seems to be no progression at all.²³ Similarly, in the third-person narrative sections – as with the party or group scenes in the film – the domestic scenes between Leonard and Ruth are strangely still and unreal. This is contrasted and made more noticeable by the interruptions of erratic acceleration. Often, a slow and dreamy scene setting – 'Each held a corner of the room, cigarette smoke formed a screen between them' – is interrupted by mania:

They brought their chairs together when the television programmes started. She commented on women announcers' clothes. He shifted around into more uncomfortable positions, hugged his knees, burst into sudden loud laughter. She knitted faster, dropped several stitches. There look what you've made me do I don't see anything very funny in that. For a time he froze into one position, the flash of television and candles darted over him (50).

²² Kovacs, *Screening Modernism*, 105-106.

²³ This splicing effect of Robbe-Grillet's is clearly evident in the film, as well as in his book *Jealousy* (1957), which Quin had read.

As is dramatised here, the composition of such scenes is strange and unsettling. The dead-pan and undifferentiated – ‘they brought’ ‘she commented’ ‘he shifted’ ‘she knitted’ etc. – list-like narration renders the characters’ actions mechanical and almost meaningless. In this they are dehumanised: still lives frozen and devoid of life one minute, barking out meaningless sound the next. The action in the scene – Leonard’s shifting into uncomfortable positions and Ruth’s accelerated knitting – is jerky, their ‘noise’ – his ‘sudden loud laughter’, her bitchy commentary – frenetic. Here, specifically with the knitting, where Ruth speeds up and drops several stitches, the form, textuality and crafting of the writing process, as well as the slippery knottiness of the reading and interpreting experience, is dramatised.²⁴ Reduced to caricatures or automata like the guests in *Marienbad*, it is impossible to forget that Leonard and Ruth are unreal.²⁵ Thus, both the knitting and automata write the constructedness of the narrative large. At the same time, the puppet-like figures contain enough of the real to evoke – aptly, given the automata here – an unsettling sense of the Heimlich and Unheimlich of the uncanny.²⁶

This uncanniness is enhanced by the statues in the garden: ‘Those ghastly statues of your father’s too disembodied pieces of bronze stone and bits scraps of metal you tried making into flesh and blood participators or audience of your little charades frankly grotesque Leon quite quite horrible ugh’ (7). In this

²⁴ I discuss knitting as a metaphor for the writing process at greater length in my chapter on *The Unmapped Country*, where the role of knitting as foregrounding the textuality of the writing is far more prevalent.

²⁵ Laura Marcus discusses the cinematic nature and effects of the interplay between and juxtaposition of stasis and mobility, or mechanical and organic in her chapter ‘The Things that Move: Early Film and Literature’, *The Tenth Muse*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, specifically 29-43.

²⁶ In Freud’s 1919 essay ‘The Uncanny’, he discusses E.T.A. Hoffman’s *The Sandman* and in particular Olympia, the automaton. ‘The Uncanny’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, (Trans.) James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 1955, 217-252.

there is a suggestion that the line between ‘disembodied pieces of bronze stone and bits’ and ‘flesh and blood participators’, between the manufactured and organic, is blurred. In a further move foregrounding the constructedness of the writing, the metamorphosis this implies – from lifeless to alive – is also a magic, an illusion that narrative itself performs. But here illusion is resisted: Leonard’s act of magical transformation fails, and even the statues’ position as audience serves to remind the reader that all that takes place in the narrative is ‘staged’, performed and watched.

Similarly, one of the most memorable things about *Marienbad* is the visually striking garden of its stately home. This garden, which also contains several classical statues, is of a geometric design which has a cubist effect, leading on and splicing up our gaze into unfamiliar segments. This setting, filled with familiar things, becomes unfamiliar, made strange. Similarly in *Three*, Leonard and Ruth’s country retreat, ‘the Grey House’ belonging to his father, has a garden where ‘The shadows of statues on the lawns stretched to the cliff edge’ (3); ‘statues gleamed, elongated shadows across the grass’ (16).²⁷ Quin consciously and carefully – the clue is in the repetition of ‘shadows’ which again foregrounds the reading process – directs our gaze. These statues cast long, distorted shadows, dramatising both our reading and the structures of the writing itself: it has a similar effect to ‘A mirror extended the window. Gardens’ (1, cited above), which leads the reading eye to the outer edges and almost beyond the frame of the page itself. As representatives of formality, both in terms of being constructed forms and of the authority of the past, these statues are shifting and incomplete, ‘broken, unbroken, unfinished’ (4).

²⁷ The insistent presence of shadows here, and their role in splicing the readerly gaze, is also reminiscent of the way shadows function in Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*.

Further, and in line with the distorting and eye-tracking effects of 'elongated shadows' – a phrase we also find in Berg's visionary experience on the beach – the statues in *Three* are often odd or perverse: 'Hallucination Aphrodite Father's favourite. Certainly not mine so grotesque didn't even have a head I mean was it a man or a woman that thing sticking out of what looked like breasts?' (9). Here again we find a parallel with *Berg*, as the interpretive potency of mythology is juxtaposed with the surreal and sexual – the 'Hallucination Aphrodite' has a 'thing sticking out of what looked like breasts'. Thus, rather than acting as an anchor of familiarity, these 'classical' statues represent something of the distorting effects of memory: their apparently familiar structures are in fact an illusion. In addition, the Hallucination Aphrodite is an irreverent transgression of lewd and classical. This statue, which represents the elevated individual held up on a plinth 'above' us – to retroflect us to the heroic past as we gaze up at it – is inverted as a grotesque, mobile, split, multiple self.

In the garden of 'the Grey House', among the statues, there is an empty swimming pool. This space provides Leonard, Ruth and S with a theatre in which to perform. In her written journal, S records: 'At my suggestion L made a platform, with steps leading from either side, in the empty swimming pool. We both write little scenarios which R half-heartedly joins in' (66). On this 'stage' then, the three of them enacted dramas, usually in mime form, wearing masks and costumes to conceal their identities. S comments: 'My favourite one with masks is just the three of us, two reject one, or one rejects two, or all three reject each other, or equally accept' (66). This dramatisation of the emotional complications of the three-way relationship in the form of a 'dumb show' recalls

the role of the play within the play.²⁸ With this, the book again recalls *Marienbad*. The film opens with the performance of an overacted and overdressed, simplified melodrama, which provides a seeming interpretative framework or allegory for the more complex ideas in the film as a whole. In *Three*, the several scenarios played out on the stage provide a similar engagement with, and in the end critique of, the dumb show as a useful interpretative framework.

A further, fruitful parallel between the two texts is that both have three protagonists caught up in a supposed love triangle. As with S (indeed also with Leonard and Ruth when referred to in the journals), characters in the film are known by letter rather than name.²⁹ In this way they are anonymised and always unreal or symbolic, like algebraic letters. In the film, a man, X, approaches a woman, A, claiming they met the year before at Marienbad, and that she is waiting there for him. A second man, M, who may or may not be the woman's husband, repeatedly asserts his dominance over the first man by beating him several times in a game. The repetition of the game seems to represent each man's desire to win, but in fact figures a desire to keep on playing.³⁰ In *Three* the on-going play for dominance and possession between the characters is also represented as at least a performance, if not also a game: 'A walks past B and C. A might turn. Stop. Shrug. Walk on. B and C watch. Perhaps follow A. Or separate. Possibly disappear together. Variations endless' (21). This mime-show clearly represents possible moves in the relationship

²⁸ This recalls a similar use of dramatic technique – the presence of tropes and tricks of mistaken identity and bed trick comedy – in *Berg*.

²⁹ Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* employs a similar technique with the character known as 'A...'

³⁰ Again, this is reminiscent of *Berg*, specifically Alistair and Nathaniel Berg's perpetuation of the play for Judith, where the continuation of the rivalry is, in the end, more important than an assertion of dominance.

between Leonard, Ruth and S, but it also insists on characterisation as being both a reading and a performance. In this the characters are: 'Interpreters in isolation. Chameleons in company' (21).³¹

This is evident in the self-consciousness of the characters' seeming rejection of but actual compliance with role-play:

She certainly had talent for those mime plays for instance. Oh those I must say I never had much time for them. You joined in readily enough Ruth. What could I do remain passive outsider to all your games then? You seemed to enjoy them rather I thought. Well – well I'd hardly thought you were aware whether I did or not. They looked at each other, quickly away, at their drinks (6).

Here, Ruth seems to criticise and reject participation in role-play but in another way she implicitly conforms to her role perfectly. During this kind of debate, Leonard and Ruth must remain 'in role'. To do otherwise would be to expose the reduction of their married life from genuine interaction into mere function. 'Playful husband' and 'disapproving wife' then, provide stereotypes of an unhappily matched couple for the narrative to expose and interrogate.³² So, if Leonard enjoys the mime, Ruth must disapprove: these are the positions that their 'good-cop, bad-cop' relationship insists on. For Leonard and S, participation in the games is both alluring and effortless: 'if others are willing to play along, it becomes comparatively simple' (61); these are 'Games that would be difficult not to join in' (135). Indeed, both the repeated mime plays and conforming to type that take place in *Three* suggest that the notion of choice is largely illusory. As S recognises, the role-play is in fact ceaseless: 'R plays a

³¹ 'The Chameleon' was at one stage a working title for *Three*.

³² The various 'games' and roles played by married couples is outlined and discussed by Eric Berne, *Games People Play*, London: Penguin Books, 1964; see 'Marital Games', 80-95. He names one of these 'Frigid Woman', a role frequently played by Ruth in *Three*, as I discuss below.

role when he is with us. Except I wonder if it is not a certain role she plays with me, when we are on our own' (142). The characters perform, they 'play out' selves, and these roles are as deliberate – 'I hang over many desultory designs, toy with subterfuges' (56) – as they are necessary. Here, role-play is not only a form redolent with theatrical technique: both the implied psychological fragility of the characters, and the fictional form of the narrative itself, require its on-going presence.

Ménage à trois

Quin showed herself to be admirably alive to the elusiveness of what happens between people, to what is lost in conversation, and to the possibilities of the English language for suggesting these little communicative lacunae. Her best writing hoarded words as if they were pebbles washed smooth by huge seas of experience.³³

More potatoes darling? Don't mind. Yes or no? She stood beside him, over him. He leaned back, twisted his neck. If there are some left thanks no no more that's plenty. How can you watch that programme just don't know I don't think it's funny one bit. He pronged a potato, held halfway, and laughed until his eyes watered. She looked at the cat, made noises, clicked, sucked, her nose wriggled. Make the coffee Leon. When this is over ohhhhhhhhhh ahhhhhhhhhhh oh that's good (15).

Many of the parallels between *Marienbad* and *Three* then – in terms, for example, of role-play and the interwoven narrative technique – come out of the desire to articulate and represent layers of interplay between three protagonists

³³ Nye, piece in memory of Quin, 1. Nye's phrasing here resonates with the extract where Berg is on the beach – there pebbles are 'hard-polished' by the sea. This is, it seems to me, an interesting example of the way that Quin's writing so often thinks about and performs its own effects. However Nye had, of course, read *Berg* and could well have borrowed the image from Quin to apply when discussing her writing.

without attempting to reduce these into a linear narrative structure. I would like now to consider this effect in more detail, by focussing on the various and conflicting representations of marriage, intimacy and sex. In particular, I will consider further a point touched upon in my introductory section on *Three*, and this is how the dense, often actually seemingly lacunae-less, third-person narrative form might communicate ‘the elusiveness of what happens between people’, specifically in terms of a ménage à trois in which S, a single and sexually imaginative young woman, both disturbs and shapes Ruth and Leonard’s marriage.

The form and nature of their interaction is key in this. As with their opening conversation, in the extract above it is not only the omission of speech distinguishers for talking, but also the general paucity of punctuation, which makes the distinction between thought and speech blurred. This enacts a continuum between the real and imaginary, as well as evoking sub-conversation. In this, the narrative is able to reach behind, beyond, before, underneath what is said, and into inarticulate sound. This technique demands that the narrative be read more carefully, that it be *listened to* – just like S’s aural journal. Here, there is certainly no lack of insight or observation into how people actually interact because of a lack of speech markers. Leonard and Ruth’s power struggle is fittingly expressed in this haranguing, threatening, noisy and visceral conversation. The crowding of sounds – the pronging, clicking and sucking, the extended ‘ohhhhhhhhh ahhhhhhhhhh’ – communicate much more than what is said. And, while the third-person narrator pretends at neutrality with minimalist description – ‘She stood beside him’ ‘He leaned back’ – the qualification of ‘beside’ as ‘over’ changes a more innocent, friendly stance

into one that threatens, as Leonard's neck is twisted round. The third-person narrator does not pretend to get inside the characters' minds, but the focus and brevity of its descriptions nevertheless add to the dialogue to heighten the sense of conflict. The form of this voice's reporting claims impartiality, but at the same time it represents marriage as an inevitable and inescapable assault on each person of its two, and here especially on Leonard.

In her diary, Ruth writes of the state of their relationship as an ultimate denial of positive intimacy, where there is no room for generosity or fun:

At least everything here around us has substance gives security. A home we have built up together. But lately I have felt almost an intruder. Why? I look at myself and see what I might be like in five ten years time. Will things be any different from now? The toleration politeness that brings a basic relationship a certain smoothness in day to day living. But never laughter (124).

Ruth's depiction of their married situation is bleak. The passage, taken from the only, brief extract from her journal in the whole book, is typical of the despair she voices there: she also admits envy of S's freedom. Here, the tone of resignation admits that the substance and security implied by the materials of house and home are illusory. The humourless 'smoothness in day to day living' remarks upon a surface with no substance behind it, and the toleration and politeness evoke unhappiness more clearly than any strongly negative terms could. This situation, despite her inevitable part in it, alienates Ruth and she feels 'almost an intruder'. Rather than love or even empathy, Leonard and Ruth are bound by routine.

For S too, as Leonard and Ruth realise: 'there was a need in her for security yet at the same time she rebelled against family everything contributed' (117). S stages her so-called rebellion against marriage by belittling

it. She reduces their marriage to exactly the kind of routine identified above, to 'habits they parcel up/ hand to each other' (102). Such observations confirm the general tenor of their habitual action and conversation, which accumulate to present a horrifying and stultifying domesticity in which they are trapped: 'She picked the plates up, rattled them together, scraped the remains and put them down for the cat' (15) and 'Have you been tidying my desk Ruth? A bit someone's got to tea's getting cold do come and sit down and stop fluttering around honestly you're like an old woman sometimes Leon' (85). Leonard and Ruth's lack of humour, genuine care or compassion is horrible, as are the endless and petty negotiations about whose turn it is to pour various beverages and the stilted mealtime conversations, which build to create a repetitive structure that allows no way out. This sort of claustrophobia is evident in a scene where they bathe together:

There we are hot enough love? She nodded, stripped quickly, looked at herself in the large mirror above the bath. He splashed about, whistled, used sponge, back-scratcher, a large round yellow bar of soap. She knelt in the bath, adjusted her plastic flowered hat, arms slid down, hands slapped the water until it lapped over her belly. She wriggled about, explored herself with an oval bar of lilac soap (43).

As with the descriptions of Edith and Judith in *Berg*, this close focus and superfluity of detail renders the bathing grotesque. Rather than creating a sense of positive closeness, it serves to deny intimacy. It is excessive and unable to, or more to the point, it is unconcerned with communicating reality. The magnification of sound in the splashing, whistling and slapping, the back-scratcher and plastic flowered hat seem like the sound effects and props of a performance. However, at the same time, the mundane setting and ordinary routine recalls, for example, James Joyce's description of Leopold Bloom's

morning routine in *Ulysses*, where the refusal of the allure of illusion similarly denies intimate acts intimacy by rejecting the comforts of mystique. Likewise, the bathing above communicates the inescapable proximity of married life, devoid of the mystique of lovers' intimacy.

Ideas about marital intimacy as claustrophobia are further problematised by the role and representation of sex. Isolated and insular, Leonard and Ruth lavish love and sensual caresses on things other than each other – he on his orchids: 'he parted leaves. Thrust through. He poked about with his little finger. He murmured with pleasure, sometimes sighed' (12), and she on her cat, Bobo: 'She looked at the cat, made noises, clicked, sucked, her nose wriggled' (15). This displacement of affection onto plants and pet, recalls Judith and Nathaniel's similar obsessions with cat and budgie in *Berg*. Across both texts the transferral of love away from the other of the relationship serves to exaggerate its dysfunction. Here, Leonard and Ruth seem incompatible in every way: sexually and intellectually, in taste and preference. Despite a willingness to explore herself with the lilac soap – and scenes where she 'Touched herself [...] licked a finger and rubbed a nipple' (76) – Ruth repeatedly refuses Leonard's sexual advances towards her, always attempting deferral: 'Just tired so exhausted after everything' (16); 'don't darling not now' (51); 'perhaps tomorrow – tomorrow darling' (52).

When they finally do have sex, it is horrible: 'He twitched several times, then sank down. She lay motionless, tears ran into her mouth' (79). There is nothing intimate about this. For both, sex has become something more reminiscent of death than vitality. This association is unpleasantly consolidated in Leonard's later rape of Ruth:

He pulled her dress up, slid the underwear apart, and went into her quickly, as she cried out, her arms above, hands clawed the wall. Her body sank into the bed, as he moved above her. Not like this oh God Leon not ... He panted as he strove faster, deeper. You're hurting oh Christ it's hurting me don't – no Leon are you mad? She tried bringing her legs together. His knees pressed them further apart, his hands planted either side of her arms. She dug her nails in until her fingers were covered in his blood. Going to fuck you fuck you fuck you until ... She screamed out as he went deeper in. She tore at his hair, face. He paused, turned his head away, began again, moved faster, until her bare thighs, belly smacked against him, and the springs of the bed creaked. Her body limp, head alone moved, twisted, came up, sank back, her mouth open, but no scream came (127-128).

This disturbing and violent scene is the ultimate acting out of the dialectic of antagonism that underpins their marriage. It both disrupts and magnifies the desire for transgression elsewhere in the narrative: 'belly smacked' echoes the 'hands [that] slapped the water until it lapped over her belly' in the bath; 'screamed out', followed by 'no scream came', recalls the inarticulate sounds at the mealtime above.³⁴ These echoes integrate the violence and shock of this act with the fabric of Leonard and Ruth's married lives. The rape provides relief, no matter how abhorrent, from the continuing sense of violent disappointment and longing between them. In this way, the transgression works to dissipate narrative tension. The resulting sense of relief, together with both the voyeurism of the witnessing and collusion in the elsewhere sympathetic portrayal of Leonard, works to figure the reading act as an implicated one.

Anyway, the narrative elsewhere implies, there is something sexy about forceful intercourse and violent language. When Leonard says 'I want to fuck you' (88), Ruth recoils in horror. S's sexual fantasies, on the other hand, desire

³⁴ Ruth's silent scream here horrifyingly inverts Judith's gaping lust in *Berg*. I further discuss the signification of the soundless scream and of inarticulate sound in Quin's writing in my chapters on *Tripticks* and *The Unmapped Country*.

violent titillation: 'Pretend I'm tied to the bed... Whip me with your hair... his chest burnt with a cigarette... When will you fuck me next?' (142). There is a distinction here between resigned sex and more active 'fucking'. While her pretensions to gentility prevent Ruth from enjoying sex, in contrast S revels in performing filthy practices. This echoes the difference between Edith and Judith in *Berg*. Both Ruth and Edith are restrained, or at least dishonest, whereas S and Judith revel in a carnivalesque sexuality and baseness.³⁵ For Ruth, the threshold of shame and embarrassment is low. She covers up trying on S's clothes – 'Picked up the clothes and pushed them into a cupboard' (13) – because of the titillation this activity brings, and is dishonest about masturbation: 'just got rather hot in the night' (77). However, as Stallybrass and White remind us: 'disgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as 'Other', return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination'.³⁶

In *Three*, S is the ultimate object of nostalgia, longing and fascination. She is the desired 'Other' for both the content and form of the narrative as a whole. Moreover, this desire for her transgresses ideas about disgust and gender: she is sexy to both Leonard and Ruth. Leonard voyeuristically watches her on film in an attempt at intimacy. He sits alone in the dark with his hand over his face after watching: 'A girl, naked, emerged from the sea, hair over her face', who 'danced away to edge of the sea, where she flung towel and mask down, dived into a huge wave, bobbed up, hair and seaweed caught in spray' (90). Although in fact

³⁵ This idea of the relationship between social status and disgust at sex can be developed by reference to Stallybrass and White's discussion about the bourgeois rejection of the carnival in Chapter 5 of *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 171-190. They point out that the carnival's revelling in base activity results from a high threshold of shame and embarrassment.

³⁶ Stallybrass and White, 191. This inescapable connection between disgust and desire recalls Ahmed's similar interpretation, which I discuss in relation to Edith and Judith above.

dead, here S is strikingly alive, as is Leonard's desire for her. For Ruth, the attempt at closeness is figured by wearing her clothes and beads. In one scene Ruth 'Undid her [S's] dress, put a dozen necklaces on, some draped over her breasts. In front of the mirror she pulled her breasts up by holding several necklaces above her neck' (12).

The covert, sexualised tenor of this act is confirmed by evidence elsewhere – in Ruth's masturbation after reading her diary, as well as the desire for intimacy when S was alive. S's aural journal records that when in bed with a bad period Ruth pleaded:

Do stay with me. An orange light
interior of some exotic flower
hovered
over walls. Smell of heavy perfume
Bodies. Hers. Only the shape moulded from the sheet. Will you
brush my hair?
Long
Thick
over shoulders (112).

The desire for physical contact in this request for hair-brushing – itself a sensual and stimulating act – is embellished in the scene by the scent of heavy perfume, the interior of the exotic flower (which recalls Leonard's fingering of the orchids), the dimmed light, and the body shape moulded on the sheet. These details imply a room fusty with the smell of naked bodies and sex. But something about Ruth's 'heavy', seemingly one-way desire for S is obsessive, unpleasant almost, especially when framed as morbid and sexualised role play by dressing up in S's clothes and jewellery.³⁷ In her actions both before and after S is dead then,

³⁷ This presence of sex-death not only anticipates the rape scene in *Three*, but also recalls Judith and Berg's titillation over what they assume to be his father's dead body.

Ruth insists on a potentially unwanted intimacy, a transgressive desire which in turn violates and infects the very closeness she craves.

Thus, the book connects sexual desire for S with the act of trespass. This is most evident in the triangular trap in which it is caught: a husband-wife-other triangle that seems to replace the father-mother-child triangle of *Berg*. But the emphasis, or problem, does not simply shift; it multiplies. The transition from child to adult is not clear cut, and instead the child-image bleeds into grown-up sexual fantasies: 'But suppose a nightmare? Scream, run over, fling myself on L's bed' (67). For S, Leonard is father figure and lover: he both replaces and plays out the father-fantasy figure, simultaneously offering parental security and sexual intimacy. Movement away from the child-image is further resisted and complicated by recurring memories where S recalls time spent with her father in 'the conspiracy of not being his daughter' (68).³⁸

Further, it becomes clear that S specifically and consciously desires to push at, to test and transgress the limits of Leonard and Ruth's married relationship: 'a situation I long to wade in right up to the very limits of imagination if possible. Gain another level, and added dimension, preferably bringing them both with me' (62). For each she usurps the other, and their three-way relationship is inevitably an unequal and temporary thing, bringing with it an undercurrent of threat, paranoia and suspicion, which unbalances and disrupts the narrative. While alive, S was the third which threatened the couple's two. Her desire to 'wade in right up to the very limits of imagination' symbolises

³⁸ This closely recalls Quin's comments in 'Leaving School' about visiting her father and 'pretending he was my lover', 63, as well as the ambiguity in 'Every Cripple Has His Own Way of Walking'. The allure of this fantasised and ambiguous parent-child relationship also echoed in the writer's friendships in life: 'I have often found myself at my best, a kind of security when with two other people, most of my friends are couples, & I suppose automatically I play the role of the child.' Letter: Quin to Brocard Sewell, *Like Black Swans*, 183.

– and this is confirmed in the narrative by Ruth’s sexual inhibition – the menace of the unknown, or of new and uninhibited behaviour. S was aware of her position of power over Ruth as usurper, ‘yet at the same time there was pity, yes pity for what I saw in her eyes, and her desperate clinging to us’ (125).

Such desperation is evident when Ruth compulsively listens to a section of the taped journal which she believes is both significant and hurtful because it implies, to her mind, a sexual encounter:

Was it like this with
Never before. Not like this. No one has touched me ever
Never never
Like this. Before. Like waves. The coming.
Slowly. Dual roles
realised. Yes yes
yes (114).³⁹

Ruth is already anxious about their relationship, and here she re-plays the tape, listening and fast-forwarding until she finds the particularly ‘painful’ section, the ‘proof’. But, the ambiguity and uncertainty of the events in S’s aural journal resists her desire for clarification. Further, the circular form of a spool of tape both complements and exaggerates the repetitive nature of Ruth’s action. This not only renders it obsessive and absurd, but also communicates the fragility, the fallacy, of her desire for clarity and understanding. The fragments of tape she hears and skips past in her quest for ‘confession’ are not quite exact repetitions of earlier on in the transcript and this slight difference creates a divergent emphasis that ironises her obsessive behaviour. Ruth hears the repeated section of tape differently each time because she listens both to cause

³⁹ This section is partially repeated on 118: ‘Was it like this with/ Never before like this. Before. Like waves. The coming./ Slowly. Then the rush of it. Demanding more. But without asking./ Dual roles. Realised. Yes yes/ Yes’.

herself pain, and in her desire for the 'truth'. Her repeated act is an attempt to inject meaning into her life by mastering the situation regarding S and Leonard: 'hell hell if only I knew – knew' (117).⁴⁰ What actually happens between Leonard and S remains, of course, unresolved. It is unclear whether references to sex between them are imagined or real, and when S describes having ecstatic and often violent sex in her diaries it is unclear whether this is with Leonard or someone else. Indeed, throughout the narrative, there is an awkwardness and sense of longing between them which smacks of frustrated desire more than anything else: S records this unease: 'In the sand/dunes/our fingers/touched. Accidentally. He sat up' (104).

Leonard's journal further serves to mystify rather than elucidate this ambiguity. Its tone is excessively flat, implying the repression of feeling in favour of an undifferentiated record of events:

October 18th Boat found capsized. Coat identified. Also
note in pocket looks like suicide
October 19th Two hours questioning by police sergeant.
River and coastline dragged.
October 20th R in bed all day. Translation completed.
October 21st Dinner with the Blakeleys. A good hock (41).

The monotone here is typical of a journal in which events are recorded seemingly at random and presented as if without qualitative difference – 'looks like suicide' 'coastline dragged' 'good hock'. The flattened tone in response to the central event of the narrative denies expectations of personal 'voice' and emotional engagement in diary writing. Instead, this journal form wants to give knowledge neither of Leonard, nor of his feelings about S's death. However, at

⁴⁰ This absurd repetition in an attempt at mastery, or progress, recalls Albert Camus' 'Myth of Sisyphus' (1942, trans. 1955) which Quin had read.

the same time, despite its form and surface, this journal seems 'less about preserving facts than about asserting, even performing, a self'.⁴¹ Furthermore, the reader suspects that Leonard's performance here is in fact false, and we read instead for clues with which to challenge or confirm this. But what kind of self is performed? It pretends to be one that does not differentiate between – or care about – the experiences of being questioned by the police and dinner with friends. The role is a callous and shallow one: the commendation of the hock seems out of place, insensitive, as does his attitude to Ruth's illness, as 'R in bed all day' is juxtaposed with 'Translation completed'. But the performance becomes unconvincing when it comes to the dispassionate record of S's suicide. Here, the apparent lack of emotion does not ring true. Leonard's reported intimacy with S, his videoing of her, and his secretive watching of that video elsewhere belie his apparent dispassion. Indeed, the journal itself exposes its minimalist form as a self-conscious performance: it is full of 'little black marks' denoting 'Far more personal' (42) events that Leonard takes pleasure in refusing to explain.

To jeopardise a bourgeois stronghold

There is a sense in which, then, these representations of marriage, sex and intimacy are again, as with the echoes of *Marienbad* in the book, always bound up with questions of role play and performance. More specifically, I have suggested that the portrayal of the desire for intimacy in *Three* exposes claustrophobic, transgressive and violating effects. To think about how such

⁴¹ Evenson, in his introduction to *Three*, Chicago and Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001, x.

representations of attack and transgression within the narrative might also be the point at which the book connects with its cultural and political contexts my reading here considers S's criticism of the institution of marriage as well as the function of the vandals who trespass into the narrative. What emerges is that while the interrogation of class clearly places the book in its broader British social context, its excessive styles and experimental forms refuse this critique as being aligned with social realism.

For S, nothing is more in need of attack than matrimony, she is 'Pursued by a compulsion to jeopardise such a bourgeois stronghold. So often scorned before, but soon understood, almost succumbed to: an ambiguous luxury' (61): her desire to trespass onto this apparently safe and solid territory is bound up with it being 'a bourgeois stronghold', 'an ambiguous luxury'. Indeed, the book's blurb claims that '*Three* is an incisive exploration of the emotional and sexual undercurrents of British middle-class life'.⁴² While this appraisal overplays the importance of class, it is true that the trappings and expectations of the British class system have a significant role to play. S's reduction of Leonard and Ruth's lives mocks them. Whereas they are imprisoned by being middle-class and limited by all its nice things and nasty prejudices, she positions herself as an irreverent outsider, exposing and rejecting the trappings and hierarchies of social position by ironising them. Her listing (and ridicule) of Leonard and Ruth's plethora of gadgetry and objects implies and denigrates a nouveau-riche, bought attempt at status.⁴³

⁴² Dalkey Archive version: Leonard and Ruth's class is not mentioned on the blurb of the 1966 Calder and Boyars edition.

⁴³ However, this simultaneously suggests that, despite pretensions to a position outside social norms, S instead remains caught up in ideas about old and new money, and therefore well within the prejudices of the class system.

Sofa. Flora-impregnated.
Chippendale chairs. Unchipped. Upholstered in blue.
They call turquoise.
Persian rugs. Second skins. For them.
Warm napkins
Silverware pawns. Salt-cellar dominates.
Rooms soundproofed.
Paintings
not hung
too small. Not small enough. But still-lives she used to do.
Burglar-proofed.
China plates
On the wall. Glass doors. Concealed lighting. White curtains (20-21).

The description is mocking, the language over elaborate – ‘Flora-impregnated’.
‘They call’ and ‘for them’ distances the speaker from those she describes.

Here as elsewhere, S’s appraisal of Leonard and Ruth’s emotional and domestic life renders it little more than a list of branded and luxurious, superfluous, objects as well as paid-for services – ‘specialists/ psychiatrists/ analysts/ masseurs/ osteopaths/ palmists/ clairvoyants’ (26). The narrative space given over to the things of their life implies a lack elsewhere – not only of their longed for child – and the sheer barrage of material objects and services is too much, and becomes ridiculous. The absurdity implied by such lists is complemented by the description of, for example, the guests at a dinner party who speak ‘with calculated eloquence. In French, in Italian. Cigars pampered, liqueur glasses stroked – the stems’ (57). Their behaviour is pretentious. These guests show off to each other: the French and Italian is used to impress, their actions pamper and stroke. They perpetuate bourgeois norms and rituals, at the same time the nature of the performance confirms that it is all for show, not genuine.

But, more interestingly perhaps, S’s attack and ridicule of middle class behaviour is mirrored and extended by the third-person narrative’s rendering of,

in particular, Ruth's prejudice. When she denigrates Leonard's father for having sugar in his tea – 'why it's almost a working-class habit' (80) – the narrative mocks her attitude. In addition, throughout the narrative, her attitude seems to parrot a classist and stereotyped bigotry and paranoia:

such peasants here too never can trust them tell them to do something and when your back's turned have to watch while they do it and show them. Yes like beasts and how they stare too Leon have you noticed when we drive past that woman and her kids honestly given half the chance I think they'd quite happily see us dead? They're all right if you talk to them. But what on earth can one say they wouldn't understand just go on staring and once we're through the gateway I can hear them laugh. Well at least they don't muck about in the river and they're certainly not to blame for those nasty obscenities put on my notices. That awful vulgar crowd from the holiday camp they're the worst I do think the Council should do something about it (9).

Cohen, in his discussion of the fear of vandals that emerged in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, identifies what he calls 'deviancy amplification' in an attempt to describe and explain the intensity of the media and middle-class distortion of the situation.⁴⁴ In particular, Cohen describes the processes that lead to the sorts of attitudes captured in Ruth's tirade above. He says that deviancy amplification is about expectation, reaction and confirmation. Put briefly, the problem (the working class adolescent – 'peasants'), leads to societal reaction (involving misperception – 'never can trust them') and the escalation into stereotypes – 'like beasts' 'who wouldn't understand just go on staring'.⁴⁵ Deviancy amplification also includes a distortion of terminology, where repeated and emotive phrasing provides a narrative for events that are yet to happen – 'I think they'd quite happily see us dead'.

⁴⁴ Cohen first uses this phrase on 177, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.

⁴⁵ My summary of Cohen's argument here is taken largely from the process laid out on 199.

This sort of middle-class misperception and fear of working-class youths – amplified by the narrative’s obsession with transgression – drives both Leonard and Ruth’s anxiety about trespassers and their desire for a ‘Burglar-proofed’ home. Their anxiety is great. Not only do they put up notices, but it is Leonard this time who fantasises a wall of cut glass and electric wire to stop ‘them’ finding a way over: ‘I’ve plans to stop them bloody well will too get a high wall built all the way round that’ll put an end to their vandalism. They’ll still find a way over. Have cut glass on the top and wire yes that’s it an electric wire will soon cure them’ (10). This paranoia develops the narrative’s class-critique by engaging with the fear of youth culture in a broader historical context: the anxiety and negative expectation here participates in and enacts a wider dialectic of antagonism. According to Cohen, such class tensions were underpinned by the ‘recurrent theme of *winning space*. Territoriality, solidarity, aggressive masculinity, stylistic innovation... all attempts by working-class youth to reclaim community and reassert traditional values’.⁴⁶ But more important that their actual behaviour, he points out: ‘these groups have occupied a constant position as folk devils’.⁴⁷ And, these devils, these inarticulate beasts, are things to be feared, banned and barred.

In the narrative, Leonard’s signs and fences are not enough to keep the trespassers out:

Then they came. In the middle of

⁴⁶ Cohen’s introduction, x. For Cohen, the ‘moral panic’ that followed working-class youths’ need to win space largely focussed on style. Emerging youth styles were associated with deviant or publicly disapproved values: they were an outward and visible sign of the ‘us-and-them’ generation gap. Teddy boys, for example, wore style and brutality as a group identity: their attitude included a callous threat of violence which, while exaggerated by the media, was nevertheless there. It is interesting, but perhaps an aside, that Quin, a working class writer, also attempted to win or create space for 1960s writing through stylistic innovation.

⁴⁷ Cohen, 10.

a storm. One night. Waving torches.
Throwing
fireworks
into the swimming pool. Stampeded
round the statues. While he stood quivering. In the summer-
house. In the dark. They screamed. Tore flowers out. She buried
her face in cushions. Crying. Hands covered her ears. Then they
left. When the storm passed. A trail of torn flowers left.
Plants. Broken bronze pieces.
Littered paths (103).

The incident is relayed by S with a matter of fact tone, despite the destruction caused: 'they came' then 'they left'. However, what happens is also confused and ambiguous – for example, who is the 'they' that screamed? S's language is distanced from both perpetrators and victims and as such what happens remains unclear. What is certain is that Leonard and Ruth – and therefore the narrative as a whole – have been expecting 'them' to come, and when they do he stands quivering and she buries her face into a cushion, cries and covers her ears. As with Leonard's earlier blocking out of sound with the shells, this signifies their inability to face or deal with reality. Further, this fear and distancing is also juxtaposed with an atmosphere of excitement and the ambiguity of this asks how much of the threat of trespass is imagined, created or provoked (or even desired) by Leonard and Ruth. The vandals' arrival, at last – as with the rape scene – does seem to bring some relief.

However, the incident is more serious than it at first seems. Not only are inanimate objects violated and damaged, but also Leonard: 'His blood. After they came/ down. Hurlled themselves. Pieces of metal at him' (104). At the same time, this violence is distorted and its 'reality' challenged by the partial repetition of the same incident in S's written diary. In this account, during the enactment of a mime: 'I noticed them first, half a dozen or so faces over the

edge of the pool' (136). Then things are thrown down, 'three of the statues moved' and Ruth screams, followed by a flurry of movement:

I couldn't make out anything, hardly see, as earth, metal pieces, broken bits of bronze fell around. When finally I could see, L lay flat on the ground. He was being beaten up by three men, whose faces, arms, legs were whitewashed... They looked like clowns giving vent to years of repressed feelings, as they punched, and kicked L (136-137).

The repetition highlights the performative nature of the violence: as clowns waving ritualistic torches, the perpetrators are whitewashed, their real identities masked. They are not real, complete people, but a blur of faces, arms and legs. This cartoon-like, exaggerated violence again echoes and recalls the objects of moral panic, discussed variously by Cohen as folk devils and 'actors on a stage', but even more relevantly here as 'images flickering on a screen. This was, after all, how they appeared to society: as processed images'.⁴⁸ In a similar way, the characters in S's journals are processed and uncanny images. The violence they enact is cartoon-like, the descriptions of it emphasise surface and flair above impact or emotion.

These trespassers (the masked unknown) haunt the remainder of the narrative, even calling to question the claims that S dies by her own hand. After the incident above, S is aware of a threatening, watching presence from across the water of 'several of the men who had beaten up L. They played some game with knives on the sand, and beckoned me over' (139). Their game is threatening; their previous trespass and attack confirms their capacity to carry out such a threat. However, simultaneously across the water, S sees a watching Leonard (the supposedly known). His presence there also symbolises the threat

⁴⁸ Cohen, 177.

of violent transgression. When 'an unidentified young woman, with stab wounds in back and abdomen, was found yesterday by a lake near the Sugarloaf mountain' (131) is read in context with, for example, Leonard's rape of Ruth, or his killing of a crab – 'L, still laughing, jumped on the crab and moved his foot several times, before looking down at the broken remains of shell, claws, greenish fluid' (133) – his penchant for force implicates him against S.⁴⁹ Once the uncertainty of her suicide has again been reiterated, this time by the discovery of the stabbed body, the possibility of murder hangs in the air. His violent actions imply that Leonard, as much as the men who attacked him, is capable of murder, and this further element of suspicion and uncertainty adds to the book's frustration of expected revelation as the narrative reaches its close.

The death drive

Today the first signs of sharpness in the air. The mist rises up from the ground lying in thin frost. The boat is ready, as planned. And all that's necessary now is a note. I know nothing will change (143).

But finally, while the narrative's representation and performance of violence and attack clearly evidences cultural interrogation in terms of both the critique of marriage and fear of violent youth, it is the ultimate transgression of a supposed self-killing which most haunts and shapes this book – it is driven by death – and I mean this in terms of its form as much as content. The book's ending, with boat, plan and note certainly implies that the death is a premeditated act. And,

⁴⁹ This meaningless killing of an animal as a possible rehearsal for murder recalls the killing of Bertie the budgie and Seby the cat in *Berg*: all are grotesque, distasteful, unsettling.

while the suggestion here that ‘nothing will change’ is reminiscent of *Berg*, S’s death is the absent and formative event which shapes and generates the energy of the text as a whole. Thus, I end my reading of *Three* by considering in what ways both the drive towards and act of death – for this text decides as well as desires – can be seen to both perform and theorise the relationship between experience and articulation, death and narrative structure.

Throughout the narrative, the desire for death is both ante and post ‘event’. S’s death sends out pre-emptive echoes of itself throughout the text like an inverted *deja-vu*, as if it is something that has always already happened. This recalls Freud’s thinking in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, where he pits ‘drives directed at self-preservation’ against masochistic drives that serve ‘to procure death’ and move the ego towards the desire for dissolution.⁵⁰ He concludes that the life drives will ultimately be dominated by the death drives, because ‘*the goal of all life is death*’.⁵¹ Put simply, life is a distraction, structured on a repetitive attempt at mastery, on the way to one’s own permanent absence in death. In the case of self-destruction, the self takes a ‘short cut to its life’s goal (to short-circuit the system as it were)’ and the attempt at mastery becomes synonymous with absence.⁵² According to Peter Brooks, deep within the plotting of literary texts themselves, we find that ‘at the heart of structures of repetition, the death drive is ‘found out’ by betraying itself *in repetition*’.⁵³ Hence the narrative tradition of foreshadowing death, found, for example, compellingly in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), where Tess imagines her death-day: ‘a day

⁵⁰ Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writing*, (Trans.) John Reddick, London: Penguin, 2003, 79.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 78.

⁵² *Ibid*, 79.

⁵³ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1984, 156. See also; Frank Kermode, ‘The End’, *The Sense of an Ending*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, 3-34.

which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of the year'.⁵⁴ This future event recurs with the regularity of a birthday, it is a date already somehow marked out from the beginning of her life. It is also a day foreshadowed and determined throughout the book by repeated signs and portents. The effect of this convergence of form and content results in a sense that throughout the book the death is already happening and already being repeated; it is not just a one off event.

However, while the death drive in *Three* might seem to imply a similar sort of determinist narrative structure, this determinism is somewhat denied by the writing and foreshadowing of death happening not only in third-person narration, but more compelling in S's journals too. Throughout, it is S who narrates and foreshadows her own absence: 'I become almost a shadow. The kind that extends up the wall, across the ceiling, dwindles gradually into other shadows. In my room. Theirs' (62). Here, S simultaneously asserts and denies her presence: 'I became almost a shadow'. Her metamorphosis from 'I' into a shadow that 'dwindles gradually into other shadows' is towards the absent signifier of previous presence. This dissolution is something S desires as a self-determined act, in which she desires to become author and protagonist in the narrative of her life.⁵⁵ Thus, her death will be an articulate act: 'My certainty shall be their confusion' (53). Here, absence from life is the necessary fulfilment of that life, because it is this that definitively shapes and presences it. S sees self-destruction as a form of authorship with her own life, an act she feels in

⁵⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. London: Penguin, 1979, 149.

⁵⁵ This connection between death and articulation is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's claim that 'Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death'. In the case of suicide, or self-destruction, the person becomes storyteller of his or her own life: 'life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death', 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations*, (Trans.) Harry Zorn, London: Pimlico, 1999, 93.

control of through repeated thinking about and planning the forthcoming and supposedly meaning-bestowing event.⁵⁶ Significantly, in this her death is a written performance of self-destruction – ‘to write it down would almost be like performing the action itself’ (139). Here the desire for dissolution is a desire for a moment of pure articulation, but also of performance, as if self-disintegration might also become an act of self-construction.⁵⁷

This desire directly engages with the problems death places on articulation and serves as a trope for the relation of death to the writing process in general. In *Over Her Dead Body*, Elisabeth Bronfen reminds us that the act of writing only ever renders present a shadow of what is absent.⁵⁸ She posits that the act of writing presupposes, or is itself an act that confirms, loss and absence, but that it also paradoxically negates that loss through partial presencing in the act of representation.⁵⁹ Thus the very form of the written word is always a matrix of presence and absence, because writing necessarily absents what it names. In *Three, S* persuasively represents this matrix in her dominating absent-presence in both the language and structure of the narrative. In addition, not only does the presence of a text always denote an absence or negation of the writing subject, but in the case of death, there is a particular gap between language and the linguistic signifier. Death, as the dissolution of the self, can only be articulated in relation to the self, either in presence when

⁵⁶ For a consideration of further implications of the annihilation of the self in writing see Richard Poirier, ‘Writing Off the Self’, *Raritan*, Summer 1981, 106-133.

⁵⁷ For more on death as articulation and self-construction see Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, 141-167. However, as Al Alvarez rightly reminds us (whatever we think of his general attitude towards Sylvia Plath and suicide), it is important to be wary of the ‘myth’ of the female writer as the ‘sacrificial victim, offering herself up for the sake of her art’, *The Savage God; A Study of Suicide*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, 33.

⁵⁸ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 30.

⁵⁹ This argument is similar to that made by Derrida in *Memoirs of the Blind* in which the act of representation is always also a moment of looking away, as I discuss in my Introduction.

looking forward to death, or retrospectively in absentia, interpreted by the surviving subjects. Indeed, as Barthes reminds us, the expression of absence is a referent wedged between two tenses: 'that of the reference and that of the allocution: you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you)'.⁶⁰ To express absence functions to presence the other: presence and absence are simultaneously experienced and uttered. So when Leonard watches the video of S he experiences her presence and absence simultaneously, as when Leonard and Ruth hear her voice on the spool of tape.

The very circularity of this spool of tape serves as a reminder that even though *Three* seems to narrate (albeit somewhat backwards) a linear order of events, the split and repetitive forms of the book refuse and fragment this, and the narrative ends with S about to die even though she has been dead throughout. This 'ending' is foreshadowed by S's repeated references to the lake in the middle of the mountains, which 'they say' will be visited on a tomorrow that never comes until she dies there.⁶¹ Her recurring desire to go to this lake – and its continual deferral – is a repetition that creates an incantation of the allure, an enactment almost, of self-destruction which fantasises about both its performance and effects: 'How easy for a body to drift out, caught up in a current, and never be discovered, or for anyone ever to be certain' (139).

As such, suicide functions as the point at which *Three* theorises about and interrogates the relationship between experience and articulation – but, most significantly, this is also always figured as a performance:

I'm contemplating hanging myself. He whispered. He stood on a chair, and mimed an extraordinary grotesque scene, the longest I've

⁶⁰ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, (Trans.) Richard Howard. London: Penguin, 1990, 15.

⁶¹ References to the promise to row to the mountains; 24, 104 and 106.

ever seen him perform. I clapped enthusiastically when thinking it over. But touching his neck he stretched up from the chair. Ducked his head, until at last he jumped from the chair, his head rolling, tongue lolled out. He collapsed on the floor, laughing, and went on laughing, shaking from head to foot. They say one gets an erection that way. He shouted at R (138).

Leonard's 'performance' of suicide here is carefully directed, knowing. It includes a theatrical whisper, followed by the longest and most 'extraordinarily grotesque' scene S has ever seen him perform. The scene is an absurd parody, an enactment and exaggeration of suicidal fantasy elsewhere in the narrative, which is simultaneously laughable and horrible.⁶² Indeed, the refusal of pathos here in both Leonard's performance of suicide and S's description of it figures the resistant and deliberate nature of the suicidal act across the narrative as a whole. This resistant play is also manifest in the way in which the narrative is aware of but refuses to succumb to the potential relationship between the death drive and deterministic narrative structure. When S refers to her role as determined – 'I have become the victim now, and from that there is no turning back' (135) – this denotes an awareness of a structural determinism, but also suggests that the 'role' she is now playing is a chosen one.

In this way, and in conclusion, it seems to me that *Three* 'plays out' suicide as a way of interrogating and rejecting the idea that written narrative is or should be determined by pre-existent patterns and structures. This challenge is posed throughout the book, from its engagement with the structural forms and techniques of *Marienbad* to the representations and performance of violent and transgressive sex, intimacy and vandalism. As such, by explicating its

⁶² This ambivalence recalls Bakhtin's discussion of carnival laughter as a reaction to life's crises, where laughter can be a (meaningful) response to crisis. Blomfield talks of Quin's 'characteristic brand of grim and self-mocking humour, a humour – to her friends now unbearably painful – which even encompassed the image of her own death', 'Reasons for Existence', 1.

engagements with cultural contexts, as well as discussing the effects of an increasingly experimental, disruptive narrative form, my reading of *Three* has established how this book moves on from *Berg*. More specifically, I have shown that the book's questioning of marriage and class acts to mirror a simultaneous rejection of traditional narrative, as Quin's writing knits form, content and performance ever more closely together. For many readers, the overlapping nature of the fragmented journal and third-person forms and repetitive, dense content of this book proved too much.⁶³ However, as I have demonstrated here, the reach for articulation which takes place across this range of forms and expression in *Three* is in fact directly necessary and pertinent to its preoccupation with whether and in what ways it might be possible to write or figure both intimacy and death without completely absencing them. Furthermore, in this book haunted by a drowning, the tension between structural determinism and authorship, in terms of the relationship between the writing and act of death, seems particularly poignant, given that the author's own fate was the same.

⁶³ In her piece on *Three*, Bruce laments that: 'most of our reviewers seem to have considered that in their comments upon Three they must at all costs avoid further indulgence: a major talent? – then let it be ritually slaughtered and buried before it attract to itself too many of the rays of the sun', 10.

Illumination 3

The knowledge that soon she would cross the border to a country,
his country America, where once more she would feel a stranger.

And England?

How distant it seemed now. Yet in moments a longing.

But for what?

She had no sense of belonging there either.¹

I wonder about stillness in Greece – from what I hear: parties, all and every night on islands, dancing and singing in taverns, ouzo local brew 3d a tot how and when can I write ????????? Scott Fitzgerald said writing is like swimming under water holding your breath. Wish I could hold mine for longer!²

Passages was written while Quin was living in America, but is very probably set in the Mediterranean of Greece. In the summer of 1964, she had travelled across Italy and the Ionian Sea, initially to Parga to stay with friends Jim and Valerie.³ Together, they travelled to Athens, Corfu, Ithaca and Kolymos, and bought tickets to Istanbul which they never reached because of the riots. Encountering this situation frightened them. Quin sent a postcard to Calder, which has a photograph of statues described as 'Olympia. Centaur seizing a Lapithan girl' on the front, and 'S.O.S. £.s.d. needed – desperate. Istanbul riots. Please forward to: c/o L. Matheovdaki, 4, Seremeti, Corfu, Greece' written messily in black felt-tip on the back.⁴ The contrast between photograph and words is striking: it conveys a desperate desire for flight from real circumstances against the classical backdrop of an idealised Greece.

¹ 'Eyes that Watch behind the Wind', *A Signature Anthology*, London: Calder and Boyars Ltd., 1975, 136.

² Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 20th June 1964.

³ The trip was funded by Henry Williamson, so he claims in Letter: Williamson to Carol Burns, 30th July 1964, Carol Burns Papers.

⁴ Postcard: Quin to Calder, received 28th July 1964. Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 2.

This trip to Greece was just one among many at this time. Quin was peripatetic. During the early sixties, she not only retreated to Dorset and Brighton, but also travelled to Bantry in Ireland, to Italy, Paris, Amsterdam and Scotland. Then, in the late spring of 1965, she sailed to New York to take up her Harkness Fellowship. On this first visit she met John Carter and started a brief affair with him. However, in all other ways the time there was not a success, she was increasingly frenetic and conflicted, and did not like this 'whale's mouth of a city, where people paddle—swim up sidewalks that are fallen ladders'.⁵ So, she went on to Placitas and then the Lawrence Ranch near San Christobal in New Mexico: 'It really is a lovely lovely place'.⁶ During this time she stayed with the Creeleys, and met Sward, an American poet she later had a love affair with – one which initially also included his wife, Diane.

At the end of that year Quin travelled more in America, spending time in the Bahamas and San Francisco – in a 'crazy yellow house on a barge, just outside Sausalito, which is across from the Golden Gate bridge, and is really lovely – I guess it's the nearest to my idea of living in a tower! Anyway it gives me that sense of stillness which I find necessary to do any writing'.⁷ Then, she settled for the next year or so in Placitas, New Mexico: 'Mountains. Mesas. Space. Ah Space'.⁸ Throughout this time the relationship with Sward developed and in 1967 she lived with him in Iowa for a while before they returned together to London for a few months. However, when she travelled to Mexico in the spring of 1968, following him there in the hope he would divorce his wife, this did not happen. Instead, Sward started up a love affair with someone new and

⁵ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 14th May 1965.

⁶ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 4th June 1965.

⁷ Letter: Quin to Boyars, 6th November 1965. Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 2.

⁸ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 20th June 1966.

Quin, devastated, returned to Placitas, before taking up a place for a month or two at the McDowell Artists' Colony in New Hampshire. Then, in November 1968, she again returned to London.

In the early 1970s, Paddy Kitchen reflected: 'I see how the last twelve years have been a pattern of conflict followed by flight and seclusion'.⁹ And certainly, Quin's life was patterned by always moving on, by the endless search for a place she hoped at last would bring the often repeated desire for a longer-term 'stillness' and 'space'. However, staying still to write – or, as she put it, swimming under water and holding her breath – became increasingly unbearable and impossible. In the end, the search for somewhere or someone – lover, father-figure, brother – to ground her was an impossible task.¹⁰

⁹ Letter: Kitchen to Carol Burns, undated. Carol Burns Papers.

¹⁰ Eva Figs claimed Quin's ever moving on was motivated by a search to replace the brother she had lost, telephone interview with Nonia Williams Korteling, 30th April 2009, 9.35 am.

Passages, 1969: The transgressive resistant paradox

Passage.

The action of going or moving onward, across, or past; movement from one place or point to another, or over or through a space or medium; transit.

To move sideways in riding, the horse making controlled and exaggerated stepping movements. Also in extended use: to move from side to side or to and fro.¹

Saturday

So let us begin another journey. Change the setting. Everything is changing, the country, the climate. There is no compromise now. No country we can return to. She still has her obsession to follow through and her fantasies to live out. For myself there is less of an argument. I am for the moment committed to this moment. This train. The distance behind and ahead. And the sea that soon perhaps we will cross.²

Quin's third book, *Passages*, ends with a 'distance behind and ahead' to 'begin another journey'. But, this is both provisional – 'I am for the moment committed to this moment' – and uncertain – 'the sea that soon perhaps we will cross'. For, there is 'no country to return to' and are, for the writing as a whole, only 'unmapped' ones ahead. The symbolic sea, which it is in fact not possible to cross, as *Three* illustrates, leads the writing on, as with both *Berg* and *Three*, towards an endpoint or resolution ever absent and deferred. This incomplete journey figures Quin's conflict as a writer, as one who wants to pull forward and move on, but whose writing simultaneously expresses resistance to this. Its explicit journeying

¹ Selected definitions, Oxford English Dictionary.

² *Passages*, Chicago and Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003, 112. Subsequent references will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

substance and form make this the book which most clearly expresses this tension: it both moves through and resists divergent narrative modes and structures. But, this is difficult to know how to read: the aim of my analysis throughout this chapter is to negotiate such difficulty.

A useful starting point is the way that, throughout, the book activates several meanings of the title, *Passages*.³ This is a narrative always in transit across and through different passages of text. Its storyline follows a woman and man's quest ever 'onward, across [and] past' a Mediterranean landscape, in a search for her lost brother. The missing third recalls the position of the absent character, S, in *Three*. But, whereas there S dominates through her aural and written journals, here the brother is silent, positioned as a shadow always beyond the narrative's reach. Instead, the book focuses on the woman and man's ceaseless action of passaging onward, across, past: as a result, the brother is not much more than a device that motivates the narrative. Indeed, as Barber rightly identifies, in this book what matters is process rather than outcome; 'the metaphor of the journey is made over into the very substance and form of the book itself'.⁴

This 'substance and form' is divided into four sections, which shift alternately between two perspectives, broadly those of the woman and man. Hers is an impressionistic account of the sensory experiences along the way; his an annotated journal. The woman's sections are formed of an interconnected chain of transitional passages that mimic, but are often in fact not, paragraphs. This

³ Although it is not a direct source text, Quin was aware of Ed Dorn's autobiographical *Rites of Passage* (1965), which she suggested that Sward read. Letter: Quin to Sward, 17th October 1966, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8.

⁴ Barber, 'The Human Sorceress', unpublished manuscript, Calder and Boyars manuscripts, box 103, 1-2.

episodic structure creates a simultaneous stasis and momentum, a stop-start from one arbitrary 'place or point [in the narrative] to another'. In this way, the technique invokes the experience of a journey as the ideas metamorphosise through the text in a broadly linear trajectory. Further, the text is written with a detail that demands the reader is always aware of the passing of ideas and images at word level.

In contrast, the man's journal requires reading of a different direction. These sections do not so much narrate the passing of time as they cross and mediate between different viewpoints and ideas, 'over [and] through [the] space or medium'. Notes, reported speech, recorded dreams, cut-up techniques, sections taken from source material and diary entries are placed side-by-side.⁵ To read them our eye must sidestep to-and-fro across, as well as down, the page. This structure is 'controlled' and 'exaggerated' like the passaging horse in the definition above, which Quin, as an experienced horse-woman, would have well appreciated.⁶ Throughout these sections, various types of text are held in parataxis and presented without clear interconnection: the possibility for a stable narrative perspective or linear reading action is denied. Instead, in the spaces and angles of reading between columns of text, the possibility for multiple and oblique meanings abides. This presents the reader with a maze that denies linear trajectory: the challenge is to find a meaningful passage through.

⁵ This engages with a zeitgeist for 'illustrative', performative formatting. See also; Richard Brautigan's 1967 *Trout Fishing in America*, B. S. Johnson's 1964 *Albert Angelo*, and the slightly later example of Christine Brooke-Rose's 1975 *Thru*.

⁶ 'I wonder how much riding horses gave me my rhythms with my own writing?!' Letter: Quin to Sward, 4th October 1966, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8. Of Quin's riding, Kitchen says: 'She rode as she wrote, naturally and with splendour', 'Catherine Wheel: Recollections of Ann Quin', *London Magazine* 19, June 1979.

In these ways, the title casts its interpretative shadow to interrogate and invigorate literary structure, and in turn, reading. Throughout, the notion of 'passages' acts as a code which both constitutes and complicates the reading process. On one hand, connotations of the title seem to offer a guide for reading; on the other a clear route through is refused. The momentum of the title, together with the search storyline, seems to connect disparate ideas or pieces of text, but what exactly that connection is remains unresolved. Instead, the proliferation and inclusion of multiple aspects of the title act to confuse and frustrate the reading process. In his assessment of *Passages*, Hassam points out that here, with a narrative structured upon the proliferation of divergent echoes of its title, Quin uses the same technique as Robbe-Grillet in *Topology of a Phantom City* (1976), but, significantly, that she predates him.⁷ Further, it seems to me, Quin's method compellingly recalls Benjamin's in *The Arcades Project* (written 1927-1940). It is not only that both writers foreground the activity of reading as a journey or search, but for both, the 'passage' is simultaneously literally a piece of text and a concept or space employed to suggest – but not fully explicate – the connections and openings between different ideas or places. Benjamin's starting point is a textual passage taken from the *Illustrated Guide to Paris* of 1852.⁸ What follows are numerous and detailed meditations on the structure of the Paris arcades – the act of passaging through them, the passages and places they lead to – which acts as a device with which to describe the city's historic and geographical constructions, and in turn the constructions of narrative itself. While there is no evidence to

⁷ Hassam, 96-97.

⁸ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Trans.) Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 31.

suggest Quin knew Benjamin's 'passage work' directly, it is noteworthy that both use the same device to generate an interconnected montage to similar effect.

In this way, 'passages' not only describes the movement and constructions of the writing, but also the action of reading it. This reading is necessarily self-conscious and reflexive – it requires that the activity of reading itself be decoded. In response, my method is informed by Barthes' theories of reading and textual analysis which emerged at a similar time. Drawing in turn on the 'way[s] of proceeding'⁹ he employs in both 'The Metaphor of the Eye' (1963) and 'The Struggle with the Angel' (1971), I utilise his methodology because it seems to me that Quin's writing here itself both anticipates and theorises such a reading. Barthes' discussion – and celebration – of the pressures, complication and open-endedness of the friction between what he calls the 'two intelligibilities' of 'sequential readability but cultural ambiguity' provides a particularly pertinent frame.¹⁰ My reading of *Passages* demonstrates how the book plays out and complicates the tension between readability and ambiguity, specifically in terms of its narrative sequencing and cultural preoccupations. This is a book always in oscillation between binaries: transgression and resistance, sexual subject and object, experiment and tradition – and, in particular here, the Hellenic/Judaic tension.¹¹ This push-pull, of a text that wants to risk more than it is ultimately able

⁹ Barthes, 'The Struggle with the Angel', *Image, Music, Text*, (Trans.) Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press, 1977, 127.

¹⁰ Barthes, 'The Struggle with the Angel', 131; see analysis 129-131. The tension Barthes identifies here recalls Creeley's claim that Quin's writing is concerned with possibilities for the modes of continuity and seriality of prose.

¹¹ The background for this perceived cultural binary is surely in the pervasive influence of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932.

to, is characteristic of the oeuvre as a whole: it is here that the transgressive-resistant paradox of Quin's writing is most deeply felt.

The line of words

His hands round the glass, veins pressed under hairs, lighter from cuffs to knuckles. Hands above his head, marking the design of some unfamiliar birds. Slant of wings to the slant of their bodies under, caught the light of falling. They turned from a straight course into a curved one, remained at the same height, wings on the convex side of their curving movements, moved in line. Lines

under his eyes, mouth. His mouth betrayed the eyes' attention on the play we saw that night (16).

The writing in the woman's sections of *Passages* is characterised by slippage and continuity across the line of words and my reading here will track, consider and respond to this. It is a quality evident in the movement of the narrative here, as it passages round, under, above, under, between man and birds.¹² Across the trajectory of the words the two become closely associated, the line(s) slanting, falling, straight, curved, moving together. The connecting instance, when the man's action gestures the movement of the birds, is proliferated by repetitions and patterns in the language. Words repeat and vary so that the descriptions become inextricable – the hands that curve round the glass mark the birds; their movement

¹² This 'bird' thread picks up from *Berg* and is discussed more fully in my chapter on *The Unmapped Country*.

into line is in continuum with the lines on the man's face. Birds and man are thus at first 'coincidentally' and then inextricably aligned.

However, the seemingly chance gesture that connects them – 'hands above his head, marking the design of some familiar birds' – is also one which marks and declares the text's design and fabrication. The birds move in an ordered chain, they turn and slant; so too does the line of words that move with and weave around them. Furthermore, to the knowing, watching reader, this focus on the particular shapes of the birds' movement – 'slant of wings to the slant of their bodies' – announces a source text. In his acutely observational notebooks, Leonardo da Vinci describes the structure of birds' wings in detail in terms of their anatomy and function during flight. He spends some time on the 'lines of movements made by birds', saying that 'they enter the wind with a slanting movement from below and then place themselves slantwise upon the course of the wind'.¹³ Quin herself said of da Vinci's notebooks: 'God wot fine things these are: beautiful descriptions [...] Have actually taken notes down and used some of his descriptions in my own work, juxtapositioning the words (shhhhh you'll be the only ONE who'll know what a 'fraud' I really am!)'.¹⁴

As a result, the extract above manages to be both overtly written – not least in the way it employs and juxtaposes da Vinci's words and phrases – and seemingly transparent, as if communicating a similarly acute observation. Indeed,

¹³ da Vinci, *Notebooks*, (Ed.) Irma Richter, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, respectively 97 and 101.

¹⁴ Letter: Quin to Sward, 21st September 1966. Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8. This is only one example among many of the paraphrasing of source texts in this book, the most dominant being the sections of Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. I consider the effects of this type of 'fraud' in the section 'Mythologies in the margins'.

the *Times Literary Supplement* review praises *Passages* for precisely this kind of mimetic effect. For that reader, the ‘juxtaposition of precisely caught experiences’ together with ‘the confused overall shape of the story’ ‘suggest exactly the reactions of the traveller whose senses acquire a new responsiveness to detail’.¹⁵ And certainly, the woman’s sections do primarily seem to respond to precise features of the unfamiliar landscape. Out of a train window, she observes: ‘valleys grown wider, deeper, where rivers continually change their position. Bases of the hills bent back towards the course of the river. Lights, signs from cities, villages, towns I know only from maps, brochures’ (7). On one level, this does indeed seem to be what is seen. The prose is responsive to and evocative of its surroundings, and the resulting accumulation of minutiae mimics the wide-eyed observations of a traveller, albeit one with a poetic, written turn of phrase – these hills are ‘bent back’. However, to the attentive reader familiar with Quin, the crafting of the imagery is even more obvious than this. The woman also supposedly saw the ‘Rain walked designing its own shadow’ (7) out of the train window, with the very same phrase that haunts the letters and fiction of this time.¹⁶ Moreover, the shadow – the key symbol of both reading and design in Quin – almost immediately then repeats: ‘Shadow thrown on a long wall’ (8).¹⁷

In this way, certain images or figures within the descriptions – the line and movement of the birds here – are imbued with apparent significance, as if aiding our interpretation towards a meaning beyond the words on the page. However,

¹⁵ ‘Lovers’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 3rd April 1969.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this particular phrase, please refer back to my Introduction.

¹⁷ This phrasing itself closely echoes Berg in Pirandello hero mode, ‘thrown’ onto a ‘shadow screen’ (cited on my 51 above). This confirms the import of reading the oeuvre as a whole, to better notice and think about the effects of such extensive patterning and repetition.

what this writing technique actually does is elevate linguistic artistry in such a way that all too often the reader cannot penetrate beyond the movement and relationship of the textual surface of the words themselves.¹⁸ The resulting partial and ever-evolving repetition of already written words and phrases both disrupts and invigorates the sequencing and readability of the prose.

The effect of this method can be usefully interpreted and illuminated by Barthes' analysis of linguistic contagion and syntagma in 'The Metaphor of the Eye'. This essay, written in response to Georges Bataille's erotic book *Story of the Eye* (1928), claims that it is not a story of characters, but a story of the object itself (the eye), which moves:

from *image to image*, in which case its story is that of migration, the cycle of the avatars it passes through, far removed from its original being, down the path of a particular imagination that distorts but never drops it.¹⁹

In a similar way, it seems to me, the woman's sections of *Passages* do not tell a story *about* the characters or their search, rather they move from image to image enacting a linguistic quest for revitalized narrative forms and expression. This quest is evident in the interrelated sequencing that characterises these parts of the book. The example of the movement of words and birds above not only (happily) coincides with Barthes' use of the concept of migration, but their alignment also corresponds with his term 'syntagma'. This, he says, means 'the plane of concatenation and combination of signs at the level of actual discourse (e.g. the

¹⁸ For a similar effect, see my discussion of the thickened narrative surfaces in *Berg*.

¹⁹ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye' (Trans.) J.A. Underwood, afterword to Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, (Trans.) Joachim Neugroschal, London: Penguin, 2001, 119.

line of words)’ – or in other words the seriality of the prose.²⁰ As with Bataille’s eye, Quin’s words here pass through a cycle of ‘avatars’, migrating between images and ideas that are distorted but not dropped. Further, Barthes point out that, while the metamorphosis of such avatars act by ‘demolishing the usual contiguities of objects and substituting fresh encounters’ they simultaneously insist on ‘the persistence of a single theme’.²¹ In the case of Bataille, the ‘narrative is simply a kind of flow of matter’: the writing is driven by the search for ever invigorated forms of linguistic interchange.²² This is certainly similar to the narrative technique and effect of the woman’s sections in *Passages*, which are driven by a similar impulse of change and continuity, transgression and resistance.

What is more, according to Barthes – and this is where his analysis is most pertinent for my reading of Quin here – *the point* of Bataille’s book is that it is a restrictive form whose purpose is to bring out the terms of the various metaphors. In this way, neither text is concerned with realistic story or content: both are literature of and about a transgressive technique which succeeds by freeing ‘the contiguities of terms’ so that metaphors liaise and cross and ‘The world becomes *blurred*; properties are no longer separate’.²³ Barthes describes the resulting ‘wavy meaning’ by concluding that ‘the whole of *Story of the Eye* signifies in the manner of a vibration’.²⁴ Similarly, the word-level syntagma in *Passages* is an interwoven prose which inextricably and inexplicably connects disparate elements of the narration. The result is indeed blurred, the language spills over and exceeds itself,

²⁰ Ibid, 127.

²¹ Ibid, 125.

²² Ibid, 123.

²³ Ibid, 125.

²⁴ Ibid.

its properties cannot remain separate. This effect can be found throughout the woman's passages, for example in an extract where again the man's gesture seems to set the chain of syntagma going:

Grains in wood his fingers traced, she entered. Land many oceans spilled into. The way landscapes entered a room. Rooms she went through, corridors. Doors she opened onto carpets that grew towards trees, branches through walls, windows (69).

Here, the experience oscillates between the real and imagined such that the narrative perspective is not so much an observation of the scene, but a blurring and communion with it.²⁵ Her movements enter and open into the scene. She passages along corridors and through doors. The rooms she goes through grow towards trees, their branches through walls. This movement is ambiguous, for example when 'she entered', does this mean the scene where 'his fingers' trace the grains in the wood or the land oceans spill into? The construction of the narrative here resists interpretation. Its characteristically minimal, pared down and often incomplete sentences are difficult to navigate, their subjects and objects often impossible to determine.

As with the 'line of birds' extract above, the transformative power of the writing here is created by the slippage and manipulation of its verbal chain. In it, descriptions blur into each other to the point where it becomes hard to follow their sense. Each focal point is effaced in favour of the next: land, landscapes, room, rooms, corridors, doors, and so on. The vibration in this extract is created by simultaneous coincidence and divergence of sound and meaning repetitions: for

²⁵ This sense of the individual blurring with and into the world is evident across Quin's writing.

example, the juxtaposition of 'corridors. Doors'. In one sense this proximity is mundane – in life, corridors and doors often do come together. However, the surrounding content, together with the stuttering of the sound repetition – see also, for example, 'line. Lines' above – makes the familiar strange. Similarly, while the proximity of 'land' and 'oceans' is common, the verb 'spilled' is perhaps unexpected. This disruption of ordinarily expected phrasing or word grouping and ordering is further enhanced by the supposedly parallel action of landscapes entering a room. The almost naturalism of the preceding sentence implies that this too happens. Yes, branches can (eventually) grow through (crumbling) walls, but the implied momentum of the surrounding content makes the idea strange, fantastical. In this way the language suggests new or unexpected meanings and resists the reader's desire for clarity. This technique, it seems to me, is a good example of how Quin's writing in *Passages* disturbs ordinarily expected linguistic associations to disrupt and invigorate language, making it stutter into new meanings.

The vibration created by this 'blurred' and 'wavy' meaning – the chain of morphing syntagma – can, I have argued, be interpreted in terms of Barthes' reading techniques. But, what does it mean to further describe the jarring, insistent partial repetitions across the verbal chain as stuttering? In answer, I propose that the sequencing and sounds of the words stutter because often roughness and disruption replace smoothness and flow. This stuttering generates alternative meanings rather than invoking pre-existent ones.²⁶ Most significantly, the straining

²⁶ For further discussion of stuttering in Quin, see both my Introduction and chapter on *The Unmapped Country*.

of language that takes place in this is simultaneously bound up with sound and meaning patterns. The creative effects of this stress and strain are articulated by Deleuze when he speaks of writers who, as he puts it, '*minorize*' language:

they make the language take flight, they send it racing along a witch's line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation.²⁷

A minor use of literature makes language 'take flight' and sends it 'racing along a witch's line': it destabilises and fragments language by dividing and varying its terms. These qualities, which result in an 'incessant modulation', recall the invigorating and blurring effects of Quin's line of words in, for example, the 'line of birds' extract. More precisely, for the 'branches through walls' extract at hand, Deleuze and Guattari's further discussion of 'minor literature' identifies the 'deterritorialization of language' as one of its key characteristics.²⁸ They describe this deterritorialization as an unexpected, disruptive use of language whereby it is either falsely enriched, or exaggeratedly pared down.²⁹

Thus, not only the strange use of ordinary words in the example above, but also the disruptive effects of sound across the syntagma, can be said to demonstrate how Quin's prose vibrates, how it 'take[s] flight'. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, this quality is integral to minor literature, which not only makes the familiar strange, but requires that its author become a '*sort of stranger within*'

²⁷ Deleuze, 'He Stuttered', *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 109.

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, (Trans.) Dana Polan, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 18. The book was written in 1975.

²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari's examples are Joyce, who they claim over determines language, and Beckett, who uses a willed poverty: both make language 'vibrate with a new intensity', *Ibid*, 19.

their own language.³⁰ 'Land many oceans spilled into' is an apt example of this in two ways. The unusual and jumbled sentence construction, beginning with the (seeming) object – which lacks the expected definite article – and ending with the verb and preposition, reads as if written by someone foreign to the language. Further, as I suggest above, 'spilled' is not only unexpected, it is not quite right: as elsewhere in the woman's sections, 'Unmade roads curled above chasms' (11) and 'fish [are] unchained at the water's edge' (7). Repeatedly, unusual sequencing and unexpected words interrupt the readability of the line of words. In this Quin writes as if one foreign to her own language: the language stutters and vibrates, resisting our reading but always luring it on.

A woman's eye

Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused [...] It is usual for normal people to linger to some extent over the intermediate sexual aim of a looking that has a sexual tinge to it.³¹

Do if you possibly can go & see Marat/Sade it is fascinating – a dream within a dream (well mine anyway!)³²

One of the most significant claims of Barthes' reading of Bataille, as I consider further below, is that the form of the narrative is the very basis of its transgressive

³⁰ Ibid, 26.

³¹ Freud, *On Sexuality: Three essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, (Trans) James Strachey, Penguin: London, 1991, 69.

³² Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 23rd September 1964.

content: this symbiosis is also something we find in *Passages*. More specifically, in Quin's book the sexually transgressive content primarily takes the form of, and is always something watched by, the culturally ambivalent figure of the female voyeur – a figure who both exemplifies and amplifies the function of voyeurism elsewhere in Quin's writing; the necessary witness in *Berg* for example, or the violating watching in *Three*. The female voyeur in this third book, as I demonstrate in the following reading, more successfully and compellingly foregrounds the persistent, morphing metaphor of the seeing eye/'I' as a symbol for implicated, sexually tinged looking, as well as for the reading process itself.

As Patricia Waugh outlines in her book, *Harvest of the Sixties*, Peter Weiss's play *Marat/Sade*, put on during the RSC Theatre of Cruelty season in 1964, presents a battle between two opposing ideological positions that were pertinent to the time. The play pits the position of the rationalist French Revolutionary Girondiste Jean Paul Marat against that of the libertarian individualist the Marquis de Sade. This was relevant to the 1960s British social context, Waugh claims, because it connected with the quarrel between 'rationalist' social planners and 'libertine' counter-culturists. She also points out how, in the aftermath of Auschwitz, Belsen and Hiroshima, the play connected with the broader context of a world where reason had 'failed'.³³ While in 'Jew on the page' below, I consider more broadly how *Passages* engages with this larger historical context, here I am interested in the book's figuring of sexual desire, or libertinism – indeed in practice, Waugh remind us, 'The visual impact of the play tended to emphasize desire over

³³ Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties; English Literature and its Background 1960 to 1990*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 112. For fuller discussion, see 111-112 and 58-60.

reason'.³⁴ In Quin's book, the representation of sexual as well as narrative desire also emphasises visual impact. In this, the female voyeur figures the 'libidinal excitation' of 'the intermediate sexual aim of a looking that has a sexual tinge to it', and the lingering nature of this looking activity is both described and demanded by the vibrating form of the narrative itself.

Against the stereotype of the violating and objectifying male gaze, it is a female voyeur in Quin's book who watches and enjoys other women be subjected to sadistic sex. Yes, this kind of male gaze is present in scenes such as the sexualised violence of the man's 'retinal fantasies' about a small beggar girl who with 'legs wide apart, danced around me' (51), but what is unusual and subversive here is the more frequent gaze of the female watcher. This act of looking is also an experience of arousal,³⁵ and afterwards, of participation:

That part I entered, where I returned. Again behind the glass I saw

what did I see, for when that scene reappears it merges with a dream, fallen back into slowly, connected yet not connected in parts. So what I saw then was as much a voyeur's sense. And since has become heightened. Succession of images, controlled by choice. I chose then to remain outside. Later I entered, allowed other entries. In that room a series of pictures thrown on the walls, ceiling, floor, some upsidedown. Only afterwards could I see things. More so now in specific detail (24).

Here, the narrating 'I' returns to and enters a place, where, screened behind glass, she previously saw something with 'a voyeur's sense'. This 'sense' is both 'in the manner of' a voyeur and literally in the act of looking, the 'sense' of sight. In turn this foregrounds the reader's eye, which, from various different positions, watches

³⁴ Waugh, 112.

³⁵ In this it is reminiscent of Quin's contemporaneous story, 'Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails', where it is 'The women [who] watched, roused, a little frightened', 8.

the watching narrator. Moreover, what the woman sees 'since has become heightened'. It is a scene which then she chose to remain outside of, looking in, but later 'entered [and] allowed other entries'. As became clear above, the narrative momentum here – of a sequence of 'connected yet not connected' images – is typical of the chain of syntagma of the woman's passages. What is more, as with the 'line of birds' extract, these images are not so much in succession as looping, and this momentum both directs and interrupts the readability of the prose: the narrative here circles and returns to a purposefully undefined moment – 'that scene', the 'then' – from several angles.

This confused and nonlinear time-structure in *Passages* adds to the sense of distance created by the voyeurism. It is an effect that can be usefully thought about further with reference to Bruce Morrissette's discussion of nouveau roman forms, where, he claims, a central aspect of their literary experiment is temporal non-specificity.³⁶ He describes this effect as a blurring of 'associative time' and 'completely restructured time'. The blurring of the former, where memories are revived by the shifting states of a narrator or character – to cite an example from Quin: 'behind the glass I saw/what did I see, for when that scene reappears it merges with a dream' – with the latter, where the narration makes 'impossible' loops in time', creates a 'new fictional topology' characterised by narratives where actions bend back upon themselves.³⁷ As Morrissette further points out, these structures are closer to music than previous literary time patterns. Not only did

³⁶ Morrissette, 'International Aspects of the 'Nouveau Roman' Author(s)', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring, 1970, 155-168.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 163. In turn, in *Passages* this chronological movement is echoed by the above description of the natural landscape, where 'the hills bent back towards the course of the river'.

Quin regularly listen to jazz musicians such as Thelonius Monk and Miles Davis; she was more directly influenced by the music and writings of John Cage.³⁸ It is unsurprising then, that she described the technique in these sections of narrative as ‘moving towards words and then from them v. much like jazz improvisations’.³⁹ With this technique, the spectating eye above is further distanced. The writing there assumes multiple positions and distances from the central, but absent, event – again reminiscent of *Three*. On the one hand the narrative seems to communicate an uninterrupted confusion of thought, dream and memory; on the other its looping repetition creates the sticky web of a constructed pattern of associations.

Indeed, it is precisely the stickiness of these associations which is important for assessing the transgressive potential of the female voyeur here. In Barthes’ discussion of *Story of the Eye* he pinpoints what he claims to be the crux of its eroticism: its chain of metaphors always carries a residue that ensures a unifying substance across different versions of the same idea. This ‘contagion of qualities’ lies at the root of Bataille’s eroticism:

In this way the transgression of values that is the avowed principle of eroticism is matched by – if not based on – a technical transgression of the forms of language, for the metonymy is nothing but a forced syntagma, the violation of a limit to the signifying space.⁴⁰

Barthes’ point demonstrates the close relationship between linguistic and erotic transgression. In *Passages*, not only do we find ‘technical transgression[s] of the

³⁸ She had, by this time, also read John Cage’s *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (1961). Letter: Quin to Sward, 25th April 1967, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 9.

³⁹ Letter: Quin to Sward, 21st September 1966, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8.

⁴⁰ Barthes, ‘The Metaphor of the Eye’, 125-126.

forms of language' in the 'forced syntagma' of a vibrating and stuttering, deterritorialized prose that characterises the woman's sections, but Quin called this her 'pornographic book', implying a transgression of values whereby the sex would be plentiful and risqué.⁴¹ In fact, its sex scenes are few and their artificial manner reminiscent of nothing more than clichéd erotic set-pieces. However, as Barthes points out above, in Bataille's book the transgression of values is 'matched by – if not based on – a technical transgression'. In Quin's writing too, the desire to transgress norms manifests more in formal experiment than narrative content. Thus, whether or not her erotic content is transgressive is not necessarily based on how explicit the sex scenes are, but rather on the violence of the 'forced syntagma' of her prose. Further, the contagion of such over-determined and highly patterned writing calls to mind Ahmed's theory of disgust where certain ideas get stuck together through a history of association.⁴² As such, the chain of metaphors carries a residue, a contagion, which acts to infect any new association: 'Such objects [ideas or words] become sticky or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension'.⁴³

What is more, in *Passages*, the figure of the female voyeur is a potent sticky and erotic symbol that evokes social tension and cultural ambiguity by the simultaneous continuation and disruption of the idea of voyeurism. All of Quin's writing asserts that looking is an important part of sexual arousal, but it is only in this book that it is done by a woman. In particular, the nature of the looking here

⁴¹ Letter: Quin to Sward, September 1966, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8. See also; Letter: Diane Sward to Quin, 17th September, 1966, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8

⁴² For a fuller discussion of Ahmed's theory of disgust, see my chapter on *Berg* above, where I draw in particular on her discussion of recoil and nausea.

⁴³ Ahmed, 11.

disrupts the border that exists and is created between watcher and watched. This is because the voyeur is both separate from – watches from a distance – and participates in – is implicated by sexual arousal – what they watch. Thus, while the border between watcher and watched is a barrier, it is also a blurring and point of contact between the two. As Ahmed identifies, sticky surfaces connect as much as they distance: they are ‘boundaries that allow the distinction between subjects and objects’ to be ‘undone in the moment of their making’.⁴⁴ For example, in the extract above, the watching woman tries to remember, can see ‘More so now in specific detail’, a sex scene shortly revealed as one where:

the three

lay there, their legs, arms linked in the formation of a dance. Under the chandelier they moved slowly. He in the middle hardly moved, watching the two women circle. Their backs arched, breasts thrust high, forward. The leather strap he passed through suspenders. Black slithered across white, between the less black. His head raised, then bent. Arms spread out from the white sleeves. He balanced a whip in each hand. The girl strapped to the chair. Her head swayed over the back, hair hung down. Legs apart, fruit placed between. Sound of whip meeting flesh, into a rhythm, slow at first. Merged with the music, as she danced on the table, danced with her shadow, bent back as though to perform a backward somersault, while the other woman behind stretched out both her hands as if to catch the flying figure (25).⁴⁵

The sex here is closely directed and choreographed. Three actors merge and dance together, their movement sways, bends, arches, slithers: at the same time the scene is in slow motion. The props – whips, suspenders, fruit – are all there.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 83.

⁴⁵ This scene is echoed in the man’s diary sections, not only by his reflection on it, but also by the marginalia, which describes a ‘frescoe’ [sic] where two girl acrobats grapple with a bull. There, one is ‘about to perform a backwards somersault’ and the other ‘stretches out her hands as if to catch the flying figure’, 110.

Further, the presence of the watcher, which presences the reader, together with the nature of the scene seen – the ‘legs apart, fruit placed between’ – renders this a premeditated and intentionally performed theatrical act.⁴⁶

While Quin herself described this as a ‘gt. orgy scene more or less ending 1st pt. of book’,⁴⁷ this sadistic dance is actually rather tame. Indeed, for one reviewer, these gratuitous – but ultimately rather static – sex scenes are disappointing: ‘the temperature of even the most torrid moments of sex passages never rise above 4 degrees’.⁴⁸ However, this appraisal in fact misses the way in which these erotic scenes are directly reminiscent and parodic of the formulaic and structured eroticism of writers like Bataille and Sade, whose transgressive literature flouts tableaux, parody and pastiche: all of which are employed here too. In addition, although Anais Nin’s ‘erotica’ – *Delta of Venus* (1977) and *Little Birds* (1979) – was yet to be published, it had been written much earlier, in the 1940s, and its caricatured and theatrical sexual content is arguably echoed in some of the techniques of Nin’s other fiction, which Quin had read.⁴⁹ To me it is clear that the sex scenes in *Passages* are a conscious play with such staged and formulaic writing.

⁴⁶ In Sade, who Quin invokes here, sex props add to the sense of distance: they ‘have the power to change [the person] into a thing, and that is precisely what he wants, to remove himself by becoming an object’. Simone de Beauvoir, *Must We Burn de Sade?* (Trans.) Annette Michelson, London: Peter Neville Ltd, 1953, 40.

⁴⁷ Letter: Quin to Robert Sward, 17th October 1966, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8.

⁴⁸ Burke, ‘People Wandering’, *The Irish Press*. This criticism recalls a similar complaint made by *Running Man*, about the supposedly ‘dry’ sex scenes of ‘Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails’. There is a nod to this sort of interpretation in the narrative of *Passages* itself: ‘Perhaps the orgy my imagination composes is better than the actual thing’, 110.

⁴⁹ Quin had not only read Nin, she was in direct correspondence with her. Letter: Quin to Robert Sward, 10th August 1966, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8. Of course, Nin’s erotica was written in collaboration with Henry Miller, who Quin’s work has elsewhere been likened to.

In addition, as Carter points out, the supposed acceptance of female as well as male promiscuity in the sexual liberation era of the 1960s brought with it a ritualising aspect. Here, libertine sex was an 'act', a rite of passage: 'In this period', she says, "promiscuous abandon' seemed the only type of free exchange'.⁵⁰ However, this abandon simultaneously forgets that 'pornography [itself] must always have the false simplicity of the fable', because it 'deals in false universals'.⁵¹ In this way, supposed greater sexual freedom also renewed sexual stereotypes. It is therefore unsurprising that Quin's book emphasises the fable-like and distancing quality of staged eroticism. Here, the female voyeurism of the erotic scenes in *Passages* evokes, interrogates and rejects the 'false universals' of the male and female in terms of watching sex. The resulting sex scenes both enact and parody representations of eroticism and sexual desire. Their purpose is bound up with the mythologizing and distancing of sex. While it is true that the result is rather formulaic, it seems to me that this is precisely the point. There are plenty of places where Quin's writing is obscenely sexual – (again) Leonard's fingering of the orchids in *Three*, for example, or the endless hammering in 'Never Trust A Man Who Bathes With His Finger Nails'. Here, as Stevick rightly puts it: 'the phenomenal world tends to appear as if charged with sexual energy'.⁵²

In *Passages*, however, the purpose of the framed and watched sex scenes is something quite different. As ever, Quin's greatest innovations and transgressions lie in their interrogation of pre-existent narrative structures and stereotypes; but here, the ambiguous position of the female voyeur also acts to

⁵⁰ Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Virago: London, 2000, 9.

⁵¹ Ibid, respectively 16 and 5-6.

⁵² Stevick, 'Voices in the Head', 234.

convincingly interrogate cultural stereotypes. In the scene above, the man is distanced from his action by using a whip to hit the girl's flesh; he is also distanced by his position as voyeur as well as participant in the scene. Further, as he looks at the two women, the narrative's female protagonist watches them being watched by him. Her watching action creates a further layer of distance but it also in turn further objectifies them and, by implication, herself.⁵³ Traditionally, as Mary Ann Doane points out in her interrogation of stereotypes of the female spectator of cinema, this group has been assigned a certain 'naiveté': 'a tendency to deny the processes of representation, to collapse the opposition between the sign (the image) and the real'.⁵⁴ In this way, according to Doane, a distinction has been made, not only between supposedly active male gaze and passive female image, but also between an assumed objectivity of the male gaze compared to the 'longing, overinvolved female spectator'.⁵⁵ Indeed, she identifies all too 'recurrent suggestions of deficiency, inadequacy, and failure in the woman's appropriation of the gaze'.⁵⁶

While the sex scene above does merge 'with a dream', suggesting a collapse between the imagined and real, the spectator there also (initially, at least) remains very much apart from what she watches: in this sense the woman in

⁵³ John Berger claims that a cultural distinction where 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' results in 'The surveyor of woman in herself [being] male', *Ways of Seeing*, London: The British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin, 1972, 46-47.

⁵⁴ Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, 1. For further discussion of the supposed active male gaze and passive female image see Laura Mulvey's chapter 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which articulates the tension between the pleasure of looking at the object of the gaze and identification with it, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1989; see 14-28.

⁵⁵ Doane, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

Passages can be said to successfully appropriate the male gaze. This sense of distance is enhanced by the succession of images being behind glass – in turn this evokes the cinema screen, a further distancing effect. Indeed, throughout these sections of the book photographs are repeatedly taken and looked at; mirrors are looked into; scenes framed by windows. The distancing and framing of the gaze which results foregrounds the figure of the spectator. This is a figure in which, despite the insistence of distance, Doane claims; ‘there is [also] a curious operation by means of which the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ of discourse are collapsed’.⁵⁷ In *Passages* the position of the spectator, together with the shifting narrative perspective, problematises and collapses boundaries between ‘I’ (or eye) and ‘you’, voyeur and reader, seer and seen.

However, this is not to forget that in *Passages*, as in *Berg* and *Three*, the looking always happens both ways – there is always the paranoid feeling of being watched as well as the arousing act of watching:

I think we are still being watched. He stood back from the window. There’s a man on the corner—been there all morning I think he must be a Government agent or security police—do you recognise him? The sunglasses unmistakable. I could not be certain. He did not have a beard. And yet the suit, yes (70).⁵⁸

As the woman and man travel ever onwards, there are figures who ‘must be’ Government agents lurking outside their hotel, guards and police who ‘must be’

⁵⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁵⁸ The nod to stereotypes of ideas about disguise – ‘sunglasses unmistakable’ ‘he did not have a beard’ – foreshadows the stereotypes of cold war spies in *The Unmapped Country* and ‘Matters of the Heart’. The paranoia and yet necessity of being watched in both, like the watching of Berg’s father, works to foreground and insist on the role and presence of the reader.

bribed, officials who try to obstruct their search. The book describes a volatile situation: 'political situation here is intolerable. There's no hope unless a revolution starts. Bloodshed under clear skies. Such a climate brings murder/war crimes easily' (35). This threat of violence is generated throughout the narrative by the rumours of shootings and torture, and stories of prisoners who have been 'beaten with truncheons on the face and head', and 'taken to the terraced roof of the building for 'special treatment'' (78). In this climate, the search for the brother inevitably results in a series of interrogations by police, ministers, soldiers and officers. The resulting tension, between the paranoia of being observed, interrogated and pursued and the arousing act of voyeurism, is indicative of a shift from watcher to watched that increasingly becomes the perspective of Quin's later writing, as my reading of both *Tripticks* and *The Unmapped Country* attests. In this trajectory, the ambivalence of watching in *Passages* marks a tipping point.

Myth in the Margins

To make an order out
of myth/the past

I would like to exhaust the limits of the
possible (92).

Have also been reading quite a bit: a fascinating book about the Mormons + their 'prophet' Joseph Smith (what a 'phoney' he was – wow – he had about 40 'plural' wives). Also equally fascinating a book I actually bought on Pueblo Gods + Myths. Strangely enough I had been reading Jane Harrison's book on Greek Religion, and had been thinking how very similar the rituals, the ceremonies/respect/fear for the 'underworld' was to the Indians sense of it all; anyway the book [on

Pueblo religion] draws comparisons with the Greek legends, so it all seems to tie up with some of my own conclusions.⁵⁹

So far in this chapter I have focussed on the woman's sections of narrative, for the remainder, I consider the form – most notably the question of the strain 'the myth in the margins' places on sequential readability – as well as a significant aspect of representation – the cultural ambiguity of the figure of the Jew – in the man's diary. What interests me here is the reading effect of the myth in the margins, not least because much of the mythical content in these sections continues the book's preoccupation with seeing and the eye. This analysis will engage a further aspect of Barthes' reading methodology, in order to develop a way of meaningfully reading across and through the parallel columns of text and cut-up techniques that comprise the man's sections of *Passages*.

The letter above evidences Quin's broad and pervading interest in myth and religion; from Mormonism, to Pueblo gods and myth, to Jane Harrison's anthropological reading of Greek religion. More specifically, as the oedipal parody in *Berg* and the grotesque classical statues of *Three* attest, their author was not only well versed in, for example, stories of Greek mythology, but also saw them as essential for interpreting the modern world. While myth is not solely confined to the margins in *Passages*, it is in the parallel structures of the man's journal that the alignment between myth and modernity is most evidently acted out. Here, diary entries are accompanied by notes containing excerpts of myth so as to 'make an order out of myth/the past' as well as to test 'the limits of the possible'. This tension

⁵⁹ Letter: Quin to Robert Sward, 17th February 1967, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 9.

(visibly here) enacts the transgressive-resistant paradox of Quin's writing as a whole, as well as challenging and invigorating the reading process. Indeed, the structuring of these sections, which refuses a linear sequentially between past and present, is ideal for considering questions of sequential readability and simultaneity in Quin's texts as a whole.⁶⁰

While Barber's review has it that 'The tremendous energy of *Passages* derives from its extraordinary alliance of classicism and chaos';⁶¹ for others, the book is unjustifiably disrupted by the fact that much of the myth in the margins is comprised of a close and unacknowledged paraphrasing of Harrison's *Prolegomena to the study of Greek Religion* (1903). Nye, for example, objected that the book is 'too rigorously informed by' this source text 'choice bits of which', he says, 'float about undigested in [Quin's] text'.⁶² While it is an exaggeration to say that the excerpts and ideas from the *Prolegomena* just 'float about undigested', Nye's objection has a point. Harrison's descriptions and interpretations of ancient Greek artefacts are indeed often taken out of context and are always without the visual aid included there. Instead, in *Passages*, the excerpts are placed side-by-side or one after the other with journal entries without explicit connection or relationship, and we must wonder at the reason for this. Faced with texts which seem unrelated, the desire for narrative comprehension makes us seek similarities

⁶⁰ For White, such parallel columns of text serve to presence simultaneity in narrative. As he says of Johnson's *Albert Angelo*: 'the specific graphic device of parallel lineation in which space *equals* time', *Reading the Graphic Surface*, 98.

⁶¹ Barber, 'The Human Sorceress', 3.

⁶² Nye, 'Against the Barbarians'.

but the simultaneity of the layout on the page does mean that we are left to rather ‘improvise an order of reading’ than ascertain one.⁶³

But, even once we do improvise an order for reading these fragments of text, the narrative itself remains in a resistant parataxis – or disequilibrium – and this means that our reading is always an ambivalent one. Thus, the reader here must always be prepared to, with Barthes, acknowledge and negotiate the difficulty, or indeed ideally, to ‘savour [the] friction between two intelligibilities’:⁶⁴

Drawing of a third
Siren’s eye by
two strokes only,
without the pupil :
the sightless eye,
eye in death/
sleep/blindness.

Image of myself
as Bar-Lgura, the
Semetic [sic] demon
sitting on the
roof and leaping
down on them all.

Sometimes she talks in her sleep. Names I don’t know. Some secret language. She says I talk Hebrew in my sleep, yet I only know a few words in that language. There are moments when she looks at me startled, not really seeing me, perhaps thinking I am someone else. The walls shift in patterns, colour, shapes behind her head, and I think I am somewhere else. At home perhaps, when the murmurs are Mother’s, made from her bed, the light shining from the kitchen, stopping in a blade of light at the foot of the bed. How I hated mother then. Day after day (and nights, long nights) of pain. Windows closed. Curtains pulled, thin-walled box rooms. Death, the smell of it, of sickness permeated everything. Nurses, doctors came and went, she thought they were family. I took her hot drinks and thought of pissing in them (37).⁶⁵

As our eye passages to-and-fro across the page here, there are plenty of what seem to be connections between the two columns of text. The annotations on the

⁶³ White, *Reading the Graphic Surface*, 97. In his critique of Brian McHale’s assertion that columns of text interrupt the fictional world, insisting on the materiality of the book, White says McHale fails to take into account ‘the normalising impulse that attempts to assimilate what does not initially fit into an established pattern’, 18. In this, the columns primarily enhance, rather than disrupt, the reading process.

⁶⁴ Barthes, ‘The Struggle with the Angel’, 131.

⁶⁵ This is only an approximation: please see appendix A for the exact layout of this section.

left do appear to comment on and give meaning to the memories narrated on the right, where the Jewish man narrates the experience of watching his mother dying. The accompanying notes in the margin include a description of a drawing which illustrates the sightless eye of a third siren, as well as the narrator's self-identification with the image of Bar-Lgura, an occult Semitic demon. The content of the parallels and sequencing here imply a reading between Hellenic and Judaic traditions. For example, a connection is suggested between the 'Drawing of a third Siren's eye', taken from a description in the *Prolegomena*, and the mother's death.⁶⁶ In this way, the imagery and connotations of 'eye', 'sleep' 'blindness' and 'death' do seem to connect the marginal notes with the journal text. But, in the extract above, it is unclear what the exact relationship between marginal note and journal is meant to be, whether interpretative or incidental, and consequentially we are left unsure as how to read it.

What is more, such eye-sleep-blindness-death connotations echo across the man's journal sections to seemingly guide, and then in turn again frustrate, the reading process. The closed eye of the siren above evokes the myth of Medusa – in terms of her blindness as well as the death that seeing her brings. Fittingly in *Passages*, the Medusa story is represented in a dream: she is indeed encountered, as she only can be, while the man's eyes are closed. The description of the dream (as well as its 'cut-up') is accompanied by an excerpt from Harrison describing a 'black-figured olpe', which depicts the slaying of Medusa by Perseus. The

⁶⁶ Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903, 201. In the relief under discussion – a photograph of which is included in Harrison's book – the third siren throws herself to her death in despair at the fortitude of Odysseus.

descriptions of Medusa in the dream(s) in the man's journal narrative focuses on the 'evil' power of her eyes. The narration of the '*Dream*' begins:

Medusa entered my room. I felt uneasy, certain she had only evil intentions. I had the revolver ready. I could just see her eyes, great glowing ovals; I would aim at those – just two shots (102).

This singular narrative passage is followed by several more of the '*Cut-up dream*' which begins:

Medusa entered a room that opened out onto the balcony. I had evil intentions. She had the revolver ready. I saw three women, great glowing ovals, on a mattress, in an arc (102).⁶⁷

Narration of the dream in the cut-up continues with a grotesque and almost fairy-tale sexual fantasy, involving two 'monstrous guardians' and a girl, all of whom have 'large warts covering their bodies' (102). This development of the scene is in turn the cut-up of another dream.⁶⁸ Both dreams here begin with the entrance of Medusa, whose 'evil' eyes must be annihilated. The metamorphosis of 'her eyes, great glowing ovals' into 'three woman, great glowing ovals' recalls the syntagma of the woman's narrative sections: the eyes are in turn ovals that become women.⁶⁹ Not only this, but the evocation of the Medusa story also calls to mind Derrida's meditation on the act of representation in *Memoirs of the Blind*, which

⁶⁷ For full layout of page, including the content of the marginalia text, please see appendix C.

⁶⁸ This dream is narrated on 92, and tells a similar story of fantasised sex with a girl, this time beautiful, after the man has gotten rid of her two hideous guardians.

⁶⁹ The object here fittingly coincides with the role of the female voyeur's looking in this book, as well as my grounding of Quin's narrative technique elsewhere in *Passages* in terms of Barthes' 'The Metaphor of the Eye'.

must take place during the suspension of the gaze.⁷⁰ Similarly, it is only ever during the suspension of the gaze that Medusa can be encountered. In this way, her story is a literary one which interrogates the relationship between looking at and (re)presenting. Further, the ambiguous relation of the cut-up to the 'original' version here calls attention to Quin's writing process.⁷¹ In this, partially repeated content is complicated rather than elucidated by the paratactic juxtaposition of the three versions of the story.

In addition to the echoes between the two textual examples above then, the unresolved parataxis of their different textual fragments means that it is not possible to ascertain what kind of interpretative value either content or structural similarities may have. Is there any meaningful or useful relationship between the closed eye of the siren and the man talking Hebrew in his sleep? Or between the Medusa story and the man's dream? A coincidence of ideas does not necessarily illuminate the meaning of either content. And what about the differences that remind us these may be merely juxtaposed or incidentally connected texts? More often than not, the marginal notes problematise, rather than aid, the desire to make sense of the narrative: their paratactic relation resists the desire for narrative progress and understanding. For many readers, such resistance closed down

⁷⁰ For a fuller explication of how Derrida's discussion of the suspension of the gaze can be applied to Quin's narrative method, see my Introduction. Derrida himself connects Medusa with the 'ruse' of the oblique gaze, where she figures the trait of an artistic structure that can only be looked at obliquely (as indeed are Quin's passages of text here); see *Memoirs of the Blind*, 73 and 87.

⁷¹ Although Quin had long been practising the cut-up technique in letters to the Burns, this is the first time it appears in her fiction labelled as such. It is a prevalent method in *Tripticks*, as I discuss below.

possibilities of reading and enjoyment.⁷² But for others, myself included, the activity of negotiating the difficulties created by this parataxis is actually precisely what frees up and invigorates the reading process so that: 'the effect of the diary sections [...] – even where it fails to explain motive or predicament in the ordinary sense – does suggest a different order of experience'.⁷³

In this way, while the interpretive relationship between the texts in *Passages* remains unclear, the structure of the journal could be said to 'suggest a different order of experience' and thus successfully interrogate the supposed mimesis of experience as narrated in a linear narrative. Here, the reading effect of the unresolved tension, rather than its resolution, is paramount. Barthes' 'The Struggle with the Angel' provides a similarly open-ended textual analysis of Genesis 32: 22-32 that allows for – and indeed celebrates – on-going ambivalence and friction between different ways of making the text intelligible. There, he describes how, when what exactly is going on in a text remains 'oblique, readability is *diverted*'.⁷⁴ Similarly in *Passages*, the parallel structure of the man's journal sections diverts readability by confusing our sense of how to proceed. In addition, for Barthes precisely what is interesting about reading the Genesis passage is its 'abrasive frictions, the breaks, the discontinuities of readability, the juxtaposition of narrative entities which to some extent run free from an explicit logical articulation'.⁷⁵ This

⁷² For example: David Haworth's review, *New Statesman*, 21st March 1969; unsigned review, *The Sunday Times*, 30th March 1969; David Benedictus, 'Books', *Queen*, 30th April 1969.

⁷³ 'Lovers', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3rd April 1969.

⁷⁴ Barthes, 'The Struggle with the Angel', 132. Barthes' description of such an effect as oblique is particularly relevant given the oblique nature of the reading experience here – as exemplified in the figure of Medusa as I suggest above – as well as Quin's elsewhere oblique approach; for fuller explication see my Introduction.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 140.

response, it seems to me, is directly relevant for the experience of reading Quin's text: here too the friction, discontinuity and juxtaposition of the man's journal sections refuse a more logical or coherent form of articulation or description, which would anyway only be reductive, and demand that the experience of reading remain crucially open and ambivalent.

Significantly, by reading and rewriting Harrison's own re-reading of Greek myth, *Passages* is already involved in an open-ended reading process. Harrison, a progressive feminist scholar and close associate of Virginia Woolf's, wrote the *Prolegomena* to redress 'a fundamental error in method': 'the habit of viewing Greek religion exclusively through the medium of Greek literature'.⁷⁶ Instead, her writing offered the first anthropological interpretation of Greek mythology. The structure of this discussion is based on a search for the (hidden) patterns and meaning of artefacts, and in turn the practices and beliefs they delineate. In particular, as Bowlby points out, Harrison insists on the ambiguity of myth in relation to the female body.⁷⁷ For example, in pre-patriarchal communities, fertility rites centred on women's bodies and nature. More specifically, Greek religion was able to reinterpret pre-patriarchal beliefs in terms of its own mythology, while maintaining the intensity of feeling and loyalty granted the earlier rites. As a result, Harrison's writing already engages with the process of interpreting, describing and enacting narrative and cultural evolution: the *Prolegomena* participates in a reinterpretation of Greek myths as already themselves being 'modern' developments of older beliefs.

⁷⁶ Harrison, introduction to the *Prolegomena*, vii.

⁷⁷ Bowlby, *Freudian Mythologies*, 90.

In this way, I propose, the retelling and repositioning of myth also engages *Passages* in an ever on-going and evolving reading process. This assertion is supported by Quin's reading of books such as H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* (1961), which demonstrates her knowledge of other avant garde appropriations of mythic stories, as well as of these source texts themselves.⁷⁸ *Helen in Egypt*, a modernist poetic recreation of the Greek version of the story, has an experimental paratactic structure somewhat similar to that in *Passages*. The several sections of the book intercut illustrative reasoning about Helen's situation with passages of poetry. The two texts act in tension with each other: although there are similarities, they are also highly different in both content and form, and the relationship between the two remains unexplained.⁷⁹

Thus, in similar ways, the *Prolegomena*, *Helen in Egypt* and *Passages* aim to open up the reading process and free their source texts from static meaning. This technique was also one employed by the nouveau roman, which, according to Morrissette, appropriated mythic parallelism precisely to draw attention to the processes of narrative evolution. In particular, the juxtaposition of classicism and chaos there insists on 'the transition from modalities of 'plot' to those of structure'.⁸⁰ Yes, mythic content can link contemporary scenarios and concerns to ancient or seemingly archetypal models, but more importantly there is a productive and illustrative counterpoint between the modalities of myth and nouveau roman texts. The plotted patterns of the former are contrasted with the chance arrangements of what Morrissette calls 'unmotivated synchronicities' in the latter. In this, the

⁷⁸ Letter: Quin to Robert Sward, August 10th 1966, Robert Sward Papers, Series 1.1, box 8.

⁷⁹ See H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), *Helen in Egypt*, New York: New Directions Books, 1961.

⁸⁰ Morrissette, 'International aspects of the 'Nouveau Roman'', 157.

seeming chaos of the nouveau roman juxtaposes with the classicism of myth as a claim to narrative progress and development: thus, the direct contrast with myth is precisely what frees up the writing process.

However, while Morrissette's interpretation here is valuable, it perpetuates an assumption that myth itself is static, that it fixes or structures representation and interpretation, that its archetypes deny agency or change. If this were true, the characters in *Passages* could indeed end up being reduced to: 'components of archetypes which role forces a certain fate upon them'.⁸¹ But, as Bowlby reminds us, while myths might seem to be unchanging archetypes, they in fact 'alter their possible or likely meanings according to the changing cultural contexts in which they are retold'.⁸² She explains her decision to use 'mythologies' in these terms: 'because, unlike 'ideology' or 'theory', the word implies a narrative movement of telling and retelling that at once sustains and changes the likely or fabulous ideas and stories in circulation'.⁸³ For *Passages*, it is helpful to think about this in terms of the search for the brother, which recalls the Antigone myth. Antigone, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, is obsessed with securing a respectable burial for her brother, Polynices. Antigone breaks a law forbidding her to mourn or bury him and after she has been caught and tried for these, commits suicide. In the book, the

⁸¹ Barber, 'The Human Sorceress', 5. For John White, the alignment of chaos and classicism in *Passages* combines psychoanalytical commentary with archetypal human behaviour, *Mythology in the Modern Novel: A Study of Prefigurative Techniques*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, 186-187.

⁸² Bowlby, *Freudian Mythologies*, 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 8. Bowlby also discusses the metamorphosis of mythic stories in terms of a 'stereotype' plate, whereby meaning changes and continues at the same time, 217.

man says of the woman 'She's playing Antigone' (34).⁸⁴ The remark connects with the idea of an archetype: the woman plays out the role of suffering sister, here for the effect of alluring other men. However, as Judith Butler points out in her reinterpretation of the Antigone myth, this is a character whose grief is an ambiguous act of defiance which cannot be reduced to an only a symbolic one. In this the myth specifically refuses readings that want to reduce it into fixed archetype and abstraction.⁸⁵

In some ways then, the myth in the margins in *Passages* does create an ironic counterpoint between intentional pattern and seemingly chance arrangements: its parallel lineation suggests a spontaneity and simultaneity of association and composition, but at the same time the journal form is restricted by the construct of its structures and cut-ups. In this, here, as elsewhere in Quin, the writing resists what it at the same time tries to enact: to push beyond the confines of what went before by virtue of being steeped in it. More specifically, rather than being a contrast with static archetypes, it is the continuing alliance, or back-and-forth, between classicism and chaos, myth and innovation, that is revealed as an essential part of the writing and reading processes. The resulting multifocal and ambiguous reading experience is always an evolving and invigorated one. To me, this is the most persuasive way that the myth in the margins defies sequential readability and embodies an argument for a radical change in both narrative structures and reading processes.

⁸⁴ Quin too played this role: 'At fourteen I met my half brother for the first time and fell desperately in love with him; he died five years later and I saw myself as Antigone', 'Leaving School', 64.

⁸⁵ Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2000, 46-52.

Jew on the page

Jewish couple next door. Her large nose, dark hairline above the mouth, slender body. He shorter, plump, coughs a lot at night. They walk one behind the other in the park opposite the hotel. Their tumbled bed in the morning.

The American couple opposite play cards, watch television all day, half the night. Their neatly made beds in the morning (30).

Strange kind of insular feeling one has in this country, cut off from all the violence, wars etc. Films of Vietnam, the Congo, Israel etc., followed by the guy who does the weather forecast 'our immediate concern is now the weather'.⁸⁶

The presence of the 'Jew on the page' is a paradigm example of how *Passages* is actively engaged in reading and re-reading significant aspects of its cultural and literary precedents. Thus, finally here, I assess the interpretative role and effects of this most politically and historically charged aspect of the book's content, to consider how the narrative participates in and interrogates stereotypes of the Jew in British fiction; and in addition, how this culturally ambivalent content might further figure and complicate the readability and transgressive-resistant paradox of the book's experimental form. What emerges out of both my and the narrative's (re)reading of representations of the Jew, is the veracity and difficulty of the connection implied above – between the assumed otherness of the 'Jewish couple next door' and 'insular' and 'cut off' position of Britain in the 1960s.

More specifically, in this letter, Quin claims that the most urgent Jewish question of the time (Israel) is one of the situations – together with those in the

⁸⁶ Letter: Quin to Robert Sward, 25th July 1967, Series 1.1, box 9.

Congo and Vietnam – treated as distant and distinct from ‘our immediate concern’ in ‘this country’. The wry inverted commas communicate her heightened awareness, having recently returned from America, of the British tendency to distance itself from world politics. However, this awareness is somewhat undermined, and her own tendency to British insularism somewhat confirmed, by letters to the Jewish Carol Burns, where Quin, albeit unwittingly, evidences and perpetuates a casual anti-Semitism as she jokes about ‘yids eating and farting’.⁸⁷ While this repeats a phrase Carol had herself used, when the comment comes from a Catholic writer’s pen, it is deeply ambiguous if not offensive. Concurrently, Quin felt herself to be philo-Semitic: both the book and letters from the time are fascinated with Jewishness. This ambivalence is interesting for two specific reasons. First, because it seems to participate in a similarly ambivalent position to that of the longstanding British literary fascination with the figure of the Jew; second, because of the book’s 1960s context.

For me, the stereotyped description of the Jewish couple above makes for uncomfortable reading. Without wanting to overemphasise, any stereotyping of physical Jewish characteristics seems dangerous and loaded. Given the timing of *Passages* – written in the same decade that the widely reported Eichmann trial took place in Jerusalem⁸⁸ – we must ask how deliberate or unwitting the implications of these seemingly brief and almost throwaway remarks are, as well

⁸⁷ Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 22nd August 1962.

⁸⁸ This event is surely the source for the report of the trial of a camp adjutant and his relationship with the Commandant on 58-60 of *Three*. For example, ‘‘Did you know that there were gas-chambers?’’/ ‘Yes. But I had no occasion to speak about them’/ Never to your Commandant?’/ ‘He was a strange unapproachable man. I avoided asking him questions’’, 59. For more on the Eichmann trial see; Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem; A Report on the Banality of Evil*, London: Faber and Faber, 1963.

as what their purpose might be. The short, plump, coughing male Jewish body, for example, recalls nineteenth century stereotypes about the degenerate, rather than what Max Nordau called the 'muscle Jew'. The former stereotype was a feminised character with a weak and inferior physique subservient to his intellect.⁸⁹ Further, in the example above, the man's feminisation is heightened by the contrast with the woman's stereotypically male (and Jewish?) characteristics of a large nose and dark hairline above the mouth. This stereotype of the otherness of an unattractive, hairy Jewish woman recalls, for example, the ambivalence towards Honor Klein in Iris Murdoch's *The Severed Head* (1961), who the protagonist initially finds repulsive and unfeminine, but later irresistible.⁹⁰

While in *Passages* the narrative's remark on this Jewish couple is clearly as figures of interest, intrigue and difference, what is less clear is whether they are objects of repulsion or admiration. If their physical characteristics do not make them appealing, arguably the tumbled bed in the morning does. This implies a warmth and intimacy that is emphasised by contrast with the American couple's passive television watching and neatly made bed. The Jewish couple might be physically unattractive, the narrative implies, but they are also passionate, and in this way appealing. Of course, however, the appeal of the implied passion of their tumbled bed can be seen to itself enact another stereotype, which is that of the animalistic passions of the exotic other.

⁸⁹ For a fuller outline of the origins of this stereotype in English Literature, see Marilyn Reizbaum's 'Max Nordau and the generation of Jewish Muscle', in Bryan Cheyette and Nadia Valman (Eds.), *The Image of the Jew in European Liberal Culture 1789-1914*, Portland, Oregon and London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004, 130-135.

⁹⁰ For further discussion of ambivalent otherness in Murdoch see; Lyndsey Stonebridge, 'The 'Dark Background of Difference': Love and the Refugee in Iris Murdoch', *The Judicial Imagination: Writing after Nuremberg*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 141-165.

The ambiguity of this attraction/repulsion reflects what scholars such as Nadia Valman, Bryan Cheyette and Tony Kushner have argued is a wider, and specifically English, attitude towards Jews. They find a continuing ambivalence towards the figure of the Jew in the English literary imaginary, in which anti and philo-Semitism become indistinguishable. As Cheyette put it in his 2011 article 'English anti-Semitism: a counter-narrative': 'perceptions of Jewish Otherness [...] are deeply ingrained in British culture'.⁹¹ In illustration, he offers a story about Martin and Kingsley Amis that exemplifies this position: 'Both father and son [...] considered Jews to be 'exotic and different'. As a result, Martin Amis ended up liking Jews whereas Kingsley Amis disliked them. One should not underestimate this statement'.⁹² It is not so much the professed like or dislike of the Jewish figure that is important here, but the problem inherent with both father and son's positioning of the Jew as wholly other. Zygmunt Bauman has called this 'practice of setting the Jews apart as people radically different from all the other' 'allosemitism'.⁹³ This position 'is essentially non-committal [...] it does not unambiguously determine either hatred or love of Jews, but contains the seeds of both'.⁹⁴ It seems to me that not only is this allosemitism, or radically ambivalent attitude towards the (perceived) other, present in the attitude towards the Jewish couple above – as well as throughout *Passages* – but that it also characterises

⁹¹ Cheyette, 'English anti-Semitism: a counter-narrative', *Textual Practice* 25(1), 2011, 23. Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* (2010) also attests to and delineates such an attitude.

⁹² Cheyette, 22-23. Significantly, Cheyette locates within English culture what he calls 'more troubling forms of anti-Semitism (post-1967) which [have] yet to receive scholarly attention', 27. Given this, my reading of the representation of the Jew in Quin's 1969 *Passages* seems of particular import and interest.

⁹³ Bauman, 'Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern', *The Image of the Jew*, 143.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Barber's review of the book. He calls the man 'a satyr, maimed by his own duality – in a sense, by his alien Jewishness'.⁹⁵

Indeed, this kind of ambivalent stereotype comes informed – and probably somewhat shaped – by fictitious assumptions about the Jew perpetuated in the nineteenth-century English literary imaginary: Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838) and George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) are obvious examples here. More specifically, a significant instance of this tradition can be found in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876).⁹⁶ This book, although championed by many Jewish readers at the time, has since been criticised for perpetuating nineteenth-century stereotypes in, for example: the sensitive, feminised Daniel Deronda; the brilliant but unnerving Herr Klesma; the pawnbroker Ezra Cohen; the prophetic Mordecai; and the tragic Jewess, Mirah Lapidoth. All are figures of simultaneous desire and repulsion or pity, and all are placed always slightly outside of and in tension with British culture itself.⁹⁷ Indeed, a similar attitude pervades into many early twentieth-century examples. For example, the fascination, despite disgust, with the Jew next door in Woolf's *The Years*: "Damn the Jew!" he [North] exclaimed. The thought of a line of grease from a strange man's body on the bath next door disgusted him'.⁹⁸

Against this background, it is clear that some of the representation in *Passages* – for example the Jewish couple above – to some extent participates in such allo-Semitism. It is, for example, certainly something we again find in the

⁹⁵ Barber, 'The Human Sorceress', 5.

⁹⁶ This was a book Quin had read. Indeed, the title for Quin's last and unfinished book, *The Unmapped Country*, is taken directly from *Daniel Deronda*.

⁹⁷ A fuller discussion of the ambiguity of Eliot's representations of Jewishness can be found in Harold Fisch, *The Dual Image: A Study of the Jew in English Literature*, London: World Jewish Library, 1971, 66-72.

⁹⁸ Woolf, *The Years*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1937, 365-366.

female character's attitude to the man's Jewish, heritage.⁹⁹ Her ambivalent fascination is evident as one minute she criticises 'you and your middle-class Jewish upbringing [...] never a step out of place that's your trouble' (89), the next she admires it:

She envies my Jewish blood, no reason, at least she said there wasn't any specific one. Envy for the historical sense of it all, a meaning for feeling persecuted? Strangely enough I've felt more Jewish with her curiosity that I've ever felt before. Though usually I feel no more Jewish than

<p>Can be any one of these, according to whim/projection. What is it/ shall it be for today</p>	<p>lover husband brother father guardian prophet mystic writer addict = demi-god = beast</p>	<p>'The scape-goat stood all skin and bone While moral business, not his own, Was bound about his head'.</p> <p>Hebrew Conception: The scape-goat was not a sacrifice proper : its sending away was preceded by sacrifice.</p>
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'And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities into a land not inhabited' (37-38).¹⁰⁰

Here, the attitude and expectations of the non-Jewish woman are placed in parataxis – and arguably in tension – with the thoughts of the Jewish man, as

⁹⁹ Quin too, at this time, had a Jewish lover – Sward – whose cultural lineage was a main source of attraction: 'I remember you saying that someone Jewish would be the most suitable for me!!' Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 17th March 1967. Quin and Sward included a section entitled 'The Jewish Question' in their piece 'Living in the Present', *Ambit* 34, 1968.

¹⁰⁰ Please see appendices A and B for exact layout of this section.

perceptions of other and otherness are pitted against each other. His characterising himself as variously 'lover', 'brother', 'prophet', 'mystic' and 'demi-god' delineates the range of roles supposedly available to him. However, when read in conjunction with both the three meditations on the scape-goat and the woman's curiosity about him as Jewish, these roles seem narrowed down and recast in terms of religious inheritance. What is interesting here is that the narrative is explicit about what makes the man feel the most Jewish, and this is the woman's curiosity about him. This notion of the otherness of the Jew as being something itself cast by others – both within the narrative here, and without, in terms of the man as a character written by Quin – recalls Sartre's discussion in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1965), which claims that the Jew's identity as 'a Jew' is always something given to him by others.¹⁰¹

Thus, by figuring the woman's curiosity as reductive, *Passages* can be seen to raise and engage with important questions about where representations of Jewishness (in British fiction) come from: it asks who exactly the other is in such a representation, and points out how a fascination with otherness actually serves to skew representation. Moreover, my suggestion that the narrative problematises stereotyping here is confirmed by the woman's 'Envy for the historical sense of it all, a meaning for feeling persecuted' together with the three-fold representation of ideas about the 'scape-goat', both of which, through mimicry and repetition, interrogate the idea that the Jewish role in history is fixed. Such an assumption is in fact based on a stereotyped, outdated and mythical idea of the Torah as

¹⁰¹ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, (Trans.) George J. Becker, New York: Schocken Books, 1973. Sartre puts it more strongly than this: 'it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew', 143.

unchanging and legalistic, as well as an eschatological view in terms of the Jew as eternal victim after the holocaust.¹⁰² In turn, this kind of misrepresentation perpetuates the misconception of a perceived tension between the supposed flexibility, spontaneity and progression of Hellenism against an assumed strictness of conscience of Hebraism.¹⁰³ It is worth noting that in *Passages* myth and Jewishness are both read as creative, evolving and responsive positions.

The problem, then as *Passages* itself suggests, with the woman's 'historical' sense of Jewishness is that it is framed in terms of a fixed mythology. In turn, Cheyette has considered this kind of misrepresentation itself in historical terms: 'We need to dismantle a view of anti-Semitism as a free-floating eternal hatred and locate discourse about Jews, certainly in the modern and contemporary era, within specific contexts and events'.¹⁰⁴ Given this, what happens when we further consider Jewishness in *Passages* specifically in terms of historical context? Written in the late '60s during an era of 'liberal revolution' at the same time as a critical one in terms of Jewish identity in a post-Holocaust world, the book is ideally placed for interrogating the position of Jews in the British literary imagination. In the 1960s the full facts of the Holocaust were beginning to come to light and, after the Suez crisis of 1956 and 'the six-day war' in 1967, issues surrounding the legitimacy of Israel – and by implication, Judaism's place in the modern world and imaginary – were

¹⁰² This is especially the case when it is positioned as opposite Hellenistic and supposedly 'free' thought. See also; Gillian Rose, 'New Jerusalem Old Athens: The Holy Middle' in *The Broken Middle: out of our ancient society*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992, 277-296, and especially 282-283.

¹⁰³ As Derrida points out in his meditation on the connection between chance and necessity in *Ulysses*, several aspects of the assumed Greek/Jewish characteristics of this juxtaposition play out throughout the language and structures of the book, 'Ulysses Gramophone', *Acts of Literature*, (Ed.) Derek Attridge, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 253-309.

¹⁰⁴ Cheyette, 'English anti-Semitism', 24.

highly topical: Tony Benn's 1970 response to Enoch Powell's 1968 'rivers of blood' speech consciously evoked the holocaust. Benn's wording – 'the flag of racialism that has been hoisted in Wolverhampton [Powell's constituency] is beginning to look like the one that fluttered 25 years ago over Dachau and Belsen' – is, for Kushner, evidence of gross misappropriation.¹⁰⁵ This kind of misrepresentation was exacerbated by a pervasive, casualised prejudice against Jews at this time in British culture, as Muriel Spark's story 'The Gentile Jewesses' (1963) evidences. Here, a character claims that to admit Jewish heritage would be 'bad for business'.¹⁰⁶ The narrator adds: 'she would have been amazed at any suggestion that this attitude was a weak or wrong one'.¹⁰⁷ This echoes and perpetuates earlier attitudes described by George Orwell in 'Antisemitism in Britain' (1945), where he identifies a pervasive anti-Jewish prejudice concurrent with a refusal to admit to anti-Semitism.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, he points out that the implication that anti-Semitism in fact lies within British liberalism is something widely denied. However, according to Cheyette: 'the history of modern and contemporary anti-Semitism [is in fact] part of the history and culture of the liberal nation state'.¹⁰⁹ This suggests the wider culture of a simultaneous perpetuation of and resistance to anti or allo Semitism, which it seems to me *Passages* provides a fruitful and complicated example of.

¹⁰⁵ Kushner, 'The Holocaust and Pressure Politics', Tony Kushner and Nadia Valman (Eds.), *Philosemitism, Antisemitism and 'The Jews'*, Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004, 252. Kushner criticises Benn for appropriating a Jewish tragedy for the purposes of political rhetoric and catalogues several ways in which the speech was erroneous.

¹⁰⁶ Spark, *The Stories of Muriel Spark*, London: The Bodley Head, 1985, 272.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Orwell, http://orwell.ru/library/articles/antisemitism/english/e_antib, accessed 28th May 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Cheyette, 'English anti-Semitism', 24.

What is more, and to conclude, it is precisely the ambivalent representation of Jewishness in this book which most compellingly figures the transgressive resistance of Quin's writing here. This is certainly writing which wants to move beyond what has been written before, and yet remains steeped in it. My reading has shown that the narrative attempts to move beyond stereotyping Jewishness, towards an interrogation of the attitude which positions the Jew as wholly other: yet, at the same time, it seems in some ways to contribute to and perpetuate such stereotyping. In this way the book provides a way of thinking about Jewishness in post-1967 literature, which Cheyette identifies as being a current area of neglect. Indeed, the woman's fascination with the Jewish man arguably participates in the book's wider voyeurism and titillation of looking at the other, and in this way the narrative seems to take an allo-Semitic stance at the same time as exposing the implicated nature of that position. Moreover, the tension of thus being stuck between two positions is one which echoes throughout the book, in the vibration between classicism and chaos, for example, or between observational and overly written representations of the outside world in the woman's sections. Not only is the reading effect of this duality something the layout of the man's sections of narrative vividly performs, but the larger scale oscillation between structural and thematic binaries is also one staged at word level, in the morphing and stuttering line of words. To me, it is precisely this perpetuation of momentum and denial of closure – whether this is in the book's end to begin another journey, the narrative's compelling re-energising of myth, or the problematic and problematising representation of the Jew – that both thinks about and contributes to an activity of unresolved (re)reading by disrupting and diverting interpretation. Therefore, it is

essential that *Passages* refuses to make sense of or resolve its ambiguities – an aspect which moves it beyond the thinking of *Berg* and *Three* – and the resulting muddied and muddled readability is a quality ever more vital to the processes of Quin's writing as a whole.

Illumination 4

At 8 m. on the 27th November 1969, the ICA hosted a 'Writers Reading' event.¹ Beforehand Quin was, according to Carter (her then lover), nervous about the thought of reading from and exposing what she saw as the weaknesses of *Passages*. But, in the event, rather than reading from that book, she gave a performance that signified more worrying problems. She sat wordless on stage, attempting E.S. (extra sensory perception) contact with people, with the aim of communicating universal love.² Despite the times, these hippie notions caused considerable unrest, as well as hostility, among the audience. So at last, bowing to the pressure to speak, she answered some questions, badly, and gave a reading. But, rather than her own words, she read from John Cage: *Silence* replacing silence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this offering wasn't enough to salvage the performance and the audience remained unimpressed. Quin responded differently. She did not say anything as she came down from the stage, just smiled. And when later on that evening she spoke about the event, it was still with a determinedly positive take on what had actually been a resounding disaster. Most significant was her conviction that in this experience she'd had 'a break-through not a break-down, from my centre', that it was now time for people to 'stop role playing and find your centre'.³

¹ 'Writers Reading' event flyer, courtesy of Carter.

² Alan Burns recalls: 'she did her Quin thing, that is to say that she came onto the stage and looked at people, she wouldn't say a goddam word! She just stared, she either implied or she actually stated that we sort of 'think communicate'. Bryan Johnson was' furious with her''. Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson*. London: Picador, 2004, 405.

³ Source: Carter's record of the evening's events, John Carter Papers.

This anxiety about the centre connects with the American setting of *Tripticks*. The late sixties were not only a period of personal crisis, as the narrative above begins to demonstrate; this was also a time of intense turmoil for American culture and politics. This was a time of race riots and the assassinations of important charismatic leaders such as Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, as well as of widespread protests against the Vietnam War. In addition, January 1967 had seen the 'Gathering of the Tribes for the First Human Be-In' in San Francisco and the ensuing fall out of the youth counter-culture. In response, those commenting on the predicament of America in the late-sixties, like Joan Didion and Hannah Arendt, voiced a desire for the rediscovery and restoration of the centre – an image which had striking resonance with W. B. Yeats' poem 'The second Coming':⁴

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

[...]

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?⁵

⁴ This is explicit in the title of Didion's 1967 essay 'Slouching Towards Bethlehem'. In 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', Arendt directly cites the poem as describing a time when the moral and political significance of thinking became urgent, *Responsibility and Judgement*, New York: Schocken Books, 2003, 188. In his book on America in the 1960s, Jay Stevens also makes several references to the poem, in particular connecting the Beat movement with Yeats' poem. See especially 'Slouching Towards Bethlehem' and 'Starving, Hysterical, Naked' in *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, London: Heinemann, 1988, 91-121.

⁵ Yeats, 'The Second Coming', *The Collected poems of W. B. Yeats*, New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry edition, 1996, 187.

Yeats voices the acute crisis following the First World War, with its 'blood-dimmed tide' and drowned innocence: the schism created by this lost youth will, the poem declares, decentre society. 1960s America too had a widening gyre and a centre that could not hold, its youth were lost, this time to a romantic rebellion couched in a pseudo-religious world view. But, what is most significant here is the belief that the poem's modernist lament and unease could be seen as somehow voicing what was happening in a post-Second World War, affluent, post-Beat, and verging on postmodern America. Despite significant historical and cultural difference, both were caught up in a residual desire for the restoration of a depth of meaning beyond the broken surface.

***Tripticks*, 1972: Seeking the centre**

The final scene of *Tripticks* takes place in a church. After its protagonist has, shivering and scared, ‘Ghost-wormed’ his way in there to seek shelter,¹ he sits feeling uneasy and cautious, wondering whether he has escaped the figure of inquisition that pursues him. While he admits that he can only ever acquire a ‘moment-for-moment-truth’ about the situation, and can only approach reality ‘from an angle somewhat off-centre’, this does not stop his desire to expose ‘false and ideological constructs about the world and [let] reality emerge as it really is’.² Despite the narrative’s shifting and oblique surfaces, a desire for depth remains. But, while this is an important tension for reading the book as a whole, it seems perhaps ultimately denied by the book’s final paragraph:

Sitting there brooding, I discovered a breathing space, but a space before the scream inside me was working itself loose. A scream that came from a long series of emotional changes. Fear for safety and sanity, helplessness, frustration, and a desperate need to break out into a stream of verbal images. The pulpit could become an extension of my voice, my skin, my dreams. Leaning over the wood, staring at the spluttering candles, the slanting eyes of the statues all around me, their shadows like kachina gods dancing in the walls of the earth. Earth moving out into the world. I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems. A power I did not want to possess. The Inquisition.³

¹ This ‘verb’ is surely a reference to the 1968 short story, ‘Ghostworm’. Above, Quin uses the conflation of ‘ghost’ and ‘worm’ to capture not only the necessarily secretive and invisible movements of the protagonist but also to insist on the insidious and haunting, gnawing sense of fear and the movement towards finality.

² *Tripticks*, Chicago and Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002, 191-192. Subsequent references will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

³ Much of this quotation is present on appendix G, which also includes the six drawings that end the book.

The endless chatter of the book ends with silence, with a wordless, soundless scream. Sitting there brooding, breathing, breaking down, the protagonist opens his mouth, but voices nothing. This scream, the narrative claims, has been working its way up inside him for some time; it comes from fear, helplessness, frustration and desperation, from a compulsion to 'break out into a stream of verbal images'. But, what break out instead are visions of the insidious, insistent words of others, spoken in the powerful languages of commerce and religion. These are not the voices in the head of *Berg*, but are external and all around. Further, rather than sounding or hearing these words, the protagonist sees them. This act of looking again figures and dramatises the reading experience – we too are looking at the words of others and while the protagonist is surrounded by shadows – as well as foreshadowing the book's close.

What our eyes rest on after the words of the final paragraph are 'silent' drawn images that work to reiterate the protagonist's final experience.⁴ In one way, these drawings disperse the fear and tension of the words; in another, they act to enhance the polarisation between frantic speech and silent scream; between a dramatic and dynamic space, and the desire for stillness. For, while the protagonist looks for solace and comfort in a spiritual space, this is not what he finds. Instead, his fear and desperate desire for verbalisation are answered by the awful realisation that proper articulation might finally not be possible. Even in the supposed safe haven and other-worldly symbolism of the church he sees the machinations and endless verbiage of the dominant cultural system – ads, texts,

⁴ Again, please see appendix G.

psalms – which, of course in fact includes religion within it.⁵ Not even a turn to religion or spiritualism can reconnect the protagonist to a more genuine, or more meaningful, self-expression. In this, the protagonist is denied his desire for meaning, stuck between the persuasive strength of an all powerful culture and the terrors of an inquisition. In this, the ending asks what lies outside or beyond this system, this linguistic surface, and fears it does not know.

Quin's fourth and final complete book was begun as a short story in 1968. Like *Passages*, *Tripticks* is a travel narrative. But, in place of Mediterranean trains, this protagonist drives a Chevy across the highways of America. While search predominantly motivates the former, here it is chase. The protagonist is pursued across the country by his 'No. 1 X-wife and her schoolboy gigolo' (7) – although actually, as he later admits, 'who was chasing who I had forgotten' (136). While the narrative does describe what is seen along the road, this is always focalised through and distorted by the protagonist's thoughts, memories and fantasies. As a whole, these are composed of seemingly only loosely connected streams of narrative which take the form of paratactic paragraphs, lists, headlines, letters, an interview, and illustrations. Perhaps aptly for a road book, these speed past the reader. But, their momentum does not denote development or progress. Instead, the intercutting of these techniques creates a confusing and increasingly anxious narrative where it becomes impossible to distinguish what takes place in and

⁵ Barthes talks about the anonymous ideology and systemic distortion in which everything is steeped, and which overlays everyday and individual life with the codes and conventions of those in power. See in particular his discussion of the Negro in French uniform, in 'Myth Today', *Mythologies*, 116-130.

outside the protagonist's mind. By the end, as we have seen above, he believes it is an inquisitor, rather than his ex-wife and her lover, who follows in close pursuit.

Of all the oeuvre this book is the most difficult to read. It is not so much that, as with *Three* or *Passages*, plot is rather thin, but more that the prose of *Tripticks* is even more challengingly cacophonous and allusive than the other writing. While in *Passages* the reader negotiates between texts and perspectives that are given differentiated space on the page, here source texts – the words of others – are ubiquitous and inextricable, even though never quite fully incorporated. Often, the result does not make much syntactical or signifying sense. Indeed, one effect of this flattened and sometimes impenetrable surface is that it interrogates notions of depth. For example, the ending suggests that language has been levelled and commodified to the point where the signage and persuasion of adverts is now on a par with that of psalms. With this, the book declares itself part of a wider problem of articulation, linguistic ownership and penetrability. At the same time, this simultaneous lack of and belief in personal and autonomous articulation is the product of a consumerist culture supposedly founded on choice and freedom: 'An unprecedented freedom, but a freedom only to switch channels' (127).⁶ With such comments the book interrogates the cultural situation in late-sixties America. And throughout, the mimicry, splicing and reformation of the clichés of that culture are used to parodic effect to make this the most obviously and consciously politicised

⁶ Or, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer put it in their critique of the culture industry, there is in a culture of economic coercion the freedom to choose an ideology which proves only in fact to be the freedom to choose what is always the same, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Trans.) John Cumming, London and New York: Verso, 1997, 167. See also; Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 131.

of Quin's books, the one that most unambiguously wants to mean something about the world beyond the text.⁷

What is most persuasive, as my reading shows, is how the book's critique moves beyond mimicry and into irony.⁸ Here, the narrative's mimicry and satire do not profess to stand outside, but are rather part of the world they critique. For instance, its use of the cut-up technique means that the book always consciously speaks with the voices and material of others that are clearly also a part of the critiqued world outside the text. In this it attempts to diagnose a cultural problem at the same time as being caught up in its symptoms – we might think of the representation of the Jew in *Passages* again here. But in *Tripticks*, the writing's engagement with cultural questions is both more overt and more complicated: it most noticeably takes the form of a paradoxical pleasure in the consumerist world of surfaces at the same time as an anxiety about what is lost in this. As a result, the narrative displays a confused and contradictory allegiance to the world of materialism at the same time as the search for meaning, in other words, to both surface and depth: in this it moves beyond mere criticism of consumerism into an ironic mode that both enjoys and rejects it. This immersive but dissociated impulse is present above in the protagonist's simultaneous sense of communion with his surroundings – 'an extension of my voice, my skin, my dreams' – and alienation 'from those who had attempted to persuade me'.

⁷ Hall calls it her 'first political work', in 'The Mighty Quin'. The book was – wrongly, I believe – criticised for a supposed hackneyed parodying of American culture in its press reviews, see: *The Irish Press*, 10th June 1972, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5th May, 1972, *Time Out*, 26th May 1972.

⁸ In his appraisal of *Tripticks* in 'Against the Barbarians', Nye praises the 'deposit of seriousness in the text' and opposes it to the parody: 'a species of frenetic satire that will allow little to occur to the narrator [...] without grimaces on the part of the author'.

The ironic tone throughout is at once playful and knowing, anxious and nostalgic. There is a tension between the images that seem to be all that there is and the residual desire to think beyond and break through this surface. With this, *Tripticks* engages in a discourse about the desire for an authentic engagement with the world which remains despite a culture which denies it. Indeed, it is this paradox that reveals the book's late modernist angst, placing it in a limbo between modernist and postmodernist concerns. The stance of Quin's irony here is what Alan Wilde, in his identification of twentieth century ironic modes, terms disjunctive: nostalgic for a modernist anxiety about authenticity at the same time as realising that real resolution might no longer be possible.⁹ Here, the writing's modernism is co-terminous with a sense of its own belatedness: but rather than being unable to move beyond earlier preoccupations, this is writing which returns to them. Indeed, it is this aspect which most firmly marks *Tripticks* as not a postmodern text, however much it might seem to be.¹⁰ This is not writing of the postmodernist ironic mode of assent, where, according to Wilde: 'Yeats was righter than he knew. The center has indeed not held [...] it has disappeared, taking with it the fulcrum on which the modernist dilemma turned'.¹¹ Quin's is a text that remains on that fulcrum. It does not assent; it charts the degradation but not dissolution of the search for the centre.

⁹ Wilde, *Horizons of Assent – Modernism, Post-modernism, and the Ironic Imagination*, 3. Wilde identifies three modes of irony in the twentieth century: mediate irony, which imagines a world lapsed from a recoverable norm; disjunctive irony, where the world appears disconnected and fragmented but aesthetic closure may yet be possible; and suspensive irony, where ambiguity and paradox give way to quandary and the quest for truth is abandoned.

¹⁰ In their discussion of *Tripticks*, Evenson and Howard similarly place it 'on the cusp of postmodern celebration', in 'Ann Quin', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer 2003: 23; 2, 71.

¹¹ Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 45.

In addition, the years of the book's gestation were an important period for cultural thinking (especially of a disjunctive mode) – as confirmed by a range of presciently coincident and relevant secondary texts.¹² These are all concerned with similar questions to those being asked by *Tripticks*: of the relationship between the individual and the system as well as of the changing relationship between surface and depth – in this it is the book which most clearly reflects and performs contemporaneous cultural theories. Significantly, as Arendt reminds us in 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', at this point in time the question of depth had become problematic because it was seen to be outdated, belonging to a notion of philosophy or metaphysics that had 'fallen into disrepute'.¹³ As such, in late sixties America the very concept of 'truth' had become problematic. This – and here Arendt makes specific reference to the Vietnam War – was a context where 'the facts' were agreed upon by consensus rather than their being objectively true. Thus, the pursuit of truth or depth had become almost wholly sacrificed for surface: 'image-making had become global policy' so much so that the stream of images became the reality and as a result, the relationship with history was being broken.¹⁴

¹² For example: R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience*, 1967; Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's *The Medium is the Massage*, 1967; Herbert Marcuse's *An Essay on Liberation*, 1969; Theodor Roszak's *The Making of a Counterculture*, 1969; Donald Winnicott's *Playing and Reality*, 1971; Arendt's 1971 essays 'Lying in Politics' and 'Thinking and Moral Considerations'; Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, 1972; Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1972; Barthes' *Mythologies*, 1957 (translated into English, 1972).

¹³ Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', *Responsibility and Judgement*, New York: Schocken Books, 2003, 161.

¹⁴ Arendt, 'Lying in Politics', *Crises of the Republic*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973, 20. For further discussion of Arendt on image-making, lying and the consequences for history, see Cathy Caruth's 'Lying and History' in *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz and Thomas Keenan (Eds.), New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, 79-94.

Tripticks engages with precisely this problem: its narrative is both enthralled by and deeply despairing of globalised image-making, especially during the time of the Vietnam War. This is evident in a description of the Apollo moon landing:

Two of our kind stand with their own four feet on the moon. Two earthlings representing both sexes (though they are men) all races (though they are pinkish-white beneath their white space suits) and all nations (though they are from the United States, as you might infer from the patches on their sleeves). How far, after all, is the moon from the earth? Precisely the same distance as Vietnam – across the living room (127).

Here, the book's disjunctive ironic mode is evident: the 'global' surface-image that the narrative ventriloquises and declares is undermined by the 'truths' given in parenthesis. The narrative is simultaneously part of what is happening – 'our kind' – and alienated from it – 'earthlings'. As Wilde points out, it is precisely in the ironic mode that narratives most engage with their historical context and thus participate in the world.¹⁵ Above the result is funny and knowing, but it also exposes the way that television, as a media form representing dominant cultural values, distorts and flattens the news, to make everything seem equally important. With this, the narrative exposes a problem of historical and cultural truth in sixties America: it also interrogates 'the words of others' to express a modernist nostalgia for truth and seriousness.

¹⁵ Denise Riley's illuminating discussion further demonstrates that while it may appear as disengagement, irony is in fact an expression of deep engagement, in her chapter 'Echo, Irony and the Political', *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 146-184.

The silent scream

The clearest evidence of this nostalgia can be found in the book's final paragraph, in the image of the silent scream. In illustration, my reading here considers the scream in *Tripticks* in conjunction with other representations of the scream, to propose that not only does this image foreground the activities of looking, reading and interpretation in order to interrogate the possibility of individual articulation; it also presences the narrative's disjunctive nostalgia for the modernist quest for seriousness.

It is clearly a significant image in Quin's writing; it appears again in 'Ghostworm' (also set in America and written at this time): 'She entered a subway, silently screaming in the Inferno'.¹⁶ The dreadful irony of these silent, screaming mouths calls to mind iconic screams in the paintings of both Edward Munch and Francis Bacon.¹⁷ Moreover, Quin's screams have specific similarities with each: they express the anxiety of the former and interrogate the act of looking as does the latter. As Frederic Jameson reminds us, what Munch's scream particularly foregrounds and instantiates is the 'atrocious solitude and [modernist] anxiety' that the absent scream would have expressed.¹⁸ This absence is heightened by the 'gestural content' of the painting, which, for Jameson – who wants to demonstrate

¹⁶ 'Ghostworm', *TAK TAK TAK NUMBER 6*, London: Tak Tak Tak, 1993, 86. As I have already noted, the scream is an image which recurs in Quin's writing; in Judith's gaping mouth and the silent scream of Ruth during the rape scene – I discuss another signification of the scream in my chapter on *The Unmapped Country*.

¹⁷ Quin was 'furious and saddened' to miss the 1962 Bacon exhibition. Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 5th July 1962. After the 1963 Bacon/Moore exhibition she wrote: 'I could have happily stayed there all day'. Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, July 1963.

¹⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, 16.

the redundancy of modernist angst – ‘already underscores its own failure’ because of the incompatibility between the aurality of screaming and silent medium of painting.¹⁹ Jameson sees this failure as proof that the affect of such anxiety is no longer appropriate in a postmodern world where, he claims, the alienation or degradation of the subject has been replaced by its dissolution and fragmentation.²⁰

However, the scream at the end of *Tripticks* expresses nostalgia for this angst and affect; it comes ‘from a long series of emotional changes. Fear for safety and sanity, helplessness, frustration, and a desperate need’ (191). Here, at the end of Quin’s last complete book, the otherwise ceaseless voicing of unease is silenced. The protagonist opens his mouth to express horror at the situation, but nothing comes out. He does not have the power to express his inarticulate pain. His wish to expose false ideologies and speak something more meaningful and real, however partial that articulation may have been, is denied. Significantly, this scream expresses a late modernist anxiety: there is a fear that the scream of the individual might no longer be possible at the same time as the belief that it might yet be recuperated or recreated. The writing contains a similar problem of gestural content to Munch’s painting: ‘I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw’. Communication is both possible, in the writing, and not possible, in speech. Here, the disjuncture is deliberate: it describes the reading experience as much as the protagonist’s by assuming we will be reading it silently – seeing the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 13-18. The move from the anguish of a coherent individual to anguish about the possibility of a coherent individual at all recalls McHale’s description of the shift in the ‘dominant’ from Modernism to Postmodernism being from epistemological to ontological crisis. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 9-10.

words – rather than aloud. At the same time, the insistent ‘I’ and ‘my’ voice of the protagonist throughout marks his final failure to voice not as dissolution, but rather as degradation of the subject. Despite his morphing and blurred ‘many names. Many faces’ (7) and many voices, this subject remains – ‘I somehow exhibited a remarkable adaptation to the peculiar surroundings, resisting burial under the constantly shifting roles’ (132).

Like Bacon’s screams then, several aspects of the soundless scream here purposely foreground sight. This coincides with the way Bacon was being discussed at the time, by thinkers such as Winnicott and Berger.²¹ In his discussion of cultural experience in *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott considers the meaning and import of Bacon’s distorted faces. He concludes that the acts of the painter’s looking at and his painting of faces are bound up with a desire to be seen, to be perceived. He goes further, to connect this with the desire for understanding by postulating both developmental and historical processes which depend on being seen.²² This observation is crucial for thinking about the act of seeing in *Tripticks*. While the act of looking takes the more distanced form of an albeit implicated voyeurism in *Three* and *Passages*, in *Berg*, as I have shown, the need to both see and be seen recalls Berkeley’s aphorism linking perception with affirmation of existence. At the end of *Tripticks*, the protagonist not only looks but sees and is seen; yet here, this does not act to confirm as much as erode his presence. Crucially, what he sees are words – and in this, the act of watching in this book

²¹ The connection between Winnicott, Berger and Bacon’s thinking is identified by Stonebridge in her recent article ‘The Perpetrator Occult: Francis Bacon Paints Adolf Eichmann’, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, Volume 17, Number 2, Summer/Autumn 2012, 101-120.

²² Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1971, 114.

insists on the way in which the acts of watching and being watched throughout Quin work to figure the watching reader herself.

The potential violence of such perception connects with Berger's discussion of Bacon's triptych paintings in his piece 'Francis Bacon and Walt Disney' (1972). There he reminds us that the seeming isolation of each of the images is undermined by their always being watched by either a spectating person or indeed by the other paintings of the three. Moreover, the triptych form, where each figure is isolated in his own canvas and yet visible to the others, means these figures are always simultaneously both alone and completely without either privacy or self-awareness.²³ However, this anguished loneliness is distinct from the disjunctive anxiety displayed in Munch's painting, because here the 'worst has already happened'.²⁴ The poignancy of Bacon's screaming figures, Berger claims, lies in their ignorance of this fact. In contrast, the poignancy of Quin's protagonist, while he is similarly both isolated and always watched, is not to do with his ignorance so much as a feeling of insignificance in the face of the endless words which in turn ignore and deny him.

Indeed, the significance of the connection between Bacon's painting and looking is developed by Stonebridge, who considers the paintings in terms of their post-Second World War context, and specifically in relation to the Eichmann trial. Looking, she proposes, is never balanced, passive or neutral; instead it is always

²³ Berger, *About Looking*, London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, Ltd., 1980, 114. That Berger is discussing Bacon's triptychs is, of course, of particular relevance given the title of Quin's book here.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

something implicated and participatory, something with inalienable moral content.²⁵ What is more, Bacon's particular presentation of the gaping and disintegrating figures doubly foregrounds this quality of our looking – the figures are in glass boxes as well as the paintings themselves being framed and literally behind glass.²⁶ The glass in and over the paintings here is not only a mirror in a metaphorical sense: we are literally reflected in the glass we both look at and through, so that it is as if we are projected into the paintings themselves. Similarly, the protagonist in *Tripticks* is projected into and participates in the world of the words he looks at. The act of looking is intimately involved with his failure to speak. This is bound up with the words and images of others, onto which we must ascribe (or find a reflection of) our own meaning. This is either possible, in which case we take it on and become culpable, or not possible, in which case we are unable to find our reflection. At the end of the book, the agonised nothing which comes out of the protagonist's mouth is replaced with the words of others in a way that seems to only reinstate meaninglessness. These words are all that remain for him to look at after nothing has come out of his mouth and his articulation has been silenced. With this, the soundless scream foregrounds the difference between a looking that remains on the world of appearances and the kind of seeing that penetrates beyond and questions it.

²⁵ Quin herself expressed an awareness of the moral content of Bacon's paintings: 'A photo, Michael had up on his wall, haunts me, of a baby born after Hiroshima. It looked so unreal, one couldn't really believe such a thing possible, same reaction as one has, perhaps, to Francis Bacon's paintings'. Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, 28th September 1962.

²⁶ Stonebridge, 'The Perpetrator Occult', 17. See also; Vicky Lebeau, 'The Arts of Looking: D.W. Winnicott and Michael Haneke', *Screen* 50 (1) 2009, 35-36.

The moral import of the scene – its nostalgia for depth – is further reinforced by the melodrama of the visual extravagance of the candlelit church pulpit and the final, exaggerated fear of ‘The Inquisition’. Together with the signification of the scream, this melodrama alerts us to the crucial moral seriousness of *Tripticks*. Drawing on Brooks’ claim that melodrama is the principal mode for ‘uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era’,²⁷ we find clear a resonance with both Wilde’s assertion that the ironic mode actively participates in history, and Arendt’s claim that this was an era when philosophy and metaphysics had ‘fallen into disrepute’. Irony and melodrama may appear as flippancy, but in fact both have qualities which render them able to penetrate beyond the world of surfaces, to reach towards the real. On the one hand melodrama is clearly role-play, something acted out that has no real feeling beyond its overstated surfaces; at the same time it specifically dramatises the fact that something is always lost in attempts to signify, capture and perform the real.²⁸ In this way its necessary falsity is bound up with the belief that its exaggerated surfaces might be precisely what allow it to reach beyond.

Moreover, the confused and contradictory allegiance to both depth and surface in *Tripticks* – evident throughout the book’s content, language, structures and irony – is precisely what energises my reading here, which moves through a discussion of the book’s parodic mimicry and critique of American culture to return to the question of the desire for the sacred, as well as the corruption and

²⁷ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 15.

²⁸ The melodramatic effect in *Tripticks* here can be compared with the use of role play and the dumb show in *Three*, which similarly dramatises, exposes and interrogates the relationship between surface and depth, performance and reality.

commodification of that impulse in drug culture. As with all of Quin's books, the title holds clues which in turn guide, confuse and extend the reading experience: its trip is a drug experience as well as an actual journey across America; its verbal ticks and tricks abound in a narrative stuck on the words of others. Further, despite and even through its trips and ticks, in both its homophone and structural allusion to triptychs – a set of three writing-tablets hinged or tied together; a picture or carving (or set of three such) [...] chiefly used as an altar-piece²⁹ – *Tripticks* foregrounds, ironises and interrogates the act of looking itself as well as the desire to see beyond the surface and into the centre of things.³⁰

A stream of verbal images

We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future. Suburbia lives imaginatively in Bonanza-land.³¹

Days were nights. Dreams were reality. Reality seen through a rear-view mirror. No sense of time (139).³²

If the silent scream marks the culmination of the book's anxiety; the narrative that precedes it is one which voices and enacts the turmoil of the protagonist's 'long series of emotional changes'. This turmoil is largely created by his relationship with

²⁹ Selected definitions, Oxford English Dictionary.

³⁰ A middle section of letters to and from the protagonist is flanked on either side by the blurred first/third person narrative of his journey across America.

³¹ McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, San Francisco: Hardwired, 1967, 75.

³² The 'retro-visor' is also a motif for visual and verbal play in Brooke-Rose's *Thru*, as White points out in 'Reading the Graphic Surface', 128. Indeed, Brooke-Rose's book begins: 'through the driving-mirror four eyes stare back', *Thru*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975, 1.

and experience of American culture, which takes the form of a simultaneous repulsion and desire that in turn pervades the book's cultural critique, as my reading across both of the following sections demonstrates. One of the most potent symbols of this, as I explicate here, is the representation of screens – and specifically television – in *Tripticks*. The narrative's ambivalent portrayal of this symbol works to foreground and question the prevalent role and position of the visual image. Moreover, it is an issue both made literal and interrogated by the form and function of the illustrations included in the book.

Tripticks is a road book set in America: 'It was when hitting Highway 101 I noticed they were following' (10).³³ The protagonist drives a Chevy, his ex-wife and her lover follow in a Buick: 'as soon as I climbed into the Chevy they began the chase again' (19). Cars, as symbols of American prosperity, call to mind the supposed connection between car-travel and (consumerist) freedom – between the individual 'free spirit' and the commercial system she buys into. The road theme and continual verbiage also recalls, of course, Jack Kerouac's infamous *On the Road* (1957), although this is more likely as criticism than homage.³⁴ Nevertheless, much of Quin's book's reality is also seen through the front windscreen and rear-view mirror of a car, and accompanied by a protagonist's relentless 'I' drawl. Its scenes are also seen in and through a variety of other screens, from a two-way mirror (10) to IBM computers (53), to the television – 'tube' (52) or 'boob tube'

³³ This recalls a further meaning of the title: Hall tells us that 'Tripticks [...] is a US name for an AA motor route' in 'The Mighty Quin'.

³⁴ Quin had written: 'simply hating 'On the Road' – what a lot of sentimental rubbish and so tedious how it goes on and on in this phoney pseudo 'isn't life crazy but it's life man' sort of fashion'. Letter: to Carol Burns, 17th August 1961.

(53).³⁵ This foregrounds not only the act of looking but also the focalisation of the gaze in and through glass, which, as with Bacon's paintings, is always a surface in which the viewer is also implicated, that is both see-through and reflects back. This surface magnifies, filters and distorts what the protagonist sees: 'faces, glass faces behind me, twisted into grotesque shapes by the Pacific winds' (12). Thus the narrative looks through various screens at American consumer culture. These screens complement and extend the mirrors and windows that dominate the looking experience in, for example, *Berg*. Indeed, the voyeur in *Passages* also, of course, sees an erotic scene through a glass screen.

The stream of (verbal) images that the protagonist sees here is bound up with his automobile-driven momentum. The car, from which much of the narrative looking is done, is not only bound up with American culture, but necessitates the speed and momentariness of the gaze. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger points out that the density and speed of visual messages, and more specifically, of publicity images, in modern society means that they belong to 'the moment': 'We see it as we turn a page, as we turn a corner, as a vehicle passes us'.³⁶ This pace leaves no room for proper reflection.³⁷ For Berger, this is part of a bigger problem and has to

³⁵ Many scenes are even seen through the 'screen' of memory, as the protagonist remembers life with his No. 1 Ex-wife in an attempt to construct a clearer sense of himself. Freud reminds us that memory is always 'tendentious' and often screening another, more important memory behind, in 'On Childhood Memories and Screen memories', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VI (1901): The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, (Trans.) James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 1958, 45.

³⁶ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 129-130. Berger points out that while it is usually we who pass the image, we get the impression that publicity images pass us – in doing so he draws attention to the experience of passivity in relation to the images, which seem literally active as well as acting upon us. The experience of reading *Tripticks* dramatises this apparent momentum of images while we, the viewer here, remain static.

³⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the flow of images on a screen exclude thought: 'sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts', 127. See

do with images and ideas being subsumed into the dominant system and then used to make the same general proposal. As the protagonist realises at the end of *Tripticks*, he can, at best, only ever access a moment-to-moment truth or understanding. This is not a culture with fixed meanings, or even fixed connotations, but of constantly negotiated and changing truths.

The undifferentiated stream of images experienced thorough the windscreen on the road is paralleled by those of and on the television, in various motel rooms. This, as the repeated television watching in *Tripticks* suggests, was indeed the ‘age of television’: further, in America at this time; ‘the most popular TV shows revealed a nostalgia for a simpler, rural or small-town way of life’.³⁸ Quin’s narrative is clearly both aware and dismissive of this trend when the protagonist declares: ‘Burn Down Peyton Place, and inhale deeply stretched time with red eyes’ (8).³⁹ Given the representation of television elsewhere in the book, as I demonstrate below, the imperative to burn Peyton Place reads as cynical and critical of the culturally impoverished shows of its ilk. This critique engages with the problem of a situation where – as Adorno and Horkheimer put it – television, film and radio no longer bother to pretend to be art, as if their being big business alone can justify ‘the rubbish they deliberately produce’.⁴⁰ Indeed, they argue that the ‘culture

also; Benjamin’s argument that information inhibits proper thinking and creativity, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Illuminations*, 211-244.

³⁸ David Farber and Beth Bailey, *The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 57.

³⁹ ‘Peyton Place’; a best selling book as well as prime-time small town soap opera, aired in the mid to late 1960s.

⁴⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, 121.

industry' inevitably leads to the 'impoverishment of aesthetic matter'.⁴¹ Thus, the call for the destruction of this kind of rubbishy aesthetic matter in *Tripticks* works to draw attention to the problem of a dominant culture in which not only taste, but also self-awareness – which provides crucial distance and perspective – seems to be lost.

Such criticism is reinforced by the injunction to 'inhale deeply stretched time with red eyes': watching too much television will make our eyes sore and red, our vision (or ability to see) blurred and impaired. But more than this, looking at the television screen has the power to distort and extend time, just as the rear-view mirror, according to the quotations above, might seem to reverse its direction. Screens, in this reading, have the power to manipulate our experience of time itself, by creating a continual moment-for-moment fragmented but inescapable momentum. This reinforces the idea that cultural experience at this time was no longer so much about content, as the medium by which it was experienced.⁴² In *Tripticks*, not only does the eye look at what is on the screen, it inhales it, like air or drugs, and absorbs it in a far more pervasive and insidious manner than 'just looking' would. Television is depicted as ubiquitous and diffuse, in the very air that we breathe. Not only this, but it is a drug with a doping and levelling effect:

I lay on the under-sized Queen bed and watched the tube. The everywhere check, if you push-me pull-you, all wired for a trance in the wilderness. It will be there through good and bad in the empty hours,

⁴¹ Ibid, 124. Robert von Hallberg says it was as if the fate of American culture hung in the balance 'so powerful was the sense that television would abruptly change national taste and sensibility, as it surely did. The idea of national taste is now almost anachronistic', *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1985, 194.

⁴² The idea that the medium itself had become the message is the main argument of McLuhan and Fiore's book *The Medium is the Massage*.

just when you need it. Sounds made visible, a missile's white clicking teeth, a dolphin's voice-prints pick arsonist and Nasser on phone. The sound 'ga' helps make a conviction. A mental patient relaxes. 'Ah' says the President, the big-sky man hemmed in 'every man his own furnace'. Hottest prospect is a fat male genius says a post-graduate historian. The issue is as old as freedom, 'In my day we all had faces'. Mere millionaires don't count now. Monsters of Moonport, the biggest discovery since Columbus. The frenzy of youth manipulated by the viewers' communication that puzzles, excites and involves. Worth a risk, change the channel with real foes on every side looking for a wedge, while cavorting cops aim low, clicking shutters, cut and faint. Ban the Germ Mediterranean style towards the doomsday bug. No withering seal limbs, upsidedown biology. We can see you on 15 Caribbean islands caught in the crossfire' (52-53).

The comfort of television is available everywhere and will be there, so it claims, 'through good and bad in the empty hours, just when you need it' 'all wired for a trance in the wilderness'. This trance is not an energising or creative experience, but a passive one where the protagonist lies down on the bed, the stream of images passing before his eyes. Here, it is not made clear whether the 'mental patient' who relaxes here is on the screen, or whether it is meant to be a term of the protagonist's self-irony.

What is experienced on the television are 'Sounds made visible', and it is the words of 'others' that we see: ranging from missiles to dolphins to the President. The experience here is represented in terms of a cut-up mixture of quotations and clichés.⁴³ The resulting rapid, list-like prose mimics the speed – here time accelerates rather than being stretched – of the stream of sounded and visible images. It also ironises the lack of differentiation and distinction that television

⁴³ Alan Burns claims: 'I know she wrote the book entirely through cut-up', 'Blending words with pictures'. More specifically, according to Hall in 'The Mighty Quin': 'the end product relies heavily on cut-ups from 'Time', 'Life', television commercials and Yankee sex and criminology pulp'. He adds, apparently directed by Quin: 'The emotion dictated the content which dictated the form'.

culture makes between the serious and the banal; for how can the meaningless sound, 'ga', make a conviction about anything? Indeed, this lack of differentiation recalls von Hallberg's claim when talking of poetry about the 'fabric of society': 'anything goes with anything else, so evened out are expectations now'.⁴⁴ The irony above – turned on, for example, the big-sky man, the fat male genius and the 'real foes' being fought off by cavorting cops – is aware of such evened out expectations and has both a funny and serious point: as well as displaying representatives of dominant culture, television also represents it.⁴⁵

But it is not only mainstream culture that is absorbed, performed and exposed by television here: nothing seems to fall outside its gaze. Even the counter-culture movement – the 'frenzy of youth' above – is 'manipulated by' the communications that puzzle, excite and involve it in ideas about politics and cultural critique.⁴⁶ In this, not only does the word 'frenzy' imply an unthinking rashness, but the stance of this representation reveals how rejection of the mainstream was simultaneously being subsumed and 'manipulated' by the distorting influence of its media. As a result, the counter-cultural critique of society was both filtered and shaped by the mainstream. This coincides with Didion's claims in 'Slouching Towards Bethlehem', which chronicles the counter-cultural movement in Haight-Ashbury in late-1960s San Francisco. Her investigation finds disorder and dysfunction – 'frenzy' – as well

⁴⁴ Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture*, 190.

⁴⁵ Marcuse criticises this situation, where cars, television, gadgets, etc. are a fundamental part of a political system which exploits the producing classes of its society by their desire to own and use them, *An Essay on Liberation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, 11-13

⁴⁶ Stevens describes mainstream America's perplexity at the 1967 'Gathering of the Tribes for the First Human Be-In' in San Francisco: 'one moment they were playing baseball and attending sock hops and the next they were racing down the Negro streets at dawn, screaming, hysterical, naked, or at least that's the way it seemed', *Storming Heaven*, xi

as a crucial lack of 'centre'. What is more, while it supposedly scorned the soulless materialism of mainstream culture, in fact, she says, the movement was 'less in rebellion against society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicised self-doubts, *Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the Bomb*'.⁴⁷ It is this passive mimicry she most despairs of. The passage above mimics, and therefore critiques, a similar impulse by regurgitating the most publicised criticisms – the missile/bomb, the landing on (and claiming of) the moon, the place of Caribbean crossfire (Cuba) – which even includes 'anti' movements – 'Ban the Germ Mediterranean style towards the doomsday bug'. Thus, the implication in both texts is that this frenzy of youth does not think or penetrate beyond a surface, mediated interpretation of things; that it fails to look towards centre or depth.⁴⁸

Furthermore, it is not just that the protagonist repeatedly watches television, but more that the episodic narrative technique of the book seems to draw on the experience of watching commercial breaks. McLuhan and Fiore remind us that the structure of adverts provides an essential insight into the medium of television; most significantly because adverts have no time for linear narrative form or story-lines.⁴⁹ And, to some extent, the narrative form of *Tripticks* acts out and seems to be implicated in a similar stream of verbal images to the experience of watching adverts, where the screen-focussed gaze is bombarded with messages about what

⁴⁷ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1968, 123.

⁴⁸ We might suspect that Quin and Didion's criticism of youth culture is in part motivated by alienation from it: too young to be Beats and too old to be hippies, their pessimism could be connected with outsider status. Hebdige provides a more positive appraisal of youth culture when he identifies American hippie culture as a 'decisive break' with its parent culture, *Subculture*, 121. For defence of youth culture, see also; Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. London: Faber and Faber, 1970.

⁴⁹ McLuhan and Fiore, 92 and 126.

to buy: 'Why not see for yourself a different big scene (for a nominal extra charge) that whirls you as if you were on a carousel' (24). This comment has a double effect; it contains a cynical joke about the power of advertising at the same time as being caught up in its whirl.⁵⁰ Moreover, this connection between screen and purchase is something that is, according to Bowlby, endemic in consumer culture. What is more, as she points out, in the act of watching the cinema (as well as television) even the pleasure of 'just looking' is something in fact already paid for.⁵¹ in *Tripticks*, the protagonist's viewing experience, through car and in motel television screens, is also always a pleasure paid for. In this way, the stream of images here perpetuates, exaggerates and thus interrogates the experience of being bombarded by advertising – and indeed, the inherent connection between the culture industry and money that this ultimately implies.

But if the stream of verbal images on the road and on the television in *Tripticks* is in this way disorientating, what are the effects of its stream of actual visual images? It is surely no coincidence that this book preoccupied with images is also the only one of Quin's to include actual pictorial illustrations throughout.⁵² Not only do Carol Annand's pictures evoke the pulp fiction feel of the written narrative – stories of bad women and shadowy men, dodgy motels and suspenseful close-ups, an unknown pursuant always over your shoulder:⁵³ they also echo the written narrative's wider

⁵⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer declare this as the success of advertising in the culture industry: consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them, 167.

⁵¹ Bowlby, *Just Looking*, London and New York, Methuen, 1985, 1-6.

⁵² Please see examples on appendices D-G.

⁵³ The book opens with pictures that introduce the narrative from such an angle; please see appendix D.

thinking about the visual image. When talking about her process in an interview with Alan Burns, the illustrator says:

I tried to make a visual narrative run parallel with Ann's narrative. I used the same Cut-up technique she used. I drew from commercial sources, clichéd images from Time magazine, American adverts and so on; sex images of suspenders and things, and pretzels and high-heeled shoes. The trouble is we didn't start work together. The book was worked out as a literary text and I came in right at the end, after it had been agreed with the publishers. The ideal is to start together so that together you discover what you are doing, and you are continually swoping [sic] information, so that the whole thing is built up as one.

Burns: So you end up not with an illustrated text but an integrated text?

Annand: Yes. For example, because I came in late the type had been worked out and I was not allowed to break it up. The nearest I could get to an integrated book was to run small drawing along the bottom of the pages.⁵⁴

The problem Annand identifies is that although she used similar techniques and sources to Quin, because the illustrations were not commissioned or added until the type had already been worked out, *Tripticks* is not an integrated text.⁵⁵ Moreover, while some of the images do seem to respond to, extend and 'illustrate' the written narrative; others appear irrelevant, tenuous and disruptive. Granted, some connections seem straightforward – the protagonist wears a Brooks Brothers' shirt (7) and one is drawn (11), the twisted faces in the glass (12) have already appeared in illustration (11). However, such images could be said to close down and restrict the reader's interpretation. Indeed, the cacophonous and

⁵⁴ Burns, 'Blending words with pictures'.

⁵⁵ Alan Burns' 1972 *Dreamerika* is an example of an integrated illustrated text – its photographs, illustrations and cartoons were composed at the same time as the written text. See also; *The Medium is the Massage*, where the multidirectional and integrated text dramatises the claim that linear narrative is no longer possible and that we must develop a new way of reading.

performative effect of Quin's writing is often such that it arguably does not require pictorial illustration. Furthermore, where illustrations diverge from the written text this can create the confusion of what seems to be a rather irrelevant engagement with the writing. For example, the comment that 'your ex-wife chipped in' (118) in a narrative about marriage is flanked by a drawing of a bride and groom poised to cut a cake but instead hovering over a huge plate of chips labelled as French Fries.⁵⁶ This is clearly meant as a joke, but it does not quite work.

However, while they may not, perhaps, always work to enhance or complement content, the pictures can be said to enhance and perpetuate the tension created by the polyphonic forms and structures of the writing. For instance, the protagonist claims that when his No. 1 ex-Wife's father was younger he was 'a dead ringer for Shirley Temple' (73), the following transcript for an interview with 'Shirley' is illustrated.⁵⁷ Annand herself comments on the juxtaposition, or even collision, of the 'lesbian scene alongside the computerised face of Shirley Temple'.⁵⁸ Here, while the face is clearly directly connected with the written text, the lesbian scenes are not, and in this way these drawings coincide with and perform the written narrative's techniques: they do not primarily attempt to 'illustrate' or explain the words.⁵⁹ Indeed, as McHale puts it when talking of Donald Barthelme's 1970 book *Brain Damage*, it is possible for drawings to in this way

⁵⁶ Please see appendix F.

⁵⁷ Please see appendix E.

⁵⁸ Burns, 'Blending words with pictures'. Burns replies: '[the] treatment of Shirley Temple exactly gets her ambiguous innocence. The way she's extremely knowing and sophisticated, yet that sophisticated surface is just a surface: a sly comment very much in tune with Ann's book'.

⁵⁹ In his discussion of Alisdair Gray's 1981 *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, White points out that the illustrations do not 'straightforwardly depict the content of the prose': instead they are 'narrative 'continued' by other means, which challenges the reader to synthesise the additional content', *Reading the Graphic Surface*, respectively 184 and 192.

visibly and emphatically 'bring worlds of discourse, visual and verbal, into collision'.⁶⁰ While McLuhan and Fiore celebrate the discoveries made possible by the imaginative juxtaposition of such a collision of seemingly disparate elements, McHale asks the shrewd question of how, in practice, we might actually read such, what he calls, 'schizoid' texts.⁶¹ Is it only possible to read first one and then the other, or constantly back-and-forth, or might we be able to read the visual and verbal simultaneously? He concludes that while some texts approximate simultaneity, in the end the reality of our reading experience means that this is not possible.⁶² This question of reading direction is further complicated in *Tripticks* by the tension more than cohesion of the visual and verbal streams of images. Ultimately then, and especially given the insistence on open-ended reading put forward by *Passages*, the value of these illustrations must lie in how far they can be said to perpetuate Quin's resistant reading effect.

The words of others I saw

You can't get blood out of a turnip so stop thinking you are nursing a hot potato (139).

In addition to the disorientating resistance to interpretation created by both verbal and visual streams of images, the narrative's cut-up technique further complicates

⁶⁰ McHale, 190.

⁶¹ Ibid. This question might well also, of course, be applied to the reading process in *Passages*, but the inclusion of pictorial illustrations here perhaps further complicates the process.

⁶² McHale, 190-193.

the reading experience by disrupting narrative fluency. What is more, the cut-up seems to both undermine and celebrate mainstream culture – the words of others – from which it also speaks. These others function at the level of characters other than the protagonist, for example in the central section of the book which consists of letters to and from the protagonist, as well as of those faceless others ‘who had attempted to persuade me into their systems’ that the protagonist sees at the end but ventriloquises throughout his narrative. It is the interconnectedness of these effects of the cut-up in *Tripticks* – its disruption of the line of words as well as the cultural implications of its ventriloquism – that concern me here.

Mixed-up proverbs and clichés make for the uncanny sense that we have heard or seen it all before even if it be clothed in slightly different terms or phrases. Words are replaced – turnip for stone above – and swapped, puns and jokes are created by absurd juxtapositions. The result is that there is always a double-sense in which the narration is at once both overly-familiar and unfamiliar. This creates an uncanny effect: the agonised, modernist individual (protagonist or reader) is unsure of how to place themselves in relation to the seemingly ubiquitous and autonomous (systemic) linguistic surface of things. This surface seems to frustrate the search for meaning or depth: the momentum of much of the narration proliferates in terms of a sort of sound, rhyme and rhythm free-association as opposed to sense structure. This produces a stream of narrative ticks:

Eyes that fall away to 282 feet below sea level. I am hunted by bear, mountain lion, elk and deer. Duck, pheasant, rabbit, dove and quail. He at first feels a little like George Custer at Little Big Horn. The enemy is all around and awesome. The road ahead is going to be difficult there will be some nervous Nellies and some will become frustrated and bothered and break ranks under the strain, and there will be blood,

irony, dwarfs and dragons, skyrocketed fired to celebrate orgasm's efficiency. Suicide in a scented Sodom. Soul on acid. Hero angelic, domestic and cosmic on a journey with God on my side and the Brownie Troop.

Meanwhile I eat a toasted cheese hamburger, and dwell on five days of unconfined feasts of roasted pig. A miracle for a man who has nothing to lose. True your family adventures may not match those of ancient Greece, but you're equipped to make history and why shouldn't you be, we've worked hard to make it that way, we took no short cuts, spared no expense, watched no clock. If you come filled with dreams it may happen that your dream changes about every 15 minutes. The most is yet to come. 3,000 miles of strawberry ice cream. Lips are frenchfries teasing cole slaw fingers. My belly a Golden Poppy and the Motto is I Have Yet To Find It. Or as posted to my 3 X-wives. Ranked according to value
vehicle
food
allied products
fabricated metal
machinery
stone
clay
glass
lumber and apparel (8-9).

Here, the references to America's colonising history with 'George Custer at Little Big Horn' and 'you're equipped to make history' are mixed in with an onslaught of cut-up clichés and echoes of clichés, as well as a list that mimics a record of exports or expenses. These words are not the protagonist's own. They are borrowed and parodied from, the range of the narrative here implies, a wide variety of literary, historical and media texts. And so the conflicting messages: 'The enemy is all around and awesome' and 'the road ahead is going to be difficult', but there is also 'nothing to lose' and 'The most is yet to come'. Furthermore, the mimicry means that, throughout the extract above, American culture and its people seem

predominantly parodied and criticised.⁶³ This is a country that claims God and Brownie Troops on its side, one that believes it is and has been equipped to make history. These are the words of the ‘American Dream’, the self-made country which, while it may not match the elitist culture of ‘ancient Greece’ is nevertheless righteous about its ability to be the best, the most. Indeed, at this point in time, this kind of American self-belief was often interpreted in largely material terms. However, while the majority of people welcomed the material abundance post-War economic prosperity made possible, there were also those who scorned – as the narrative seems to here – the ‘soulless materialism of America’s consumer society’ which ranked everything according to material value.⁶⁴

This parodic reiteration means that the prose seems to make sense, because much of it is familiar, but that at the same time it is difficult to interpret and possibly even meaningless, because it refuses ordinary cause and effect structural connections: ‘there will be blood, irony, dwarfs and dragons, skyrocketed fired to celebrate orgasm’s efficiency’. The cacophonous cut-up of the language here reads as an allusive ‘non-sense erected as flow, [a] polyvocality that returns to haunt all relations’.⁶⁵ This polyvocality is held together by a kind of free-association that directly contrasts with the opening sentences above, which deal with

⁶³ Quin expressed scorn for American people: ‘oh these Yankee Apple Icecream people with their lives like gobbled gum with the teeth marks showing! They even have a schedule (skedule!) for suffering. Aie’. Letter: to Calder, 19th February 1966, Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 2. But she also realised her view of America was very much as an outsider to that culture – ‘Decided to more or less abandon Tripticks, that was a presumption on my part to think that I could write about this country in that way – and frankly it seemed a device’. Letter: to Boyars, 11th September 1968, Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 3. It is worth always framing her critique, enjoyment and perception of American consumerist culture in these terms.

⁶⁴ Farber and Bailey, *The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s*, 55.

⁶⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Trans.) Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane, London: Continuum, 2011, 144.

measurements of place and the list of real animals. Here again, as with the effect of television, there is the sense that everything is up for grabs, that it has been levelled and now has equal value. Furthermore, the speed of the focal momentum is acknowledged: 'your dream changes about every 15 minutes'. In this, the protagonist's surreal and silly fantasising moves from being hunted by animals – including dove and quail – to having French-fry lips and coleslaw fingers. Significantly, an enjoyment of what is on offer infects the enjoyment of technique here: the narrative simultaneously both revels in and makes fun of this culture of excess made up of 3,000 miles of ice cream and unconfined feasts of roasted pig.

A similar tension between enjoyment and criticism, pleasure and anxiety, runs throughout the book. In this way, the nostalgia for what has been lost is also, to apply Jameson's words to Quin's writing here: 'fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV scenes and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film'.⁶⁶ *Tripticks* is fascinated with the degradation of culture, but its materials and influences are not properly dissolved or incorporated either. This tension confirms the book's limbo state, caught between modernist angst and postmodern assent, on the fulcrum as it were. While this is writing that wants to move beyond distinguishing between so-called high and low culture and to accept that everything is evened out now, it is finally unable to integrate that idea into its very fabric.

⁶⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 2.

A book that does do this is Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), another American road book.⁶⁷ In her analysis of the narrative, Bowlby points out that while supposed oppositions between Europe and America, high culture and consumerism, and true literature and trash seem to perpetuate notions of original and fake, the book in fact challenges such assumptions.⁶⁸ What drives this book on 'from one motel to the next' is the way that its language actually resists Humbert's snobbery by being incorporated into Lolita's mass-cultural American world. Even more emphatically than that, according to Bowlby, the language of consumption is powerful enough to 'take over the poetic force of the book as though against the grain of the narrator's own intentions'.⁶⁹ Thus the narration is ambivalent: it simultaneously expresses enjoyment and disapproval and largely does so through the tension of the different perspectives of its two protagonists.

Despite evidencing a somewhat similar ambivalent enjoyment of the language of consumption and mainstream culture, the narrative in *Tripticks* also exposes its exhaustion and loss of meaning. Rather than taking on a poetic force, the tone of this prose remains dulling and relentless. In the extract above, quotations of the words of others dominate, and this resists the readerly desire for a prose with distinguishable character. The protagonist's words are inextricable from the words of others, without the counterbalance of the dual, characterized

⁶⁷ Burns: 'there's all sorts of undigested literary matter floating about, and personal influences like Creeley and Nabokov and me', 'Blending word with pictures'. Quin had both read the book and seen the film of *Lolita*: despite reservations, she thought it 'A very funny film tho' and worth seeing'. Letter: to Carol Burns, 4th January 1963.

⁶⁸ Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, see discussion 56-64. See also: Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 21-24; Deleuze, first appendix to *The Logic of Sense*, 'The simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy', (Trans.) Mark Lester, London: The Athlone Press, 1990, 253-279.

⁶⁹ Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*, 65.

perspective of *Lolita*. Here, not only does the narrative impersonate what its singular protagonist describes, it becomes what he describes; degraded, debased, clichéd and boring. Hence it is often impossible to differentiate between where the narrative voice mimics or ventriloquises the words of others, and where it merges with them:

Special continuous loop tape switches track automatically for uninterrupted listening pleasure as you operate simple push-button on-and-off controls with one hand exclusive. But don't forget to practise Enthusiasm daily APRPBWPRAA (Affirmative Prayers Release Powers By Which Positive Results Are Accomplished). Take all your bills lay them out on the bed and then ask God what to do about the ask Him for a definite plan for eliminating comfortable fat matrons in opulent costumes feelin' smellin' knowin' the corridors of the heart (35).

This prose is a combination of electrical appliance instruction with a satire of religious practices and belief that culminates in a preposterously long acronym. The narrative voice has no identifiable subject but only the object of the exhortations – 'you'. This longwinded and vacuous speech adds to the sense in which the words here are defined by an absence of meaning, where their signifying properties are debased and devalued. In this, the words are not merely descriptive but performative, and while that performance is at times excruciating perhaps that is precisely the point.

In his germane discussion of David Foster Wallace, James Wood claims that the 'risky tautology' of this sort of narrative is that it shows a willingness to mangle and debase itself for the sake of its project.⁷⁰ Wallace's style pushes parodic extremes to full-immersion method by employing the technique of an

⁷⁰ Wood, *How Fiction Works*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2008, 27.

unidentified narration that is ugly and migrainous to read. The resulting pain of the experience is the intended result: the writing is effective precisely because it is experiential, not descriptive. In this way, Wood claims, Wallace's fiction 'prosecutes an intense argument about the decomposition of language in America' through a method that degrades and discomposes his own style 'in the interests of making us live through this linguistic America with him'.⁷¹ It seems to me that in *Tripticks* Quin makes a similar sacrifice for a similar effect.

Most importantly, this excruciating performance of imperfect imitation is the most persuasive example of irony in *Tripticks*. By imperfectly invoking utterances of the dominant linguistic system again and again, the narrative not only scrutinises that system, but is able to dismember and expose the contingency of its elements. In her discussion of the relationship between irony and reiteration, Denise Riley evokes Echo as the initiator of the ironic, who 'fingers strangeness simply through listening to what [the narrative] hears being reiterated' and in this, remains poised 'between dullness and provocation', petrification and newness.⁷² For irony to grip, she claims, it is unease as well as boredom that must alert us to the fact that something sounds as if it is in the wrong register. This demands 'careful stupidity'; an act of miscomprehension that stops its ears to the content of what is being reiterated and instead becomes fascinated by the word made thing.⁷³ Because of its excessive reiteration, the very ugliness and boredom which registers linguistic degradation is also what transforms it into something vital and active – for

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Riley, *The Words of Selves*, 157.

⁷³ Ibid.

'reiteration produces more than inert copies'.⁷⁴ It is worth briefly turning to Sianne Ngai here, who coins the term 'stuplimity' to describe the coexistence of shock and boredom – or as she puts it, the sublime and stupidity – experienced when reading such texts.⁷⁵ Further, she insists on the specific political content of this discursive exhaustion: the tedium of aesthetic effect facilitates linguistic and philosophical questions about what it means for the individual to be linguistically and aesthetically overpowered by a large-scale system.⁷⁶

Given this, it is significant that Quin uses the cut-up technique – which itself both creates excessive reiteration and interrogates ideas of freedom and control – far more so here than in *Passages*. Indeed, in his analysis of the cut-up, Nathan Moore directly assesses the way in which, while the cut-up seems to be the result of control, it is actually about freedom from control in both the content as well as method of the writing.⁷⁷ In this, the cut-up is able to create distinct effects which, while they do not have a coherent meaning as such – by being freed from the principal systems and structures of meaning – have 'a particular evocativeness' which is not that of 'structural relations but singular intensities'.⁷⁸ In this way, the cut-up resists the illusion of order and causal relationship that narrative usually creates. Not only this, but for Moore, the cut-up technique reminds us that the

⁷⁴ Ibid, 159.

⁷⁵ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2005, 2. Throughout the analysis of her main examples, Gertrude Stein and Beckett, she is careful to make the distinction between the reader's stupefaction when confronted by a thick or muddy text and the text's own 'stupidity'. Quin was reading Stein while writing *Tripticks*, Letter: to Carol Burns, 6th September 1968.

⁷⁶ Ngai, 265-278. See also; Barthes' claims underpinning 'Myth Today', *Mythologies*, 109-159.

⁷⁷ Moore, 'Nova Law: William S. Burroughs and the Logic of Control', *Law and Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall 2007), 435-470. In 1963 Quin had quipped 'call me Ann Boroughs' – the misspelling nicely implying Burroughs himself, the pastiche aspect of cut-up composition and Quin's own act of 'borrowing' that technique. Letter: to Carol Burns, 29th Jan 1963.

⁷⁸ Moore, 439.

writing is not generated by an author but by 'itself'. It dramatises the fact that: 'All writing is cut-up, already composite, hybrid, impure, unstable'.⁷⁹ Here, the technique cuts the words free from their sense. This allows words and phrases to function outside of and almost pre-emptively of their normal usage; thus, they are also caught up in a continual process of becoming which escapes the tyranny of a fixed 'meaning' bound up as this is with the symbolic order of the dominant culture.

What is more, *Tripticks* not only uses the cut-up in a similar way so as to interrogate dominant American culture, it also questions the technique itself. For example, the cut-up narrative is dominantly focalised from the perspective of the protagonist and this has the interesting effect of reinstating an originator of meaning at the same time as undermining it. While the process might stand for the idea of generative freedom, the inevitable acts of selection and editing that take place require (artistic) control. This double-sense can be usefully thought about if we return to Berger's discussion of Bacon, which considers what Bacon called 'involuntary marks' on the canvas. These are supposedly chance elements of the composition that enable the paintings to be more deeply suggestive. The problem is, as Berger points out, these involuntary marks are often mixed in with the consciously painted; thus it is often impossible to distinguish which in fact are the 'accidental'.⁸⁰ The apparently random and yet always necessarily selective cut-up technique of Quin's writing here creates a similarly ambiguous effect, where it is impossible to tell which of the writing is a cut-up, accidental collage, and which

⁷⁹ Moore, 437. Although he is not mentioned, this understanding of texts of course calls to mind Barthes' 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, (Trans.) Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press, 1977, 142-148.

⁸⁰ Berger, *About Looking*, 112-113.

created. This 'trap' at the level of content and composition is further reinforced and challenged by the book's 'schizoid' combination of drawing and writing. In this way, the book's techniques can be seen to be always bound up with a reiteration as well as critique of dominant ideology.

The latter can be thought about further if we return to the extract from *Tripticks* cited above, and specifically the section: 'you're equipped to make history and why shouldn't you be, we've worked hard to make it that way, we took no short cuts, spared no expense'. This is a relationship where the 'we' guilt trips and manipulates its you(th) to take on its own values and aspirations. The 'we' and 'you' here evokes a relationship between the individual and society – rather than family – that evidences an attempt at coercion and control. This reflects an intergenerational tension, found, for example, between mainstream American culture and its critics, as well as a shifting attitude towards psychology as a whole. Not only is this a narrative where the psychoanalysing has already been done – 'I can't even recommend you to my analyst, he's a schitzzy shrink with hidden camera and two-way mirrors' whose 'favourite slogan for almost any trauma is 'don't panic'' (115) – but, whereas *Berg* narrates familial neuroses to expose and critique the veracity of the Oedipus complex, *Tripticks* reflects and appraises the move towards reading neuroses in wider, social terms – 'Now a Geiger Counter detects Freudian signs of suppressed guilt feeling' (156-157).⁸¹

This shift from individual to group psychology was largely aligned with the antipsychiatry movement associated with R. D. Laing – a position recognised in the

⁸¹ Eli Zaretsky calls this a shift in the 'culture of narcissism', *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*, New York: Vintage, 2005, 327-328. See also; Bowlby, *Just Looking*, 29.

narrative by its self categorising as 'part lecture in existential psychoanalysis' (163).⁸² Furthermore, Zaretsky claims that the so-called counter cultural move away from the cult of the materialist individual in fact, especially in terms of its drug induced spiritualism and hippie style, remained immersed in the self-admiration and commodification it professed to escape. It seems to me that similar concerns energise the search for moral seriousness and personal meaning, which arguably lie, despite being often hidden behind the stream of verbal images and words of others, at the heart of the narrative momentum of *Tripticks*.

Trips and Psalms

Thus, while my analysis so far in this chapter has delineated and assessed different aspects of the book's representation of mainstream American culture, here I consider its interrogation of the counter-culture, particularly in terms of how the narrative figures and thinks about the supposed connection between this movement, drug taking and spirituality. In this, drug taking becomes a symbol of the reach for the real, thus seeming an ideal focus for the book's search for seriousness or a centre; however, in *Tripticks*, it is a symbol exposed as empty while the search itself is not.

⁸² In Sward's Journal no. 38, he mentions reading Laing's 1967 book *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* when he and Quin were living together in London. Robert Sward Papers, Series V, box 40.

In terms of the former, it is well worth noting that an early version of *Tripticks* in short story form won *Ambit's* 1968 writers-on-drugs competition.⁸³ Quin's letter to the editors accompanying the story reads:

This is written under my usual combination of nicotine, caffen [sic] and of course, the birth pill I take – Orthonovin 2.

I should like to emphasize however that although I have never written under the influence of Pot, Peyote, Acid, Hash, etc., I am absolutely certain that having taken these, especially Peyote and LSD, they did actually open out a much wider possibility for my writing afterwards – like I think the time thing is important, i.e.: it might have taken me ten perhaps longer years to have reached the stage in writing I am at the moment, so I would like you not to disregard this aspect which I feel so strongly about. After all taking these things are part and parcel of experiences, and they are bound to have some effect on a writer's work, visual and psychological.⁸⁴

Here, while Quin denies writing the story while under the direct influence of illegal or mind-expanding drugs, at the same time she claims that taking such drugs, 'especially Peyote and LSD', directly influenced and progressed her writing. What is more, that this link between drugs and the creative process was made while writing *Tripticks* is unsurprising. Not only does its protagonist talk about and take drugs, but it is set in America, where the writer herself took Peyote and LSD in the mid-1960s. The idea that psychedelic drug taking could not only be inspirational and expansive for creativity but also a spiritual experience had, of course, already

⁸³ The story is a broadly similar but less developed version of the first 40 or so pages of the book. Many phrases are exactly the same, although, for example, names are given to characters in the short version which have later been anonymised. 'Tripticks', *Ambit* 35, 1968.

⁸⁴ Letter: to the editors, *Ambit* 35, 1968, 42. J. G. Ballard was one of these editors. He comments: 'when *Ambit* launched a competition for the best fiction or poetry written under the influence of drugs. Lord Goodman, an intimate of Prime Minister Harold Wilson, raised the threat of prosecution. In fact, we were equally interested in the effects of legal drugs – tranquilizers, antihistamines, even baby aspirin. The competition, and the 40-pound prize which I offered, was won by the bookist Ann Quin', *The Atrocity Exhibition*, London: Flamingo, 2001, 145-146.

been famously written about in Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954). Further, in America this idea had been turned into a sometime money and fame spinner by Timothy Leary, who founded the 'League for Spiritual Discovery' in 1966.⁸⁵ And indeed, similar connections – between drugs, the search for spirituality, the open road and the counter-culture movement – were also being dramatised in mainstream culture itself: the play *Hair* opened on Broadway in 1968 and *Easy Rider* came out in 1969.⁸⁶

The book questions the veracity of such connections. While there is a sense in which the attitude towards drugs is casual – for example the flippant remark, 'Pot and pop-pills are morally right' (17) – its more serious point is an interrogation of the youth movement's use of drugs, and particularly the claims that drugs could enable people to access the real. Further, in the example here, the narrative makes a connection between drugs and morality – seeming to invert the usual critique, and thus parodying mainstream culture's censuring of drug taking as immoral. However, throughout the book references to drugs are more compellingly coincident with an interrogation of the ideas and motives of the counter-culture; in this way the example above is mimicry as critique, exposing the absurdity of any attempt to claim drug taking as 'morally' right. This indicates the narrative's wider exposé and deconstruction of the relationship between drugs and religion. Not only

⁸⁵ Leary's role in the counter-culture movement is discussed at length throughout Stevens' *Storming Heaven* and is condemned in Roszak's chapter 'The counterfeit infinity: the use and abuse of psychedelic experience', *The Making of a Counter-Culture*, 155-177.

⁸⁶ In his account of their New Year trip to Amsterdam 1969-1970, Carter remembers Quin 'told me [...] that the musical "Hair" was in town - in some way she saw herself connected to it, and the cast. Strange, because she had hated the musical in London, regarding it as a commercial travesty of the libertarian ideals in which she believed', document, John Carter Papers.

are television, advertising, drugs and mainstream ideologies exposed as elements of control, but so too are the ideas of drug taking freedom and the counter-culture: this is a youth movement that already speaks in the words of others, of dominant culture, as I began to outline in my discussion of the 'frenzy of youth' above.

So, when the protagonist remembers his ex-wife describing her 'medicine' as she comes back into a room with spoon and syringe in hand, she says:

Let's have a party, let's have a fix. I just don't feature getting strung out, I just don't dig it. Like there's no need for it, no need at all. You got a habit, you like your habit, it makes you feel so good, so very very good, you gotta feed your habit, you gotta be good to your habit, it's gonna be good to you. But you don't be good to your habit, then it's gonna turn on you and be mean, real mean. It's gonna make you hurt, it's gonna give you such awful pain. And man, I don't like pain, no kind of pain. That's why I got a habit in the first place. You know that commercial we watch I always get a bang out of it. You know the one with a bunch of women doing yoga, and this babe starts laying it on another babe about how good this yoghurt is for you. The second babe takes another mouthful. She swallows this stuff and closes her eyes. Then she says something that always makes me break u She says "Now this is inner peace." And every time I see that commercial I say, "yeah, inner peace," and I think about my habit (133-134).

Here, the mimicry of the language of youth is clear – the ex-wife just does not 'dig' getting 'strung out' 'man'. And so the quotation is funny for its humorous ventriloquism of a certain type of speech. But more than this, the advert purposely and specifically links the supposed goodness of yoga and yogurt, enabling the ex-wife to think of her drug talking in terms of inner peace and sustenance; however, this is a connection being framed in terms of consumer culture. Moreover, the connection made here between a drugged up counter-culture and the colonisation of eastern spiritual practices insists on a merging between the desire for spiritual experience – here, as in much of hippie culture, through drugs – and the increasing

commodification of the counter-culture. In 'Anticipating the Spiritual Legacy of the Sixties', Franca Bellarisi discusses this blurring in terms of exploitation.⁸⁷ Such colonisation is evident, for example, in something like the Beats' championing of Buddhism or The Beatles' widely publicised stay in an ashram in Rishikesh in 1968, which are arguably examples of Western appropriation rather than genuine engagement with eastern practices. Here, any avenues 'likely to help the individual transcend the barriers of the socially and linguistically conditioned self' were tried out, be it drugs or Buddhist meditation, as if the effects would be the same and both would cleanse the 'doors of perception'.⁸⁸ As a result, the western individual, as the advert described above suggests, assumed that both eastern spiritual practices and mind enhancing drugs were equally on the market and there to be consumed. What began as genuine belief in the spiritual and creative potential of psychedelics became an obsession with drugs as a purchasable end in itself: 'consumer choice, in the grand American tradition, had come to the private revolution'.⁸⁹ Or, as Roszak puts it, the counter-culture ended up: 'proclaiming that personal salvation and the social revolution can be packed into a capsule'.⁹⁰

Tripticks engages with the effects of this corruption, so that its representation of drug taking as spiritual quest not only interrogates commodification, but also the mileage of the idea in the first place: after all, what kind of 'inner peace' do psychedelics bring? Many of the drug experiences are

⁸⁷ Bellarisi, 'Anticipating the Spiritual Legacy of the Sixties: 'Beatness' and 'Beat Buddhism'', Mirella Billi and Nicholas Brownlees (Eds.), *In and Around the Sixties*, Viterbo, Italy: Sette Citta, 2003, 19-44.

⁸⁸ Bellarisi, 24 and 26 respectively.

⁸⁹ Stevens, 347.

⁹⁰ Roszak, 177.

much more ambiguous and seem rather to be aligned with inner agony. The darkest character in the book is a drug dealer named 'Nightripper'. In one incident, when the protagonist recalls asking his then wife about some photographs he finds of her in 'what looked like some black mass orgy' (59), she immediately arranges for a black mass to be held. The leader of this mass is a 'sleepy-eyed, scraggle-bearded' man, Nightripper: 'it was rumoured he was also called Mystic Murderer' (59). This figure cynically re-inscribes the optimism of a positive connection between drugs and spiritual quest in reductively consumerist terms – "Most black magic', he drawled 'is a hustle to get fast money'" (59). Further, the incident that follows confirms the connotations of darkness, violence and drug abuse in his name. In it, the protagonist's drug experience is one of a frightening loss of control:

The scene resembled a Bosch vision of hell.⁹¹ Some of the women were staring, some were unusually happy, some were sick, others were screaming, and some said the walls were moving. These days if one escapes being hijacked in an airplane, mugged in the street, or sniped at by a man gone berserk, one apparently still runs the risk of getting accidentally zonked by the hors d'oeuvres at a friendly neighbourhood cocktail party. As soon as I thought this I began hallucinating, and ultimately freaked out, overturning the altar, calling Nightripper my motherfucking father. Apparently everyone soon left, except the girl, who my wife asked to stay, hoping between them they could bring me through. I remember there was a point when I didn't want to come down, but remain on an edge that appeared to touch upon a very thin line between life and death, and such power! I felt I was capable of anything, by merely putting my hand out things would fall or rise. I was Satan with God as my servant (62).⁹²

⁹¹ The Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450-1516), who, of course, used the triptych form, not only for spiritual contemplation but dreadful warning. Quin saw Bosch's paintings when travelling in Italy: 'saw the Bosch paintings – fantastic colour and tones (so used to just glimpsing reproductions!)' Letter: to Carol Burns, 24th July 1962.

⁹² The precariousness of the protagonist's position here is something repeated in Quin's unpublished story, 'Matters of the Heart', where the narrator recalls: 'an acid trip, and that same feeling that I don't want to come down, as if I am on the edge of a revelation, a very thin life between life and death', unpublished manuscript, Carol Burns Papers, 9.

This experience is one of 'freaking out' and being 'upon a very thin line between life and death' and the scene directly contrasts with the description of a supposedly centred but actually only ever superficial claim to 'inner peace' in the extract above. Here, while drug taking and religion are again aligned – the protagonist overturns the altar and the scene is reminiscent of Bosch: the effect is more melodrama than parody, an element that alerts us to its moral seriousness. What is more, the representation here engages with the counter cultural claim that drugs can enable a breakthrough towards a more authentic experience, but insists that as much as breakthrough, drugs can trigger breakdown. However, the heightened drama of the scene simultaneously insists that this is not reality: it is instead an image that gestures beyond the exciting drama of its action and language, towards the real fear of a possibly lost centre. In the widening gyre of the protagonist's experience here, the centre does indeed not seem to hold. This is not only in the sense of the inevitable dissolution of a psychedelic drug experience, but also in the excessive language and action which both engage with and enact the anxiety for authenticity.

Further, while this 'bad trip', where the protagonist hallucinates the Nightripper as 'my motherfucking father' pushes him to breaking point,⁹³ the two women stay 'hoping that between them they could bring me through'. It is only compassion and care, the narrative suggests – or genuine feeling – that can rescue him from the staring, sick, screaming women and the moving walls, from

⁹³ That this terrifying father-figure is a drug-dealer and therefore both a representative of mainstream consumer culture and of its supposed anti-movement, again indicates a shift from the familial neuroses of Oedipus to the broader, social terms of psychologising suggested by the Geiger Counter citation above. Indeed, whereas the father in *Berg* is the witness required for Berg's continuation, here the father symbolises the protagonist's potential dissolution.

the 'point when I didn't want to come down'. Here again is a nostalgia for affect similar to the one Jameson identifies in his discussion of Munch. But, while elsewhere such an experience is included in the narrative's parodic stance – 'To cope with neuroses and nuisances there was a centre offering help after bad trips' (45) – here the protagonist is caught, like one of Bacon's subjects, in suspended animation with no way out. This scene offers no alternatives and is deeply engaged with the protagonist's dilemma: the experience is at once and inescapably both genuine and inauthentic. This in turn necessitates a loss of distance, again exposing the difference between mere mimicry – as remaining at the surface of things – and irony – as necessarily reflective, genuine engagement.

Indeed, the book's residual spiritual quest remains bound up with a desire for genuine engagement even while the idea that drug taking can point towards this is exposed as being false. In this, it seems to me, Quin develops and complicates the preoccupation with (Jewish) religion in *Passages* into a more urgent and personalised pursuit. For, despite the critique of the commodification of the search for spirituality in *Tripticks*, the narrative remains caught up in the question of, and desire for, the authenticity of the idea itself: its disjunctive ironic mode evidences a nostalgia for 'the quest for paradise' at the same time as a suspicion that this hope might finally be denied.⁹⁴ And indeed, I propose that the book is ultimately unable to shake off its predilection for the spiritual contemplation-towards-revelation that the title's homophone suggests. While Didion is suspicious of the late-1960s turn to religion, seeing its transcendental urge as a dangerous 'itch for the transcendental, for purification. Right there you've got the ways that romanticism historically ends

⁹⁴ Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 2.

up in trouble, lends itself to authoritarianism',⁹⁵ Roszak sees this urge as a vital rejection of technocracy, as a powerful and important force in the movement away from a prejudice against religion. He calls the counter-culture's defection from sceptical, secular intellectuality 'remarkable'.⁹⁶ Indeed, like the letter of Quin's with which this project opens, he is nostalgic for the 'magical vision of life'.⁹⁷

Finally then, it seems to me that throughout its trips, ticks, tricks and triptychs *Tripticks* successfully exposes the magic lost in the assumption that everything, including the counter-culture and spiritualism, can be packaged up and sold. Despite the play of its parody and cut-up, and the exhaustion of its performative, flattened language, the narrative's irony and melodrama nevertheless simultaneously insist on the continuing need for the search for authenticity, for the real. Moreover, as my reading of the book's final, silent scream has demonstrated, this evidences a seemingly backward looking but actually still vital modernist nostalgia which wants to break down and through towards the very centre of things. It is not that the narrative is immune to the attractions that such a mainstream culture offers but that ultimately this stream of verbal images and these words of others are not able to articulate a genuine self: neither, however, is the individual caught up in this world. Despite the cacophonous relentlessness of its protagonist's self-conscious drawl, and the several different forms of speaking and illustrating that the narrative includes, what remains in this book is the search for articulation – a search compellingly captured by the image of the gaping, silent mouth with which the book ends. In this, I suggest, more clearly so than with the

⁹⁵ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 120.

⁹⁶ Roszak, 141.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

more inward-looking and literary searches that motivate the forms and methods of *Berg, Three and Passages*, this book emphatically enacts the oeuvre's simultaneous refusal of postmodern assent and residual longing for the real. What is more, it is not incidental that this preoccupation connects this book compellingly and directly with the theory and thinking of its time: in this, *Tripticks* is the book most clearly engaged with thinking about the possibilities of not only narrative expression itself, but also about the wider crises of interpretation and articulation both taking place and being discussed within its broader cultural and historical contexts.

Illumination 5

Between 1969 and 1971 Quin suffered a series of severe breakdowns where her behaviour and delusions became increasingly bizarre and dangerous. These began when she caught the boat to Holland with Carter to see in the 1970 New Year. On the journey over, she remained on the freezing deck and refused to eat. Carter remembers that 'At some stage Ann did come inside to tell me that Cleopatra's barge had just gone past and that she had seen her father on it'.¹ This delusion signalled she was far from being in a good state. Indeed, once they arrived in Amsterdam her behaviour deteriorated even further, culminating in Carter having to wrestle her to the ground to stop her running out onto the only thinly ice-covered river. After this episode Quin was given a sedative and taken to a psychiatric hospital. But, once out of there and having returned to London, she declared herself to be at the centre of a 'conspiracy', and escaped with an Arts Council grant to Denmark, Norway and then Sweden. There, she was found in a snowdrift in a delusional state and was again hospitalised. Refusing to eat or sleep, she was force fed and given electric shock therapy, after which she said to Carol Burns: 'both my angels and my demons are gone'.² She was subsequently diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.

However, after a while, Quin seemed to recover and was able to write again. During the relatively calm time that followed, she enrolled at Hillcroft College – 'a Residential College, established in 1920, for women between 20 and 45+, who

¹ Carter's written account of their journey, unpublished material. John Carter Papers.

² Carol Burns' piece in memory of Quin, 4.

have missed out educationally in their teens³ – for the academic year 1972-1973.

There, she studied psychology, sociology and English literature:

having a whole year in which to have some systematic study, and participate in seminars, tutorials, and attend lectures, and discuss what I was reading with other people, seemed to me ideal; a way-out of the rut I felt I had got myself into.⁴

Her piece on her time there, 'A second Chance', describes one of the few relatively happy and stable times of her later life: 'we all seem to get on very well indeed'.⁵

She charts the sense of progress achieved through studying and writing essays. Unsurprisingly however, her approach to the writing tasks remained somewhat unconventional: 'my Lit. essay for the week : What from Middlemarch might have inspired the Suffragettes before 1914 – have decided to use a dialogue between two Suffragettes'.⁶

Nevertheless, she did well and the time at Hillcroft seemed such a success that in spring 1973, Quin began applying to university. She wrote to Boyars:

Haven't heard from any University whether or not I've got in – went to East Anglia and hated it, such a desolate 'Brave new world' kind of place, felt I couldn't stick it out there for 3 years, so even if they do offer me a place I shall refuse! Sussex, on the other hand, is a super place'.⁷

³ Quin, 'A Second Chance', unpublished manuscript, Carol Burns Papers, 1.

⁴ Ibid, 2.

⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁶ Letter: Quin to John Carter, 7th February 1973. John Carter Papers.

⁷ Letter: Quin to Boyars, 10th April 1973. Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 4.

But, in the event, Sussex refused and East Anglia offered her a place. Thus, in the autumn of 1973, had things been different, Quin would have gone on to study English there under Angus Wilson.

The Unmapped Country, 1973: Too close reading and writing

But that movement of mind which led her to keep the necklace, to fold it up in the handkerchief, and rise to put it in her *nécessaire*, where she had first placed it when it had been returned to her, was more peculiar, and what would be called less reasonable. It came from that streak of superstition in her which attached itself both to her confidence and her terror – a superstition which lingers in an intense personality even in spite of theory and science; any dread or hope for self being stronger than all reasons for or against it. Why she should suddenly determine not to part with the necklace was not much clearer to her than why she should sometimes have been frightened to find herself in fields alone: she had a confused state of emotion about Deronda – was it wounded pride and resentment, or a certain awe and exceptional trust? It was something vague and yet mastering, which impelled her to take this action about the necklace. There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms.¹

The title of Quin's final, unfinished book, *The Unmapped Country*, is taken from the assertion of 'a great deal of unmapped country within us' at the end of this extract from *Daniel Deronda*. This claim makes the realist move from the particular to the universal. In this way, the narrator's commentary on the incident is supposedly able to reveal its truth. When Gwendolen Harleth, compelled by 'something vague and yet mastering' decides to keep the necklace, the narrator knows what makes her act in this way – 'it came from that streak of superstition in her' – whereas Gwendolen herself does not. This 'unmapped country' within her, the narrator would have it, can tell us something about an unknown within real people in the world outside of the text, something 'within [all of] us' that 'would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms'.

¹ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, 235.

Eliot's narrator is thus simultaneously within and outside of the world of the text, able to employ a meta-language – 'that language which tells us what is *really* happening'² – which claims to bridge the gap between fiction and truth. However, this meta-language has an ironic effect, for it exposes the narrative as a fiction at the same time as consolidating its claim to the real. This tension is exacerbated by the way that the detail of the incident insists on the constructedness of the writing. The returned necklace is the one Gwendolen suspects Deronda of rescuing from the shop she pawned it to in order to continue gambling at the start of the novel. That vision of her gambling, and Deronda's response to it, is a central idea, not only in terms of content, but also of the book's causal structure. Indeed, as Cynthia Chase points out, this is a narrative where causality is the logic at work throughout the text.³ The incident above – the second rescuing of the necklace – is therefore itself a key part of the structural mapping of the text.

Gwendolen herself recognises these rescuings of the necklace as portents, signifiers of things to come if only she were able to read them correctly, but the narrator's claim to an authoritative reading instead gives the reader access to that coveted, knowledgeable position. In this way, the extract is one of the many moments in *Daniel Deronda* where the narration is as much about the activities of reading and writing as about events within the world of the story. It exposes a tension between what is known and not known both in and outside of the book: between the mappable writing and reading processes that take place in the

² Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press, 1979, 24.

³ Chase, 'The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double-Reading *Daniel Deronda*', *PMLA*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (Mar 1978), see especially opening comments, 215.

constructing and receiving of a realist text and the (at that point in time) largely unmapped human psyche. More specifically, this ‘unmapped country’ is also always bound up with articulation: it is the unknown within us, which must be taken into account for an explanation of human behaviour. We are faced with a paradox – the claim that something unchartered, unwritten and unknown is at the same time necessary for understanding and interpretation.

But, why *Daniel Deronda*, and why at this point in Quin’s writing? The specific motivation for this last book may well have been bound up with a criticism Nye made of *Tripticks*: ‘It can still be hoped that Miss Quin will chuck the box of tricks away and sit down one day to write a whole book in which observation of the heart’s affections is allowed to predominate and inform’.⁴ This rather gendered appraisal and distinction, between the ‘box of tricks’ and ‘observation of the heart’s affections’, was nevertheless an attack that stung Quin into response: ‘Am also well into another book – another journey of discovery/rediscovery and taking Robert Nye’s criticism seriously: writing/dealing with ‘matters of the heart’.⁵ However, what both the unfinished story of ‘Matters of the Heart’ and incomplete book *The Unmapped Country* narrate are their protagonists’ literal and metaphorical, final journeys into madness and subsequent incarceration in psychiatric hospitals – Linda in ‘Matters of the Heart’ says ‘This is, I suppose, the first stage on the real journey’,⁶ and Sandra in *The Unmapped Country* is asked by

⁴ Nye, ‘Against the Barbarians’.

⁵ Letter: Quin to Boyars, 16th January 1973. Calder and Boyars manuscripts, Series II, box 52, folder 4.

⁶ ‘Matters of the Heart’, 16.

a psychiatrist to 'Tell me about the journey you took'.⁷ After the Mediterranean trains and American car trip then, *The Unmapped Country* can be seen as Quin's final journeying and search story.

But, rather than narrate the 'heart's affections', Quin turned to Eliot and *Daniel Deronda*, a novel which not only maps the lives of its protagonists onto the social and political issues of its time, but also one which is specifically engaged with the question of narrative form. Indeed, Eliot is arguably herself a tricky writer who interrogates and even deconstructs key realist questions of causality and order, even from within her realism.⁸ Moreover, as I have shown, Quin is a writer who, despite the escalating experimentation of her books, is always either writing in the shadow or in rebellion of realist forms and structures – for instance, the resistance to the determinist oedipal frame in *Berg*, and the play with the journal form in *Three* and *Passages*. Indeed, on one level, there is a sense in which even the writing in a book like *Tripticks* demonstrates not merely a descriptive but a performative, full-immersion attempt to write reality, where its very excess is its realism. There, as opposed to the transparency and self-effacing language of the classic realist narrator, we find a realism that is experiential rather than descriptive: it is not realist in the classic sense of being unmapped or 'unwritten' – as Colin MacCabe terms the third-person narration of traditional realism, and Eliot is his

⁷ First chapter and only currently published section of *The Unmapped Country*, Gordon (Ed.), *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, 253.

⁸ For Chase, the peculiar, backwards plotting of Eliot's book works to disrupt and deconstruct the concept of cause. For a fuller exposition of this position, see 'The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double-Reading *Daniel Deronda*'.

example⁹ – but rather exactly because it is over-written; frenetically and exhaustively mapped and signified. What is common to both Eliot and Quin is that it is a supposed faithfulness and truth (interpreted differently) of representation, which dictates and determines the writing's style.

In Quin's other writing the possibility of effacement is undermined and deconstructed, not only by the thickened accretion of the narrative surfaces, but also because it is so clearly causal and authored. Not only does (part)repetition echo throughout the letters, stories and books to determine our reading, but, as I demonstrate in my opening chapter, for Quin the earlier writing mapped out the later – hence *Berg* as 'a sort of map I had to plan out'¹⁰ – as well as her life. Here, the deterministic foreshadowing and causal structure of clues that realism relies on for the logic of the text (as well as our seduction by it) seemed to pattern life too. In this way, both writing and life always returned to and were shadowed by what had gone before, by what had already been written. However, such ideas seem in tension with even the title of *The Unmapped Country*, which already suggests an attempt to do something different, the desire for a new journey. The writing here is unusual in that in some ways it participates in a more traditional form than the rest of the oeuvre: for example, its first chapter is narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator. This works to create a distinction similar to the one MacCabe finds in Eliot's writing: between the articulated speech of characters and the surrounding, supposedly unwritten, narration.

⁹ MacCabe identifies the classic realist text, as part of his analysis of Eliot, as being unwritten, with an absence of style that reaches for transparency, as part of his argument throughout his chapter 'The End of a Meta-Language: From George Eliot to *Dubliners*', *Revolution of the Word*, 13-38.

¹⁰ Already cited letter: Quin to Carol Burns, August 1962.

Below, I assess the final form of Quin's 'realism' in the available two chapters of the overlapping and repeating *The Unmapped Country*, and, in particular, demonstrate (this) realism's madness in terms of both form and content.¹¹ The book's story narrates its protagonist Sandra's experience of madness and incarceration in a psychiatric hospital. In this, the writing not only coincides with madness as a topical social and political issue, but also with the writer's personal experience.¹² Here, the text engages with questions of what was supposedly known and unknown about madness by 1973. The previously unmapped country of the mind was something which had, by this point in time, to some extent already been rather deterministically 'mapped out' by things like the Oedipus complex of earlier twentieth century psychoanalysis – hence Quin's title can be seen to be intentionally ironic as well as serious. In the 1960s and 1970s the idea that madness was something in need of a further or different mapping made this the fashionable endeavour in the fields of psychiatry and anti-psychiatry.¹³

Writing in the mid to late-1970s, Shoshana Felman refers to the 'well known' fact that madness was the 'crucial question in the current cultural scene', with people keen to promote their "madness' goods as the latest thing in order to

¹¹ These two chapters are all that remains/was written of *The Unmapped Country*. While the first chapter has been published, the second chapter is not, and exists in draft manuscript form only.

¹² I employ the term 'madness' as it is the one Quin herself uses in *The Unmapped Country*. It is also, as Baker, Crawford, Brown, Lipsedge and Carter point out, the term which best includes and represents the social, personal, and cultural contexts that surround it, *Madness in Post-1945 British and American Fiction*, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 3.

¹³ Laing had become one of the most prominent and famous figures of this zeitgeist since the publication of, for example, the popular and widely read *The Divided Self* (1960) and *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (1967). This popularity is discussed by Jenny Diski in *The Sixties* (2009). In these Laing attempted to write the unwritten about madness. The shift in emphasis, from case-study analysis in the former to pseudo-mythic literature in the latter, signifies the increasingly romanticised currency of the genre of madness.

publicize [their] avant-gardism'.¹⁴ Indeed, this fashion for madness had already been explicitly engaged with and interrogated in fiction of the 1960s.¹⁵ The most relevant examples here are Jennifer Dawson's *The Ha-Ha* (1961) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), both of which narrate the difficulty of articulating the experience of being inside madness: Dawson's mad protagonist can never find the right words when speaking and Plath's is a budding writer whose illness renders her unable to read or write; nevertheless, they are still able to first-person narrate their experiences in highly evocative detail. In this way, both books, as Quin's text here, attempt to write the experience of being inside madness.¹⁶

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Quin's writing more successfully goes some way towards actually activating (rather than describing) madness at the level of reading and writing itself, specifically by performing an overemphatic and 'mad' demonstration of the coding that realism relies on to make itself work. In *The Unmapped Country*, this happens in the places where the oddness of the overwriting – the repeated signs and tics – at word level undermines the apparently unwritten and transparent realism of the third-person narrator.¹⁷ As *Daniel Deronda* reminds us, a classic realist text is a specific hierarchy of discourses which places the narrator and reader in a position of dominance. However, Quin's writing

¹⁴ Felman, *Writing and Madness*, (Trans.) Shoshana Felman, Martha Noel Evans and Brian Massumi, Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2003, respectively 12 and 13.

¹⁵ Possibly the most famous example of this trend is Ken Kesey's 1962 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

¹⁶ Whether or not this is possible, Felman remarks, is a key question in Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation*, which was relevantly first translated into English in 1973.

¹⁷ MacCabe makes an explicit connection between reading a realist text and 'reading' madness (as the twentieth century heir to neurosis): 'The problems and method of reading a realist text may be usefully compared to the problems an analyst faces in the analysis of a neurotic's discourses and the methods used to disengage significant interpretations from those discourses', 21.

problematizes such an assumption: there is a tension and in places a collapse of the assumed opposition between the third-person narrator as a dominant authority who writes the interpretative frame – the reality – and the ‘mad’ person who reads clues everywhere to deconstruct it. This last book is concerned less with the question of articulation more generally, and more with the possibility of articulating or activating madness itself. In this way, madness does indeed function as unmapped territory rather than abject otherness.

Significantly, Felman’s 1978 *Writing and Madness*, which my thinking in the analysis below is both informed by and moves beyond, associates the fashion for madness with an upheaval in the status of knowledge. This not only interrogates the meaningfulness and adequacy of theories and claims to knowledge (mapping) about the world and human person, but engages with the question of how we read apparent signs of causality in the world around us to tell a story about our existence, as well as the question of whether it is possible to adequately or truthfully write or know madness at all. In this context Quin’s turn to *Daniel Deronda* at this point in time becomes clear. *The Unmapped Country*, by directly evoking Eliot’s book in its title, overlays a reading, writing and deconstruction of causality – the way a text means and a reader knows – over the story of madness in the 1960s and 1970s. That earlier narrator’s instinct that something ‘unmapped’ can be offered in ‘explanation’ is interrogated. In this, the unfinished book does not just engage with madness as a fashionable idea or genre, but with the far more probing question of the connection between madness and writing itself.

(Un)writing about and out of madness

‘Good morning and how are we today?’

‘Bloody rotten if you must know’.

‘Why is that – tell me more?’

Silence. Patient confronted psychiatrist. Woman and man. She looked at the thin hair he had carefully placed over his yellow husk. Thin lips, almost no lips. Thick hands, bunches of spiders on his knuckles. He wrote or doodled, leaning forward, back.

‘I don’t like your madness’.

‘What do you mean by that, Sandra?’

Pen poised, ready to stab yet another record. She could not see his eyes, the light bounced, spiralled in his spectacles. Black tentacles crept from his nostrils. In the distance a woman screamed.¹⁸

To begin, I consider how *The Unmapped Country* interrogates language’s ability to represent madness by assessing the effects of its third-person narration specifically in terms of its evocation of stereotypes. This is evident in the published first chapter of the book, which focuses on the experiences of its protagonist, Sandra, in a psychiatric hospital. The lines above, with which the book opens, are part of a description of her morning session with one of the hospital psychiatrists. Although the chapter is written from a predominantly third-person narrative perspective, it is also one which closely sympathises with the protagonist. What is more, the role, position and symbolism of this third-person narrator is significant, particularly for thinking further about this book’s tricky but sustained relationship with realism.

For example, above the patient psychiatrist opposition is not only stated – ‘Patient confronted psychiatrist’ – it is also exacerbated by the dehumanising,

¹⁸ *The Unmapped Country, Beyond the Words*, 252. In this part of the chapter I will be predominantly reading this chapter, and subsequent page references will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

revolting and sinister description of the almost lipless, yellow husked, pen stabbing and eyeless doctor. The description of the doctor is in staccato, reduced to fragments of close-up detail. The result is both observationally specific and evocative but also somehow stereotypically villain-esque: we might well think of Berg here, or Judith. Again, the strangeness of the details – here the ‘bunches of spiders on his knuckles’, the ‘black tentacles’ which creep from his nostrils – undermines the sense in which the general clarity of the prose and third-person perspective might imply an objective or ‘transparent’ record of the meeting. This is instead an exaggerated and ambivalent description, made strange because it loses any sense of distance. It is conscious that the notion of the ‘evil’ doctor and mad ‘victim’ are already encoded and mapped out. In this, the writing does not so much describe the experience of being inside madness as it performs and interrogates an overly encoded and stereotyped way of seeing the world.

Indeed, the passage knows, and to some extent performs, stereotypical power oppositions – sane/mad, doctor/patient, woman/man, human/animal, villain/victim – while at the same time subverting and undoing them: the patronising ‘how are we today’ is sent up by the ‘bloody rotten’ answer. Sandra, under attack from the doctor’s questioning, offers mutinous silence and terse, tightly controlled answers in return, despite the horror of having to listen to another woman screaming. This scream is not the silent gaping mouth of *Tripticks*; neither is it the protagonist’s. Instead, in contrast with the inarticulate and agonised sound heard ‘in the distance’, Sandra’s protests are perfectly comprehensible, lucid and even

witty: she says it is the doctor's madness she does not like.¹⁹ Significantly, his response is to ask what she means, which admits that her speech could indeed have meaning, in spite of her 'madness'. This raises the crucial question at hand, which is whether and in what ways it might be possible for language and writing to *mean* madness. While Sandra's response here is lucid it is also ludic, irreverent and playful. The writing's lucid-ludic double-sense, where what seems to be in one register always carries within it and implies the sense of another, recalls the transgressive and carnivalesque ambivalence that we find the clearest precedent for in *Berg*. Its inclusion of binaries – the way in which the narrative here is both in and outside of madness, where it knows and subverts stereotypes, its register is lucid and ludic, its images and logic both realist and surreal – not only recalls the transgressive-resistant tension of, for example, *Passages*, it is also the most persuasive way that Quin's final writing is able to expose the way in which madness was at this time both emphatically over and yet still not quite properly being articulated or mapped.

The first chapter as a whole charts the course of one of Sandra's days and is in short sections which communicate its minutiae and scheduled manner. She converses with psychiatrists and fellow patients, writes in and reads old entries in her diary, and attends a group therapy session and ward party. She spends time walking and drawing shapes in the snow in the hospital grounds, as well as several times trying (and not being allowed) to go to sleep. She is also visited by her lover

¹⁹ This is surely a playful reference to the anti-psychiatry movement's emphasis on the world as mad as opposed to the individual labelled as such.

Clive, a man who wants to leave as soon as he has arrived, but not before she has performed her 'duty' and taken 'him in her mouth' (262). At the end of the day and the chapter, she is finally allowed to sleep. Throughout, the rigidity of the institutional context is reinforced by a seemingly traditionally realist unwritten narrative in which passages of speech and description are clearly demarcated. These qualities, which make things so much easier than other of Quin's texts for the reader, and flatter our desire to 'know' the text, did not go unnoticed. While elsewhere championing the innovations and experiment of Quin's prose, it was these more conventional seeming qualities that Gordon praised when he called this: 'Her best writing, in fact, the actual quality of perception and its handling in prose'.²⁰ And indeed, in some ways the seemingly clear form of the third-person narration in this writing in this book could not be further from the escalating experimental forms of *Three, Passages* and *Tripticks*.

Predominantly here, the third-person voice describes a madness that is very much separate from and outside of itself, and with a tone that knows the stereotypes of the madness 'genre'. The effect interrogates the possibility of writing about madness from without:

The Red Queen breathing through the tunnel. Her face at the bottom of the lavatory, grinned u Flush her away. Sandra sat for some time in the lavatory, the only place she could be by herself and not be distracted, and go back over the journey; even so their voices interrupted 'It's all in the head you must realise that – in the head in the head inthehead inthehead inthehead...' and she saw the doctor's faceless presence behind his desk, like the painting 'Le Principe du plaisir', by Magritte,

²⁰ Letter: Gordon to Boyars, 27th February 1974. The collection, *Beyond the Words*, began as a collaboration with B.S. Johnson, who died shortly after Quin in the late summer of 1973. In the introduction to the collection Gordon writes: 'Judging by the opening chapter printed here, it could have been her most considerable work', introduction to *Beyond the Words*, 11.

except the figure in the painting was infinitely better, more pleasing. Then there was the Red Queen's face; even when dead her mother, no doubt, would be watching her. And Clive – what of Clive [sic]? Frightened of his own madness; seeing her actions, reactions as interpretation of what he considered a madness just round the corner for himself (255).

This description of madness is a clichéd one where Quin places Sandra's experience in the context of a very much mapped country; the references to Lewis Carroll's 'Red Queen' and Rene Magritte's 'Le Principe du plaisir' make this clear. Elaine Showalter claims that: 'For woman writers, Alice's journey through the looking glass is a more apt analogy than Ophelia's decline'.²¹ Given this, when Sandra sees the face of her mother, referred to throughout *The Unmapped Country* as the Red Queen, grinning up from the bottom of the toilet, the vision knows and is determined by what has gone before.²² In contrast, the faceless presence of the doctor is described as 'infinitely' less pleasing than the one in Magritte's painting. The painting's title, translated as 'The Pleasure Principle', of course recalls Freud, whose psychoanalytic theories sought to map the mind, and it depicts a doctor's face obliterated by a shining light representing the 'light of reason'.²³ This reference to Magritte's image here both recalls – 'the light bounced, spiralled in his spectacles' – and contrasts with the detail of the description and

²¹ Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, London: Virago, 1987, 211.

²² In 'Matters of the Heart' (also 1973), the protagonist, Linda, also names her mother the Red Queen throughout. This repetition affirms the significance of the allusion, not only in terms of the pugnacious and heckling nature of both mother characters, but also of a known association between Carroll's Red Queen and madness. It could also be seen as a play with the generalisation that madness and bad mothers go together.

²³ Quin sent a postcard with this image on to Blomfield in the summer of 1973.

behaviour of the doctor in the earlier extract, which there works to undermine his status and reasonableness.²⁴

Much of the thinking about madness at this time opposed madness and reason, including, for example, Foucault, who Derrida criticises for remaining attached to the 'concept of madness as unreason'.²⁵ Above, similar assumptions about clear oppositions between reason and madness, clarity and confusion, knowledge and ignorance are interrogated by a tension between the third-person narrator's 'transparent' language and the places where the narrative seems to slip into Sandra's voice. While the quotation marks around the 'it's all in the head' speech of 'their voices' reinforces the sense of an unwritten and transparent narration MacCabe identifies with the realist narrator, where speech marks define what is articulated against what is not articulated and the writing is thus distanced from the experience, in places here the narration is more ambivalent and unidentified. The narrative seems to inhabit Sandra's first-person perspective with – 'And Clive – what of Clive?' – the distance of a third-person narrative perspective collapses.

This ambiguity is further complicated by the sense in which, even when hallucinating her mother as 'The Red Queen' grinning up at her from the bottom of a toilet, Sandra seems to remain lucid and ironically aware – she evaluates the

²⁴ We find, perhaps, similar caution about reasonableness as the only proper response if we return to Gwendolen, whose behaviour 'would be called less reasonable' but is nevertheless, the narrator implies, genuine and legitimate.

²⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, (Trans.) Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1995, 38. Sass also identifies and refutes the 'ubiquitous image of madness as irrationality', *Madness and Modernism*, 2. In this book, as well as *The Paradoxes of Delusion: Wittgenstein, Schreber, and the Schizophrenic Mind*, Sass argues instead for an interpretation of madness (and specifically schizophrenia) as reason *in extremis*.

Magritte painting as 'infinitely better, more pleasing' than the faceless doctor she looks at – while other patients are depicted as more obviously 'mad' and without such articulation and self-awareness.²⁶ For example, Thomas believes he is 'Judas Iscariot reincarnated'; that 'God is Mrs Carr, and my young friend Bob is Jesus Christ' (253).²⁷ His God, Annie Carr's, speech is profane – 'you cunt you bloody fucking cunt' (254): at the lunch table she exposes herself – 'Annie Carr shouted, pushing out her left breast, dipping it in the gravy' – and then tears off her nightdress 'and on all fours gave herself to the linoleum' (256). While, absurdly, her behaviour poses no challenge to Thomas' belief, confirming the strength of his delusional world-view, it also serves to provide another exaggerated example of 'madness'. Other unnamed characters scream, are drugged, whimper, rant and rave, and even try on post-lobotomy wigs: 'Well I got this lobotomy op coming up and they shave the head you see – nice isn't it – they designed it specially so it would look like my own hair' (265).

The simultaneous horror and humour of Annie Carr's behaviour and the normalised chatter about lobotomy surgery here engages with the problematic question of the treatment of patients diagnosed as mad in the 1960s. In this way, the wider cast of characters not only recall literary and otherwise stereotypes of madness, they are also the point at which the narrative most evidently engages with the fashion for protests about how the mad should or should not be treated, and in turn with questions about authority. As with those depicted in *The Ha-Ha*

²⁶ This distinction reflects the kind of interpretation Felman calls 'an illusion of reason' whereby a person who is mad does not know they are mad and is instead convinced of their reasonableness, *Madness and Literature*, 36.

²⁷ While the character's words are 'serious', Quin winks an ironic awareness naming the title of Thomas' book setting out his world view 'God's Joke'.

and *The Bell Jar*, the psychiatric hospital here is not a place of refuge from the outside world, but one where the mad person is confined, reduced, misinterpreted, and acted upon with drugs, electro convulsive therapy and lobotomy surgery: the patients are thus rendered powerless and completely at the mercy of the system.²⁸ However, while they might contain a censure of discipline and the institution at one level, as D. A. Miller points out, realist texts in fact exercise policing powers of their own and the third-person narrator is the key representative of their 'institution'. He assesses the omniscient narrator of the type we find here and argues that it 'assumes a fully panoptic view of the world it places under surveillance' and that 'nothing worth knowing escapes its notation'.²⁹ In this way, even a supposedly sympathetic third-person narrator is also always an agent of a textual system which attempts to dictate the interpretative frame. This creates a narratorial ambivalence whereby any critique of the system is a covert reinforcement of it because of the power relations it enacts: the third-person narrator's attempt to tell the experience of madness in the language of reason is the most powerful example of this.

In addition, points of apparently sympathetic engagement with the wider debate are also often the places in the text where the narrative expresses a level of resentment about and resistance to Sandra's fellow patients, the point at which it is most horrified by and alienated from them:

Someone changed the television channel. Screams of protest.
'Well you weren't watching anyway just natter natter natter'.
'That's not fair we were watching'.

²⁸ In 1960 Erving Goffman had called the asylum a place in which the person's self 'is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified', *Asylums*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1970, 24.

²⁹ Miller, *The Book and the Police*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988, 23.

'No you fucking wasn't'.

'No need for that'.

Silence. A picture came on of a table laden with food.

'Looks nice doesn't it?'

'Not poisoned like it is in here'.

They leaned forward and watched the picture intently.

They leaned back and swallowed their saliva; carried on chattering, nose picking, knitting; fingers plucked at buttons, cigarettes, fingers at fingers, a battle of insects (268).

The anonymising and distancing effects of 'someone' and 'they' here is reinforced by the disembodied and depersonalised speech of the squabbling patients. They have been so reduced by the institution which supposedly feeds them 'poisoned' food that they are left with nothing to argue about and invest in except for the television (the ubiquitous 'drug' of dominant culture in *Tripticks*). The listing technique demonstrates the reductive and dehumanising effects of an institutional experience which leaves people salivating, chattering, nose picking and ultimately reduced to 'insects'.

But, such a description also seems to condemn them with its own disgust: their frantic, plucking fingers and the knitting are ordinary activities made strange, frightening and ridiculous. In this way, at the same time as criticising what is done to the patients, here again, as with the cliché of the Red Queen, the narrative voice is always distanced from them. This double-effect, which both sympathises with and is removed from these patients, both reinforces and problematises the notion that madness is an already mapped and familiar realm. The wider cast of characters provide a familiar sense of the chaos and bedlam of archetypal mad-people, but it is precisely because of this that the narrative is unable to penetrate them. Thus this third-person perspective remains, as we might expect, very much

on the outside of a seemingly inaccessible and alien experience: hence the resort to stereotype.

This contrast, between the other characters (both patients and doctors) and a sympathetic, articulate protagonist, is similar to the contrast we find in *The Ha-Ha* and *The Bell Jar*. However, both of those are written in the first-person and in this way insist on both the possibility and difficulty of articulating madness from within. In contrast, Quin's third-person perspective not only fails to write madness from without, it also, by its very narrative position but also, the writing implies, because of something about the nature of the experience itself, refuses Sandra the possibility of speaking from within her experience:

If speech at all then it was the spaces between words, and the echoes the words left, or what might really be meant under the surface. She knew, had known. No longer knew. Only remembered. In the recollection, pictures, words, visions, thoughts, images built themselves into citadels, gigantic towers that toppled with the weight of it all; the top heavier than the foundations. Last events came first, the beginning at the end, or suddenly reversed, or slid into panels midway. Had ECT done that – damn them? (257).

For Derrida, any attempt to speak out of madness will always fail because 'madness is what by essence cannot be said'.³⁰ There is a similar absence of language here when Sandra attempts to speak her experience – instead all that remains are 'the spaces between words, and the echoes the words left'.³¹ The passage indicates that madness has broken her relationship with vocalised

³⁰ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 43.

³¹ The poignancy of this description of the limits of articulation is acknowledged by the fact that the title of Gordon's anthology was inspired by these words: 'my Hutchinson anthology, incidentally to be called Spaces between words, a phrase of Ann's which will be credited to her'. Letter: Gordon to Boyars, 27th February 1974.

language to the point that she no longer knows but only remembers what words might mean, or how they might speak and relate to experience. She has lost the ability to put language in orderly – and ordinary – coherence and a space has opened up, between her experience and the words, so that speech is always just out of reach. However, there is also a sense in which this particular failure of articulation – the lacunae of rational or ordinary speech – may be precisely what reaches towards ‘what might really be meant under the surface’.³² At the same time, this possibility seems always denied and in deferral. Any recollection of the sense of language remains only as a visual metaphor of concrete structures (we may well think of the structures of realism here) and now these have toppled and lost their order. Further, any notion of the realist idea that the organisation of language and indeed the world itself contains inalienable causality is deconstructed – ‘last events came first, the beginning at the end, or suddenly reversed, or slid into panels midway’. While the passage here implies that this severance and obliteration may have been caused by ECT, Derrida’s assertion that the attempt to articulate madness is always in deferral – always, we might say, an act of amnesia – would indicate that these destructive effects are the result of the illness itself.³³ Further, when we recall that Derrida also – in *Memoirs of the Blind* – likens representation itself to amnesia, this similar effect of the two suggests that writing (as representation representing) madness is always something doubly deferred.³⁴

³² As already cited in my chapter on *Three*, Nye called Quin a writer especially ‘alive to the elusiveness of what happens between people, to what is lost in conversation, and to the possibilities of the English language for suggesting these little communicative lacunae’.

³³ Deleuze describes the violence of the effects of madness on language as ‘less a question of recovering meaning than of destroying the word’, *The Logic of Sense*, 88.

³⁴ I have also suggested, after Barthes, that readability in *Passages* is something always suspended.

The amnesia of mad Sandra's relationship with language, then, engages with the vexed question of the madness of writing itself. The ambivalent position of the third-person narrator is particularly important here – and it is this which marks Quin's text out from Dawson and Plath's first-person narratives. Not only is this a book dealing with the forces of social regulation and standardisation, both in terms of psychiatric institutional content and realist form, it is also one which, from the narrator's distanced position of authority in the text, wants to articulate an unspeakable and lawless experience. The third-person narrator – who figures the 'transparent' language of reason itself – is inevitably challenged in a text about madness, which always signifies a crisis of knowledge and understanding; its claim to authority is always shadowed by a realisation that there are places the language of reason cannot map or explain.³⁵ In this way, the attempt to write about madness in the language of 'reason, which masters and represses' is always a failure of translation: 'to talk *about* madness is always, in fact, to deny it'.³⁶ In the extract above, we might read the failure as being Sandra's own, when of course, because of the filter of the third-person voice; it is actually a failure of supposedly transparent articulation itself. The third-person perspective can only talk about the experience and not of it: can only ever stereotype, and therefore deny it.

³⁵ As Derrida points out in his critique of Foucault, and Quin's text here also demonstrates, there is the problem of how to talk about madness except but in the language of reason which has exiled it. Politically, as Waugh reminds us, this was an era when reason was seen to have failed, *The Harvest of the Sixties*, 112. This comment has interesting implications for the possibility of writing madness.

³⁶ Felman, *Writing and Madness*, respectively 41 and 252, my italics.

Signs of madness everywhere

hallucination begins by a reading of signs. Madness is, before all else, an intuition about the functioning of the symbol, a blind and total faith in the revelation of a sign.³⁷

But, if Quin's writing in *The Unmapped Country* rejects the possibility of writing about madness, does it wholly reject the possibility of writing or reading madness at all? It does not. While I began my reading by assessing the narrative's critique of the possibility of writing madness in the voice of a rational third-person narrator, I now turn to the reading effect of signs and hallucination. This is not only in terms of considering whether the reading experience itself might better communicate Sandra's, but also of how the 'signs of madness everywhere' create a patterning which works to interrogate realist narrative structures. What emerges is that while, on the one hand, the narrative demonstrates reason's failure to write madness, on the other it insists on the madness of the reading and writing of realism itself.

In *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen's instinct is that the necklace is somehow an important thing-become-sign of the future: it seems to me that Quin's second chapter of *The Unmapped Country* is similarly primarily about, dramatises and interrogates the function and effects of reading signs. This conscious enactment of the reading experience brings the constructedness of realism to the fore – these are texts structured on foreshadowing and signification. In turn, this foregrounds the idea that interpretative mastery is based on clues, but begs the question of who has the authority to correctly interpret those clues: Gwendolen is unable to read

³⁷ Felman, 71.

them properly and Sandra is mad. While ordinarily the realist text places the narrator, and in turn the reader, in a position of interpretative dominance, in this second chapter there is no stable third-person narrator to do this for us. The signs are coercive, but their meaning is unclear. The reader is left in the position of knowing that they must be interpreted, and probably differently to Sandra's own interpretation, but is without a narrator to chart the 'correct' reading for us. Indeed, as well as apparently aiding or directing our interpretation, these signs that are everywhere seem also to figure madness as an 'irreducible resistance to interpretation'.³⁸ This quality is something we have seen before in Quin – for example in the suggestive titles of *Passages* and *Tripticks*, which seem to both lead on and then frustrate the reader's attempt at interpretation – but here there is a sense in which the subject matter itself resists interpretation because it generates clues and signs that lead to nowhere. What is more, we readers do interpret this resistance, as I demonstrate here.

The protagonist's name, (Cas)Sandra, has already warned us that this will be a text concerned with the reading of signs. Cassandra, in different versions of Greek mythology, is alternately able to speak or hear the future (even, in some versions, to hear the language of animals), and foresees, but is powerless to stop, her own demise. In the second chapter of *The Unmapped Country*, which to date remains unpublished,³⁹ Sandra hallucinates a world full of signs that indicate what will happen or what she should do – she has an intuition about the functioning of the symbol, a blind and total faith in the revelation of these signs – although these

³⁸ Felman, 254.

³⁹ Gordon dismissed it as 'apocalyptic and wishy-washy' and did not include it in his anthology. Letter: Gordon to Boyars, 27th February 1974.

do not lead her anywhere except to a psychiatric hospital. The most striking, repetitive and insistent of these visions are those bound up with the cold war and the one she has of God's face. These signify and activate the paranoia (spies) of madness – and indeed of the experience of reading a realist text – as well as interrogating the relationship between authority and meaning. Moreover, Sandra's madness is thus significantly bound up with the way she reads the world – indeed, as Felman suggests, madness may on one level be described as 'nothing other than an intoxicating reading' of word and world.⁴⁰

This second chapter of the book narrates Sandra's experience prior to her breakdown, in a confused prose where the differences between what happens in and outside of her head become almost completely elided – while this elision is reminiscent of *Berg* or *Tripticks*, the nature of the experience here is more fantastical and surreal, and harder to separate from the 'real'. The narrative is told in a mixture of third and first-person narrative; this first-person is not synonymous with Sandra, although it is predominantly focalised from her perspective. For example, the chapter opens with an unidentified narrator, 'I am a bird hovering, searching for human shape', who then 'step[s] into the shape of a woman I no longer know'.⁴¹ Despite the strangeness of this opening, initially the situation of the narrative seems fairly mundane: Sandra waits, in both anxiety and anticipation, for her lover Clive's return from work. However, when he arrives, the normality of the

⁴⁰ Felman, 64.

⁴¹ Second chapter of *The Unmapped Country*, manuscript, Marion Boyars Papers, 28. In this part of the chapter I will be predominantly reading this second chapter, and subsequent page references will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

scenario is disrupted and refused as she reads his behaviour in terms of 'fugitive signs' – red lights in the flats opposite that act as a warning, her attempts to draw out the 'Knight' with the help of the North star, 'the spectre of his Grandfather [who] refuses the warmth' instead (29). In what seems like a performance of the structuring of a realist text, she exists in a wholly over-determined world, one where her behaviour and next-step is always informed and directed by the signs she reads around her. This world is an overemphatic, mad, demonstration of the coding that traditional realism relies on to make itself work as well as of the reading experience it creates – it is also an overemphatic demonstration of the coding of Quin's letters, stories and books. Thus, the writing here is an exaggerated and climactic performance of the writer's directive prose elsewhere, one that can assist and complete our reading of the earlier texts. Throughout the oeuvre, this is writing that wants to shape the way it is read at the same time as it resists our interpretation, in terms of the shadows, signs, repetition and directive titles of the books – not forgetting the fact that the writer herself read her own life in these terms. As the first-person narrator here puts it: 'I have to go back into the past of this existence; the interpretation lies before me here and now' (31).

The writing in this chapter is thus a kind of maddened performance of realism, where all objects stand for far more than themselves and bear great semiotic importance – 'Two blue cars parked outside this house, a sign that it is all right' (33). The narrative also interprets Clive's speech in this way. For instance, his criticism – 'You're not going in for all that cranky vegetarian stuff are you Sandra?' – is followed by – 'His grandfather prongs a turnip. Other spectres come and go' (29). And, when he admits that the vegetables are, after all, edible, the narrative

continues: 'But listen to what he is really saying, gestures belie what is being said; hand clutches throat. The faces round the walls are in conspiracy' (29-30). Moreover, when Sandra leaves the flat, the world outside is overwhelmingly full of signs and visions. Some, such as the vision of the two blue cars and the belief that the pulse in her wrist is 'twitch[ing] in time with the stars' (31), are benevolent and allow her a feeling of communion with the world similar to the one described in *Berg* and *Passages* and hoped for at the end of *Tripticks*. Others – the pain through her left side indicating she has taken the wrong turning, the park that is 'teeming with serpents' (34), the belief that her radio is tapped into – are frightening and alienating. Such anxieties push her into stealing an outfit for disguise and fleeing in such a panic that she gets lost. The chapter ends with her wanting to call on one of the 'Underground movement' – the people she believes are protecting her – for help, but fearing that even these might 'pretend I was some mad woman and call the police' (40).

Furthermore, in this chapter, Sandra sees – or hallucinates – agents of control everywhere: the police, Russian spies and members of the underground movement. Indeed, as I have established, a sense of being watched and pursued is everywhere in Quin's writing, from the requisite undead dad at the end of *Berg*, to the trespassers in *Three* and government agents in *Passages*: it serves as a reminder that, of course, writing is always spied on by its reader. Here though, it is also a conscious acknowledgement of the paranoia of both cold war stereotypes and madness, as well as a dramatisation of the forces of control always at work in a realist plot:

I move like a blind person. But the signs are there. As long as I keep within the Controlled Zone I will be safe, outside of that it is enemy territory. The traffic lights are for me all the way. My right side gives me the route to take. But it is all very difficult to learn. A pain goes through my left side, I have taken the wrong turning. I am out of the controlled zone. Two Russian spies are waiting on the corner, just like in a corny film, hiding behind newspapers. The traffic speeds up, then slows down so I can run across the road and into the park (33).

There is a strong sense in which this is an exaggerated performance of being mad. It is as if Sandra is 'a blind person', unable to see rationally, though at the same time able to see signs which communicate a different 'truth' of things. These signs lead her – 'traffic lights are for me' 'right side gives me the route to take' – through a safe, controlled zone. However, reading such signs is difficult and she takes a wrong turning – 'pain goes through my left side'. These dramatic, physical responses to the right or wrong reading of signs exaggerate and send up the realist reading process. At the same time the whole experience is filtered as if being seen on a screen in the stereotype of a film where spies wait at the corner 'hiding behind newspapers'.⁴² This makes the scene seem distanced and unreal as well as exaggerated and clichéd; it adds to the stereotyping of the doctors and patients in the first chapter. Again, the supposedly unfamiliar and unmapped world of madness is exposed as being already always over-plotted and determined in a way that is reductive and unsatisfactory as well as humorous.

More specifically, the well-known paranoia of the madness here is figured in the unsurprising (given the time) terms of the cold war – the spies who watch

⁴² This recalls the stereotypes of agents in *Passages* as well as the stereotyping of mainstream culture in *Tripticks* – here there is a similar sense of fascination and critique.

Sandra are, of course, Russian.⁴³ Similar cold war paranoia pervades 'Matters of the Heart'; especially once the protagonist Linda has had a breakdown: 'A large grinning chap from Red China in the Restaurant car watched me. And there's a large Russian woman occupying the seat opposite mine'.⁴⁴ Given this, it is no coincidence that the pervading agent of oppression in both narratives, 'the Red Queen' – who will, Sandra thinks, be watching her 'even when dead'⁴⁵ – is also a 'Red' agent: and is thus simultaneously a figure of both the cold war and madness. Indeed, Adam Piette makes the point that the cold war manifested as a 'paranoid plotline' in many Anglo-American texts at this time.⁴⁶ This paranoia, according to Piette, tapped into the longing for a direct link between private fantasies and the military-industrial complex running the world. He calls this: 'the most powerful of dreams: that the big world of the cold war has an entranced relationship with the [individual] citizen's unconscious'.⁴⁷

Such reading or writing of an individual's inner life in terms of world events is also one that lies at the heart of traditional realist texts. For example, in *Daniel Deronda*, Deronda is an individual whose 'destiny' – to unite the Jewish Diaspora – is seen in real-world historical terms. In addition, the first chapter of *The Unmapped Country* ends with 'The pendulum swung back' (274), surely a reference to both

⁴³ In Hall's interview 'The Mighty Quin', Russian Spies feature as agents of darkness. These allegedly watch the writer's every move – Quin says she believes that 'The Russians [are] interested in her'. The comments are only half-joking.

⁴⁴ 'Matters of the Heart', 14. Further, both *The Unmapped Country* and 'Matters of the Heart' are pervaded by images of snow and whiteness, the archetypal post-nuclear holocaust image – but the desire for white blankness is also notably one that Diski connects with mental breakdown in *Skating towards Antarctica* (1998).

⁴⁵ First chapter of *The Unmapped Country*, 255.

⁴⁶ Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009, 11.

⁴⁷ Piette, 3.

Léon Foucault's pendulum, a device that demonstrates the rotation of the earth, and to the writing process of someone like Eliot, which connects its protagonist's individual story with the wider themes of time, history, politics and philosophy. This realist way of reading the connection between word and world directly coincides with a claim Felman makes about madness which is that it is 'the illusion of being able to salvage something from time, the belief in the possibility of eternity... in God'.⁴⁸ Here, the mad person sees their insight as bound up not so much with world history as with eternity, and even God.

Of course the attempt to salvage something from time by hallucinating God – or even believing oneself to be God – is again a stereotype of madness: for example in the first chapter we have Thomas as Judas, Sandra as John the Baptist and Annie Carr as God. Such hallucinations were given credence in Laing's assertion that madness, specifically schizophrenia, could also be a mode of insight and prophecy, of religious vision and spiritual quest.⁴⁹ However, this is an interpretation sent up in Quin's text by the behaviour of Annie Carr – surely meant to refer to Mary Barnes, who smeared shit as self-expression during her widely publicised 'therapy' with Laing and Joseph Berke – who shouts 'May the blessed Virgin shit on you – shit shit shit' (254).⁵⁰

This engagement with and critique of a romanticised notion of madness as spiritual quest is developed more fully in the insistent vision of God's face that

⁴⁸ Felman, 84.

⁴⁹ Deleuze and Guattari: 'Laing is entirely right in defining the schizophrenic process as a voyage of initiation, a transcendental experience of loss of the Ego', *Anti-Oedipus*, 93. Waugh identifies this zeitgeist in different terms, as 'a Laingian thesis about the tendency to define as insanity the expression of passionately held but unconventional personal convictions', 111.

⁵⁰ Barnes' experience is narrated by Mary Barnes and Joseph Berke in *Mary Barnes: Two Accounts of a Journey through Madness*.

recurs throughout Quin's writing and thinking at this time. This vision appeared real and vivid, so fundamental in fact, that it seemed to negate the possibility of writing anything meaningful afterwards – 'my vision of God was so much more purposeful than anything I could ever write'.⁵¹ She goes on:

It's very difficult to talk about, but I just knew it couldn't be anything else. There was every possible landscape in the face: valleys, trees, mountains, hills. It was composed of every landscape, and it looked like a picture from Blake, with snowy white hair and a long white beard. It was important to my work because I have found it difficult to believe in writing since.⁵²

The experience described here is something difficult to talk about – both hard to put into words and embarrassing to admit – but is at the same time perceived as being valuable and real. The vision was of God, something fantastic, but the tone of the description is ordinary, matter of fact. It seems to both confirm and disrupt conventional ways of knowing – 'I just knew it couldn't be anything else'. This 'knowledge' is not logical or reasonable but is in fact counter to those things; nevertheless, it seems irrefutable. In this way, this is an experience on the edge of madness, for religious beliefs, experiences and visions have the strange status of being both indicators of madness and of reasonable, 'sane' faith. This is evident in the way in which the sublime and extraordinary religious vision recounted above is something that has real and ordinary effects on Quin's thinking about her writing. Moreover, the notion that this vision is purposeful and important means it shadows and repeats throughout what was written afterwards.

⁵¹ Hall, 'The Mighty Quin'.

⁵² Ibid. Years earlier, Quin almost foreshadowed this vision: 'one expects a Blake-Like God to suddenly emerge from it all and extend an arm'. Letter: Quin to Carol Burns, August 1961.

Indeed, a similar vision of God is very probably the experience that triggers both Sandra and Linda's descent into madness and hospitalisation. In her diary in 'Matters of the Heart', Linda records: 'I saw the face of God – just like a Blake picture, snowy white hair and beard, in His face every conceivable landscape: valleys, mountains, lakes, rivers, oceans, trees; the whole universe in fact'.⁵³ In *The Unmapped Country*, Sandra narrates:

Staring at a white wall I see a face appear. White against white. Soon valleys, mountains, forests, rivers, lakes and many oceans appear in the face, in the white hair and long beard. The eyes contain day and night, and in their depths stella [sic] spaces. Each strand of hair is luminous. I know it is God's face. This is the absolute (32).

Across these repetitions the description is very similar, although increasingly elaborate: by this version God's 'eyes contain day and night... their depths stella spaces. Each strand of hair is luminous'. There is a sense in which the description seems very literal and simplistic – the flowing white beard and hair – at the same time as being mystical and expansive – the face contains 'every conceivable landscape'. It is significant that the image that repeats at this time – the one which caused Quin to question the purpose of her writing – is one of God, a figure who in turn presences the idea of the author as well as authority.

The slippage here between Quin's belief that her own vision was a sign bound up with the meaning and purpose of writing and the mad protagonist hallucinating a revelation of God, recalls Felman's notion of madness as 'a blind and total faith in the revelation of a sign'. What the repeating vision of God signifies is the notion of absolute authority, a way of reading the world as something which

⁵³ 'Matters of the Heart', 11.

is created, meaningful and purposive.⁵⁴ Indeed, the figure of God also connects with questions about the function, continuing relevance and veracity of realist writing, which is founded on structures of authorial and narratorial authority. Of course, both God and the author had, by this time, been declared 'dead', but this writing nevertheless instantiates their continuing presence as key figures in the reading process.⁵⁵ What is more, God's role as a guarantor of meaning is underpinned by reference to a well-known quotation from *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880): 'if, as Dostoevsky [sic] puts it, there is no God then everything is permitted'.⁵⁶ Thus, the repeated and insistent vision of God here functions to insist on and dramatise the restrictive as well as suggestive role of this figure, who here works to signify both madness and realism at once.

It is also a description grounded in the romanticism of Blake, who by the 1960s had become an 'icon of campus revolution' and thus rather misread and clichéd.⁵⁷ However, the vision of God here refuses the urge to romanticism. It is instead an experience exposed to the ridicule the writer seems to anticipate in the interview above, when Sandra attempts to capture and articulate the vision during a painting therapy session:

⁵⁴ This relationship between the absolute and writing is something further discussed and explored by Spark: 'what I am writing is a fiction because I am interested in truth – absolute truth', Joseph Hynes (Ed.), *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, New York: G. K. Hall and Company, 1992, 30.

⁵⁵ Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' echoes and therefore restates Nietzsche's earlier declaration of the death of God.

⁵⁶ 'Matters of the Heart', 26. It is also employed by Laing – 'if God does not exist, everything is permitted' – as part of the religious rhetoric of *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967, 114.

⁵⁷ Victor Sage, 'The Greater Tragedy Imposed on the Small: Art, Anachrony and the perils of Bohemia in Rebecca West's *The Fountain Overflows*', Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (Eds.), *British Fiction After Modernism*, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, 169. As I pointed out when discussing *Tripticks*, Didion's chief critique of the counter-culture's turn to romanticism was a fear about the notion of absolute authority this idealism might generate.

In a grain of sand the whole universe – something like that, Blake put. He had visions. A God who laughed, belched, snored and picked His nose. Her God had been straight out of Blake, long snowy beard and snowy locks, and in His face every conceivable landscape.

‘That’s a funny face Sandra’.

‘It’s God’.

‘Looks like a lump of shit to me’. A patient said, making up her face with paint brushes.⁵⁸

Here, the notion of Blake’s vision as romanticised is refuted by the claim that his God ‘laughed, belched, snored and picked His nose’ much like the patients described in an extract above. Here, the capitalised ‘His’ is juxtaposed in between ‘picked’ and ‘nose’ to contradictory effect: it simultaneously both denies and bows to the conventions of respect. Further, the assertion that ‘Her God had been straight out of Blake, long snowy beard and snowy locks, and in His face every conceivable landscape’ is at odds with the preceding description, which is apparently also straight from Blake. On the one hand this refutes the desire to claim Blake for romanticist purposes only, and on the other, it asks the meaning of such juxtaposition. Crucially, this God is never Sandra’s (or Quin’s or Linda’s) own even though it is called ‘Her[s]’, but is always figured in terms of other representation, is always shadowed by what has gone before.

However, when Sandra’s representation of this laughing, snoring, belching, nose-picking God is likened to a ‘lump of shit’ not only is this comment transgressive, it also signifies a verbal slippage – from face to faeces. While this faeces serves in turn to deface the face of God – just as the patient who describes Sandra’s picture ‘defaces’ herself with paint, which in turn again refers to Barnes’

⁵⁸ First chapter of *The Unmapped Country*, 260-261.

painting with shit – it also signifies an absurd ambivalence and blurred ‘wavy’ meaning, a maddened language.⁵⁹ Here, not only is the repeated signifying chain of variations of the beautiful and flowing image of God disrupted by ‘His’ bad habits, which defamiliarises the repetition, but at the level of the language itself, the face represses and denies, but also always already carries within it, the faeces. In this, the notion of the authority and the fixed meaning of signs is emphatically refuted and denied: at the same time, the narrative is unable to escape the fact that the activity of interpretation must also always be one of reading signs.

***Furor scribendi* – the madness of realism**

It would seem that we are condemned for some time yet always to speak *excessively* about reality.⁶⁰

Thus far in response to *The Unmapped Country*, my reading has shown how the third-person narratorial position exposes the failure of writing madness from without and in the language of reason. In contrast, I have suggested, we do find evidence of madness in the over-signification of the writing. Moreover, the excessive proliferation of signs and visions, together with the insistent images of both spies and God, seem to suggest that the realist reading experience itself is a

⁵⁹ John Wilkinson identifies this kind of slippage – his examples are ‘jewelry [sic] and jewry/Boers and De Beers – as an example of automization, where the appearance of the word itself becomes the focus, ‘Too-Close Reading’, *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of excess*, Cambridge: Salt, 2007, 159. Automization is one of the types of ‘schizophrenic’ language that Wilkinson takes from Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, 178-180.

⁶⁰ Barthes, ‘Myth Today’, *Mythologies*, 159.

kind of maddened activity. Finally though, I would like to consider how and in what way we find madness at the level of the writing itself. Indeed, it seems to me that it is precisely where the emphatic and excessive detail of the writing becomes slippery and sticky that madness is most compellingly betrayed.

Most interestingly, this madness is not something separate to the language that speaks about it, but comes from within. As a result, there are places where the third-person narrative perspective is undone, and the language is activated into an excess that it cannot know or explain, creating an ambivalent realism and opening up a 'contestable space for the expression of resistance to dominant meanings' – here the language of reason.⁶¹ Thus, the language itself seems to break free from reason's control, into 'a madness that is acted out in language, but whose role no speaking subject can assume'.⁶²

She rose and went inside, up to the ward, or rather into a parrot house. Those who were not chattering, stalked the room, or fluttered on chairs, made stabbing movements with knitting needles, skeins of coloured wool spilled onto the floor, dribbled yellow and red between flapping arms, someone croaked, another barked. A mouth opened, closed, opened again, no sound came. But eventually a howl did emerge. Doors opened, and in rushed the keepers. The howl continued. People turned their heads, froze in contorted positions, as the keepers bent over a young girl struggling on the floor; her head curiously twisted; the white of her eyes showed through dark feathers, damp with sweat. The howl changed to a gurgle, the gurgle to gasps, as the body writhed in the net of arms. And like a huge octopus the group moved slowly out of the room. The girl's shoe remained, on its side. Someone kicked it across the floor. The knitting needles pierced the air, click click click, and bodies took up their preceding positions, and went through the motions of survival of the fittest.⁶³

⁶¹ Coulson, *Henry James: Women and Realism*, 15. Again, as with *Berg*, 'ambivalent realism' is a useful way of thinking about how Quin disturbs and extends the realism of her writing here.

⁶² Felman, 252.

⁶³ *The Unmapped Country, Beyond the Words*, 270-271. As this section mainly deals with this first chapter, subsequent page references will be in parenthesis in the body of the text.

In place of Sandra's inarticulate lacunae – the endless deferral or amnesia of speech – here the sound at the centre of the passage is the howl of the young girl. While initially 'A mouth opened, closed, opened again, no sound came', 'eventually a howl did emerge'. However, this sound of protest is soon reduced to a gurgle and then gasps as the girl is subdued by the 'keepers' – this recalls the woman's scream (which soon becomes a whimper) Sandra hears at the start of the book.

This, then, is another story of the scream – unlike the scream in *Tripticks*, sound does come after the silence, but it is inarticulate and soon suppressed. Here, the scream reduces the girl to a howling beast, an image of the archetypal and primordial mad person. In some ways, she seems to represent another stereotype reinforcing the opposition of madness and reason, where madness seems, as with the characters Annie Carr and Thomas, 'a role to be played'.⁶⁴ In addition here, there is the poignancy of the abandoned shoe that is kicked across the floor. With this, the girl's victim status is confirmed. The doctors or 'keepers' are also stereotyped as the oppressors of the piece who take the girl away. As with *Tripticks*, the scream here signifies an individual being overwhelmed by the system – and indeed the dominance of the reasoned words of others. The girl's howl signifies her disconnection from the language of reason as well as her powerlessness. In turn, these are signs of the condition which has led to her incarceration; a condition which is itself a label assigned from the outside and in the words of other, more 'reasonable' people. As Felman reminds us; 'the term

⁶⁴ Felman, 82.

madness is [always] borrowed from the language of others'.⁶⁵ Indeed, this kind of reading of the extract would seem to confirm the impossibility of a language for or of madness itself, as the assignation of madness is still a stereotype about it, which comes from without and in the language of reason.

However, I propose that when we look more carefully, what also happens in the extract is precisely a language of madness. Throughout, the writing is punctuated – its surface pierced – by repeating, stuttering 't's and 'k's, which perform the violence not only of the knitting but also of the illness, as well as acting to instantiate the concrete meaning of the words. These sounds repeat those in the extract cited earlier: 'chattering, nose picking, knitting; fingers plucked at buttons, cigarettes, fingers at fingers, a battle of insects' (268). The briefer evocation of the sounds there are repeated, exaggerated, and proliferated in this longer piece, where sustained consonance makes the language strange and unwieldy, completely denying transparency: this, the knotted pattern of the texture insists, is certainly not unwritten narration. Instead, the patterning of the language – a glossomania particularly in terms of sound, movement and rhythm rather than sense – seems to be something very purposefully controlled and performative.⁶⁶

Yet something in the language here also spills over and out of control – 'skeins of coloured wool spilled onto the floor, dribbled yellow and red between flapping arms, someone croaked, another barked'. Here, the text unravels just as the knitting does, dramatising and infecting Quin's writing process as it juxtaposes

⁶⁵ Felman, 80.

⁶⁶ For an extended discussion of the nausea, alienation, sense of meaninglessness created by glossomania and excessive reiteration, see Sass, 'Languages of Inwardness', *Madness and Modernism*, 174-209.

and interweaves sound and sense connections to create a knotty and tangled surface. Knitting is knotting with gaps; it produces a tangled order out of skeins of wool. It is an ideal metaphor for writing which spills over with meaning, and indeed had already been used as such by Quin herself in *Three* – as I discuss above in the example where Ruth’s knitting foregrounds the knotted and holey textuality of the prose – as well as by one of Quin’s key influences, Woolf, in *To the Lighthouse*.⁶⁷ In addition, knotting had also been used as a metaphor for the patterning of madness and psychological binds: in *Knots*, Laing claims that language is able to reveal such experiences – ones that cannot be articulated in the language of reason – through word patterns such as ‘knots, tangles, fankles, impasses, disjunctions, whirligigs, binds’.⁶⁸ In these intertexts, as well as in *The Unmapped Country* here, the images of knitting and knotting both invade the text and are the text – in Quin’s writing the madness of the description is generated at the point where the text, writing about itself, tangles up, knots and unravels itself.

Furthermore, the flow of the spilling and dribbling of this undoing directly contrasts with the overwhelming quantity of jerky and unpleasant movement – stalked, fluttered, stabbing, flapping, writhed, kicked – and sound – chattering,

⁶⁷ Throughout the first section, Mrs Ramsay knits a ‘heather-mixture stocking, with its criss-cross of steel needles at the mouth of it’ for the Lighthouse keeper’s little boy, Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, London: Wordsworth Classics, 2002, 19. The action stands as metaphor for the interwoven patterning of Mrs Ramsay’s thoughts as well as the constructedness of the prose. The repetition of this trope in *The Unmapped Country* then, not only enacts these same aspects of the metaphor but also interweaves references to Woolf, that, given Quin’s established familiarity with and admiration of the writer, are surely deliberate.

⁶⁸ Laing, *Knots*, New York: Random House, 1970, preface. Throughout the book Laing generates patterns of neuroses and psychoses through partial and ambivalent repetition.

croaked, barked, howl, click – throughout the extract.⁶⁹ In particular, the sound of the ‘click’ is something repeated elsewhere in this first chapter, for example, ‘The nurse clicked her teeth, and took mental note of the patient’s words’ (255). Not only is the onomatopoeia of the ‘ck’ and ‘t’ here similarly threatening, but the repetition into a different context makes the sound seem strange and insistent.⁷⁰ In this, it is precisely the nature of the realism of such descriptions that transform them into an unsettling and ambivalent version of the ‘reality effect’. Rather than a ‘relatively straightforward claim of realistic representativeness’, this ‘version of the reality effect’ is a maddened one which speaks excessively about reality.⁷¹ This at once both reinforces and subversively undermines its realism. Knitting has a common-sense, mundane reality in the world outside the text, but an insistent, threatening and unstable one within it. This ambivalent representation is ‘characterised by the productive equivocation of its semiotic structures’.⁷² It is productive because it unsettles the reader’s perception of how to receive the text – does it remain under the control of a third-person narrator? How does the equivocation of the words here affect meaning and interpretation? Are there places where the accelerating repetition of sounds, effects and intertexts means that the writing is no longer about madness but somehow also of it?

It seems to me that the very ambivalence of the writing here, where it is both the third-person narrator’s description of Sandra’s experience and a realism-gone-

⁶⁹ The dehumanising effect of the jerky movement and sound here recall Leonard’s erratic movement and disturbing barks of laughter in *Three* – it is the same scene where, presciently enough, Ruth sits knitting.

⁷⁰ Like Riley’s *Echo*, who fingers strangeness by listening to reiteration. The effect of the strange use of something familiar here also recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of ‘deterritorialization’.

⁷¹ Coulson, 16. This is reminiscent of what I called the overt, excessive ‘reality effect’ in *Berg*.

⁷² Coulson, 8.

mad – in terms of the knitting of exaggerated signification and its knotted profusion of detail – is the most persuasive way that *The Unmapped Country* manages at once to be both about and somehow of madness. This becomes clearer when we also consider the effect of the bird metaphor here. The flapping, fluttering patients are not seen as people, but as if birds in the ‘parrot house’ with the staff as keepers. Indeed, throughout Quin’s writing, birds take on an over-signified, hallucinatory quality. For example, the ‘gigantic bird [which] wheeled, then plummeted down’ (253) and the gulls that Sandra remembers in this text – ‘she saw again three gulls circle the ship’s mast’ (253) – not only recall the gulls in *Berg*, but also the description of the birds’ flying formation in *Passages*, which itself recalls Leonardo’s description of birds’ flight.⁷³ More specifically, Sandra’s distancing from language is described in terms of birds: ‘Once she had understood the language of birds, now no longer, it took her all her time to understand her own language’ (257). This echoes the connections made between madness and the ‘language of birds’ elsewhere in Quin’s writing – for example, ‘She had wanted to understand the language of birds. They spoke now to get out getoutgetoutget’.⁷⁴ In turn, these surely reference Septimus’ hallucinations of birds talking to him in Greek in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*.⁷⁵ In this way, Sandra’s claim to have once understood the language of birds both describes an experience of madness and

⁷³ Gulls haunt Quin’s writing elsewhere; they are in *Three* and *Berg* too. In ‘Leaving School’ Quin recalls a poem ‘about gulls being damned souls’ which won her a ten shilling prize, 65.

⁷⁴ ‘Ghostworm’, 64.

⁷⁵ ‘A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words’, Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, London: Penguin, 2000, 26. As the notes to the text confirm, Woolf herself had ‘imagined she heard the birds singing in Greek’, 218.

activates the madness of realist language itself – the signs of madness everywhere – by repeating an already over-encoded image and idea.

Thus, the chains of signification move through Quin's writing here and beyond to emphatically perform a sense of 'hallucinatory inflation'.⁷⁶ This inflation comes precisely because the images and signs in *The Unmapped Country* echo and hallucinate, and are in a sense relentlessly pursued by, a literary inheritance of madness, not only of Plath and Dawson, for example, but also Woolf and beyond. Here then, the madness of Quin's text is in part created by an obsessive internalisation of others' representations of madness. This generates not only the seemingly banal and clichéd aspects of the writing here, the sense in which we have heard it all before – for example, the wider cast of characters or Sandra's conversation with the psychiatrist at the start of chapter one – but also provides the necessary cultural repository out of which Quin's writing is able to signify and activate madness through the very profusion of its reference and reiteration. In this way, *The Unmapped Country* performs a maddened realism where excessive signs, stereotyping and repetition are in fact precisely what unsettle the boundary 'between psychosis and stereotype', enabling it to speak out of as well as about madness.⁷⁷ This brings madness into a state of coming out in the language: it 'is not the *origin* of [the] writing, the *cause* of meaning, but an *effect*' of the excessive repetition, shadowing and echo.⁷⁸

To conclude then, the writing in this last, unfinished book can be seen to both proliferate and pin down some of what seem to me the most compelling

⁷⁶ Felman, 67.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 253.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 98.

properties of Quin's writing as a whole. Moreover, while the attempt to activate this writing into a kind of madness necessarily sets into motion some of the oeuvre's wider methods and effects, it is here that the reiterating and over-determined forms and qualities of the writing elsewhere finds its most convincing expression: it is the paradigm example of a writing both of the shadows and writing its own. In this, although the third-person perspective figures a failure to articulate madness in order to demonstrate that it cannot be articulated from outside, Sandra's experience of an over-encoded reading process works to presence and perform the reading experience itself as already always working within a kind of madness. Furthermore, I have argued that the rippling echoes of intertexts – both of others and Quin's own – work to proliferate the explicit and implicit clues which characterise the writing's madness as a form of strange, reiterative realism. In this way, the writing here voices an argument about what kinds of writing and reading might be able to experience and activate madness – the unmapped country – if the language of reason cannot. Paradoxically, the very form this writing finds its expression of madness in is an extreme performance of the coding of realism, the traditional form of which pretends to a kind of unwritten rationality and transparency. Thus, *The Unmapped Country* insists on madness as a literary thing.⁷⁹ In addition, its return to and reflection on realism, enables the reader to better look back on and describe the forms, after effects and on-going place of the wider oeuvre's gusts and storms.

⁷⁹ Or as Felman puts it more generally: 'It seemed to me that it was through madness that one could best 'apprehend' the literary thing', 260.

Illumination 6

Be given to, the sliding of water, to forget, be forgotten; premature thoughts—predetermined action.¹

She threw her body, no longer her body, but just a body hurled out of the ground, into the mountains of water, she bent her head under, rose up, bent again, and struggled out. Further out into higher and higher mountains. Away from the beach, where she knew he waited, watching, not quite knowing. Unsure again.

And if she returned?

If she chose not to, but moved on out into the ocean until perhaps the areas she had so nearly reached could be touched upon.²

For the last few months of her life, Quin had been finishing her time at Hillcroft College, applying to university, and working on several radio plays as well as *The Unmapped Country* and 'Matters of the Heart': things seemed to be moving forwards. However, it was also a time of loss and frustration. In the February of that year, she had lost many of her books and manuscripts from a flat she had been subletting out. These were 'apparently thrown out by Estate Agents' Builders 'cos they were covered in cat shit!'.³ Further, she spent her final weeks that summer unable to go on a hoped for work trip to Geneva and instead felt increasingly trapped by having to look after a convalescing mother in Brighton.

Then, in late-August 1973 – a month or so before she was due to take up her place at the University of East Anglia – Quin took off her clothes and walked slowly into the sea at Black Rock, Brighton, watched by a man fishing. Her body was washed ashore at Shoreham on the Bank Holiday two days later, on the 27th

¹ *Berg*, 152.

² 'Eyes that Watch behind the Wind', 142-143.

³ Letter: Quin to John Carter, 7th February 1973. John Carter Papers.

of August. While the coroner's report gave an open verdict and the death certificate records 'death by drowning', this has since been widely read as suicide.

Several of her friends, as well as her mother, attended the funeral on the 14th September. Sewell remembers: 'We drank two bottles of wine to Ann's memory, which was perhaps a form of ritual salute to her, a tribute to her achievement as a writer, and gesture of farewell, that she would have appreciated.'⁴

⁴ Sewell, *Like Black Swans*, 192.

Afterword: Tracing flows and causing them to circulate

An author is great because he cannot prevent himself from tracing flows and causing them to circulate, flows that split asunder the catholic and despotic signifier of his work, and that necessarily nourish a revolutionary machine on the horizon. That is what style is, or rather the absence of style—asyntactic, agrammatical: the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says, even less by what makes it a signifying thing, but by what causes it to move, to flow, and to explode—desire. For literature is like schizophrenia: a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression.¹

I have chosen to end with a citation from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, not only because the book's title coincides with Quin's deconstruction of that myth throughout the narrative of *Berg* – where uncertainty 'split[s] asunder the catholic and despotic signifier' of Oedipus – but also because it is one of the theoretical texts which shadows my thesis, without my having yet engaged directly with it. Moreover, the thinking that takes place in the extract here coincides with my desire to finish by reflecting on the effects of my own theorising and methodology, as well as on the wider implications of the writing's self-theorisation in terms of the relationship between experimental writing and theory in the 1960s and '70s.

Above, Deleuze and Guattari state that an author is great because [s]he 'cannot prevent [herself] from tracing flows and causing them to circulate', which is exactly what I have shown Quin to do throughout the writing's persuasive reiteration, activation and interrogation of intertextual material. Furthermore, this flow is specified as 'a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression'

¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 145. They are talking specifically here about what they term 'Strange Anglo-American literature' written by those who know how 'to scramble the codes', 144.

– the former distinction here coincides with the one I also made in my introduction when discussing how we ought to read Quin and with reference to Cage’s emphasis on experimental processes over outcome. This approach, I suggested there, allows us to suspend judgement: a deferral which I have shown the ambivalence of the writing to create and demand. In addition, throughout my analyses I have demonstrated how this oeuvre is increasingly written expression precisely as role-play and experiential performance, as production.

More specifically though, for Deleuze and Guattari, writing is able to enact this flow and desire only when it is not reduced to an object by ‘oedipalization’ – or, enslavement to dominant ideology.² As I have demonstrated, Quin’s writing resists such enslavement both by interrogating the dominant ideologies of traditional narrative form, and in terms of the critique of the political, historical and social issues of its time. This is writing which successfully utilises and then scrambles the codes of such ideologies, by re-enacting and recasting them. Indeed, the cumulative reading effects of the oeuvre can be argued to trace, circulate and emphatically demonstrate such a resistance. I have proposed that the writing which most convincingly interrogates the dominant narrative ideology of, for example, realism, are texts like *Tripticks* and *The Unmapped Country*, which activate narrative as glossomania – ‘asyntactic, agrammatical: the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says... but by what causes it to move, to flow’. Here, what seems like an ‘absence of style’ in *Tripticks* in the very reiteration and cut-up of its intertexts, is paradoxically where the narrative is most powerful and active – or explosive, as Deleuze and Guattari put it above. In this way, it is precisely where

² Ibid, 145.

the language is no longer defined by what it says, but by what it does: in activating the shadows and echoes of intertexts and ideas which demand that we then attend to the strangeness we hear reiterated. Thus, I have argued that this being steeped in its intertexts is precisely what energises the writing's resistant rebellion to and ironic interrogation of its time.

What is more, my own method in this thesis has been to trace – and in turn to enable and activate my reader to trace for themselves – the flows, echoes and resonances between the writer's life, contexts, writing and intertexts. As part of this, the paratactic position of the 'Illuminations' as alongside, but not part of, my analyses, not only resists the reader's desire to think about parallels found across my own texts in terms of cause, it also overtly and productively participates in and proliferates Quin's own reading effect by generating further echoes without either explaining or interpreting them. Moreover, these illuminations are neither life-writing nor close reading, but blur with and vibrate both in that they inhabit the hyphen between life and writing, as well as enabling a closer, more attentive reading which causes flows to circulate and ripple further, rather than closing interpretation down. Indeed, these incidences from life are offered as themselves ambivalent and unclear texts which defer meaning and understanding, rather than as if transparent, 'unwritten' or giving access to the real. The result is a response to Quin which holds her life, writing and contexts in paratactic tension; without dismissing the interpretative value of any of these texts, but refusing to place them in a hierarchy either. In this way, I believe, this method acts to generate and perpetuate the productive friction between intelligibilities that we also find throughout the oeuvre itself.

Of perhaps wider significance though, this symbiosis between my methodology and Quin's also characterises my theoretical approach. Increasingly explicitly across the oeuvre this is, as my readings have demonstrated, writing that not only actively thinks about the relationship between narrative processes and cultural contexts, but whose own theorising also clearly coincides with thinkers of its time: in this, it acts as an example which begins to map a relationship between theory and experimental writing. This is a synergy most evident, perhaps, in *The Unmapped Country*, which voices an argument about what kinds of writing and reading might be able to experience and activate madness, given that the language of reason cannot. In this, the text most clearly articulates the oeuvre's wider argument about the inescapable madness of realist structures, patterns and determinism found even in experimental writing, which seems to refuse realist narrative representation. More than this, I suggested that here – in its activation of madness by an extreme performance of the coding of realism – the thinking in Quin's writing moves beyond some of the thinking offered by Felman.

My analyses have traced theorising in the earlier writing too. Most significantly, I have proposed, those narratives reflect, enact and necessitate engagement with, for instance: Barthes' theories of reading; Derrida's desterrant indirection; Deleuze's discussion of stuttering and minor literature; cultural critique in the early 1970s. Throughout, engagement with such thinkers and thinking has responded to close observation of Quin's reading effects, which identifies similar kinds of thinking in traits such as the performativity of the writing and slippage identifiable in *Berg* across character, narration and description, and the insistent refusal of closure in *Three*. In *Passages* it is compellingly evident in the oscillation

between structural and thematic binaries, which is also staged at word level in the morphing and stuttering line of words: the resultant perpetuation of momentum and denial of closure, I argued, both thinks about and contributes to the activity of unresolved (re)reading by disrupting and diverting interpretation. Even more clearly perhaps, *Tripticks* thinks about the possibilities of not only narrative expression itself, but also the wider crises of interpretation and articulation taking place in its cultural and historical contexts. Throughout the oeuvre, unlike those of her contemporaries whose theorising about writing was something separate to as well as within it – Christine Brooke-Rose is a useful example here – Quin’s thinking happens always and only through the creative processes of the writing itself.

In a final reflection then, this thesis has established that Quin’s is writing which traces and causes to circulate flows and echoes of not only fictional and personal intertexts, but of wider theoretical ones too. In particular, the argument about writing put forward by the oeuvre means that where it seems the most derivative, clichéd and determined by the shadows of what went before, it is actually precisely here that it most compellingly designs its own. This is the writing’s method: to actively think about and test out the ways in which ‘the ‘seriality’ of prose, the mode of its continuities, might be altered’, specifically by effecting both continuity and alteration at once. Further, this not only disrupts the readability of the prose; it also insists that proper reading is already and always an inevitably disrupted and resisted process. Here, the writing begins to think about those aspects of reading and writing which were also taken up and extended by contemporaneous critical thinkers, for example Barthes and Deleuze.

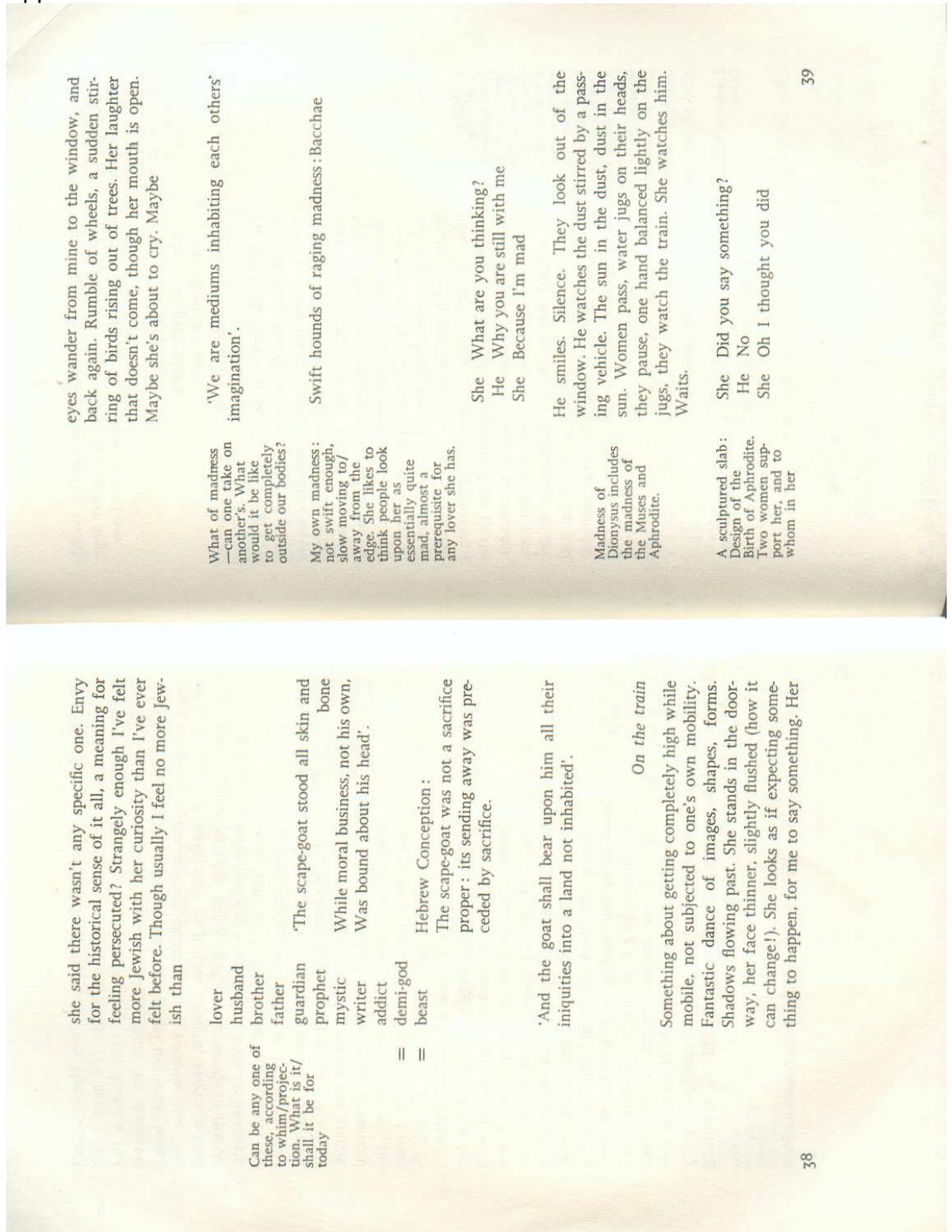
Thus, reading Quin's writing is valuable not only for disrupting the story of twentieth century British fiction, as my preface proposed, but also, as my analyses throughout the thesis have performed and demonstrated, for noticing elements of parallel thinking between theory and experimental writing in the sixties and seventies. In order to think about this, rather than acting as if it were possible to stand back from the writing's circulating flows, my methodology has embraced the necessarily participatory and reiterative nature of reading this oeuvre's shadows and designs.

Appendices

Appendix A

<p>me, hands me a book, opens his mouth, but says nothing, and walks on. The book falls open on the skeleton. It is the Talmud. I begin to follow my father, the sea rises, cuts me off. Geese/horses cry above me, descend, beat their wings on my head. They start biting, pecking at me. I go back to pick up the Talmud, only the covers remain. The sea sucks at my feet, my genitals. I woke up with an erection.</p>	<p>Sometimes she talks in her sleep. Names I don't know. Some secret language. She says I talk Hebrew in my sleep, yet I only know a few words in that language. There are moments when she looks at me startled, not really seeing me, perhaps thinking I am someone else. The walls shift in patterns, colour, shapes behind her head, and I think I am somewhere else. At home perhaps, when the murmurs are Mother's, made from her bed, the light shining from the kitchen, stopping in a blade of light at the foot of the bed. How I hated Mother then. Day after day (and nights, long nights) of pain. Windows closed, curtains pulled, thin-walled box rooms. Death, the smell of it, of sickness permeated everything. Nurses, doctors came and went, she thought were the family. I made her hot drinks, and thought of pissing in them. I wanted to screw my sister in front of her and Father. I hated her then for allowing death to cheat her as likewise life. The sunken eyes looked up with incomprehension from the damp sheets. I was convinced then that change could introduce no sense of renewal: I feared death, seeing it for the first time. Father I still see, sitting there, opening the Book of Esther, flicking off a squashed bug, reading in a monotonous tone, possibly thinking of his mistress waiting. Waiting, then no longer: within a year they married. For a week I thought of rising at sunrise, thought of the custom I could not betray myself to: reading the Kaddish in mourning for a whole year.</p>
<p>Different genera and species of dreams</p>	<p>Drawing of third Siren's eye by two strokes only, without the pupil: the sightless eye, eye in death/sleep/blindness.</p>
<p>Dreams that structure the day</p> <p>Dreams interrupted</p> <p>Time/space to think back over a dream</p>	<p>Image of myself as Bar-Ligura, the Semetic demon sitting on the roof and leaping down on them all.</p>
<p>Not remembering a dream until something hints at it later in the day/week.</p>	<p>My last words to her: 'there are maggots in the mincepie'.</p>
<p>Recapitulating a dream—attempt at interpretation: an exorcise.</p>	<p>As it is the custom to do: telling his mother's name, which is part of his 'true name, is an essential part of the procedure in which a hasid opens his heart to a zaddik.</p>
<p>The horror that lingers, sensing some prediction/premonition: a crisis/death/loss.</p>	<p>She envies my Jewish blood, no reason, at least</p>
<p>An unsatisfactory embodiment of what I intended.</p>	<p>37</p>
<p>Dream related 1st and 2nd consciousness</p> <p>Dream accom- panied with a sense of touch— single and double touch</p> <p>Old English: dream meaning mirth & mimi- trely, died in 14th c. Teut. draugm—to deceive. Old Norse: draugr, ghost.</p> <p>36</p>	

Appendix B



she said there wasn't any specific one. Envy for the historical sense of it all, a meaning for feeling persecuted? Strangely enough I've felt more Jewish with her curiosity than I've ever felt before. Though usually I feel no more Jewish than

lover
husband
brother
father
guardian
prophet
mystic
writer
addict
demi-god
beast

Can be any one of these, according to whom/projection. What is it/ shall it be for today

=
=

'The scape-goat stood all skin and bone
While moral business, not his own,
Was bound about his head'.

Hebrew Conception :
The scape-goat was not a sacrifice proper : its sending away was preceded by sacrifice.

'And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities into a land not inhabited'.

On the train
Something about getting completely high while mobile, not subjected to one's own mobility. Fantastic dance of images, shapes, forms. Shadows flowing past. She stands in the doorway, her face thinner, slightly flushed (how it can change!). She looks as if expecting something to happen, for me to say something. Her

eyes wander from mine to the window, and back again. Rumble of wheels, a sudden stirring of birds rising out of trees. Her laughter that doesn't come, though her mouth is open. Maybe she's about to cry. Maybe

'We are mediums inhabiting each others' imagination'.

Swift hounds of raging madness : Bacchae

What of madness — can one take on another's. What would it be like to get completely outside our bodies?

My own madness : not swift enough, slow moving to/ away from the edge. She likes to think people look upon her as essentially quite mad, almost a prerequisite for any lover she has.

She What are you thinking?
He Why you are still with me
She Because I'm mad

He smiles. Silence. They look out of the window. He watches the dust stirred by a passing vehicle. The sun in the dust, dust in the sun. Women pass, water jugs on their heads, they pause, one hand balanced lightly on the jugs, they watch the train. She watches him. Waits.

Madness of Dionysus includes the madness of the Muses and Aphrodite.

She Did you say something?
He No
She Oh I thought you did

A sculptured slab : Design of the Birth of Aphrodite. Two women support her, and to whom in her

Appendix C

October 30th

Dream

Medusa entered my room. I felt uneasy, certain she only had evil intentions. I had the revolver ready. I could just see her eyes, great glowing ovals; I would aim at those—just two shots. I knew she understood what I was up to. Her eyes grew larger, filled the room. I felt their heat. I fired two, three shots and the eyes fell onto the floor, circled me, tried to rise like half dead fireflies, then faded. I switched on the light, her bloody head separated, rolled over the bed, the sheets without even making a stain. Then her head rose and fell upon me.

From a black-figured olpe:
The slaying of Medusa by Perseus. Medusa has protruding tusks and tongue. Her lower lip covered by a fringe of hair. Four snakes rise from her head. She wears a short purple Chiton, over which is a supplid skin with two snakes knotted at the waist. She has high huntress-boots and two pairs of wings, one outspread, the other recurved. She has a bent knee that indicates a striding pace.

over to the girl. I switched on the light. I felt the warts on their hands, her bloody head separated, small dead toads. Laughing the women rolled over the bed. I fell on the girl and entered her, lay in her. Inside her she was utterly motionless. Her orgasms several times made a stain, the second one out on the balcony, where she turned and smiled, then her head rose and fell.

Her neck was so oblong and delicate it could have been sliced so thinly and evenly. He did not fail to notice this immediately, it was very tempting. He politely refused while thanking her at the same time.

You must realise that I am another woman by the evening. In that case, he said, I shall only see you during the day.

November

I am constantly amazed by the strangeness of natural things and the naturalness of strange things.

A squadron of horses on a spiral staircase presented itself several times during the night and by sunrise they came down: nothing absolutely nothing could prevent them, nor the moving stairs as I began climbing.

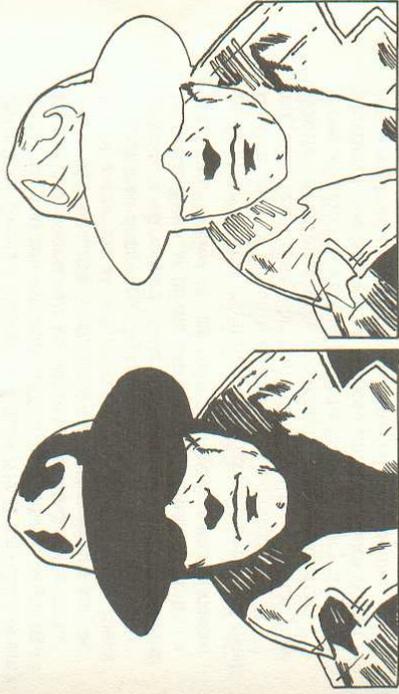
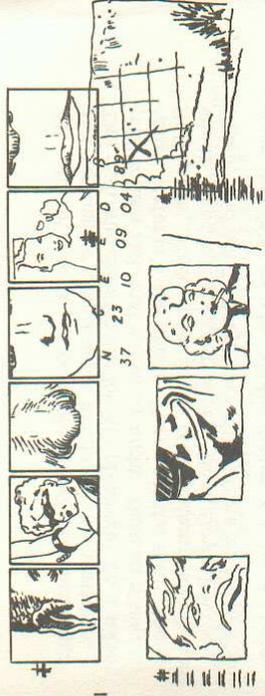
103

Cut-up dream

Medusa entered a room that opened out onto the balcony. I had evil intentions. She had the revolver ready. I saw three women, great glowing ovals, on a mattress, in an arc. I would aim at those large warts covering their bodies. Just two shots. I knew she understood the third, a girl whose face, eyes grew larger. I moved, crouched, filled the room with heat. The girl schemed how I could get rid of her monstrous guardians. They fired two shots, and the eyes fell, though the girl continued to be apparently asleep. The floor circled me, tried to rise and come towards me. The walls like half dead fireflies caught hold of my arms, led me gently

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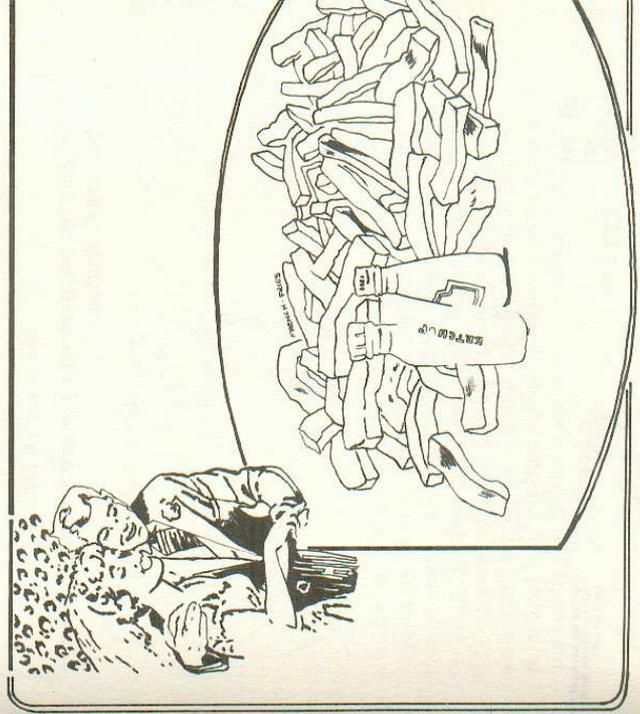
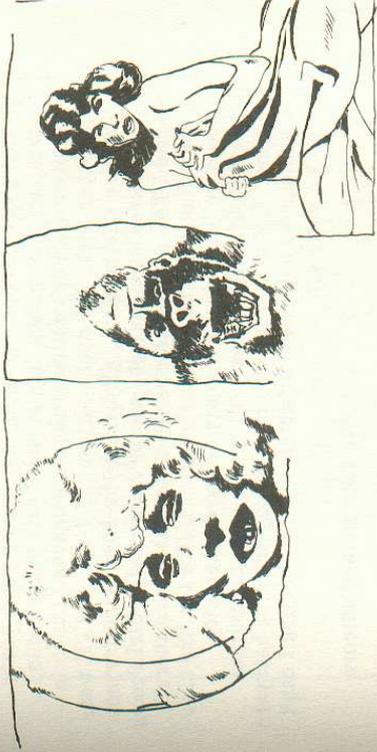
Appendix D



I have many names. Many faces. At the moment my No. 1 X-wife and her schoolboy gigolo are following a particularity of flesh attired in a grey suit and button-down Brooks Brothers shirt. Time checked 14.04 hours Central Standard Time. 73 degrees outside. Area 158,693 square miles, of which 1,890 square miles are water. Natural endowments are included in 20 million acres of public reservations.

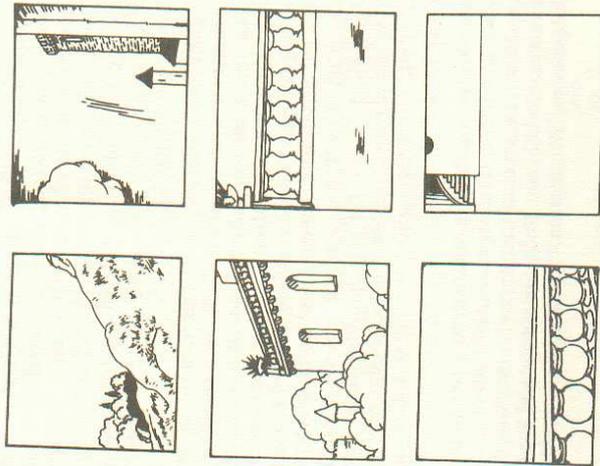
come on strong as the consummately sensible and strong female, sharp-tongued and absolutely clear-eyed, and while he with eyes raised in mock piety, squinted in suspicion, went on shouting things like 'I have no regrets. I do not intend to repudiate my beliefs, recant my words, or run and hide.' She whispered 'don't take too much notice of his off-the-cuff blunders. These days his atrocities are premeditated. He seems unable to help it.' Then your ex-wife chipped in and said something about 'daddy, you know, keeps in his desk a list of men, killers all, who were spared the gas chamber and went on to murder another 22 people.' And the whole time he went on shouting out stories about his life in the early days, punctuated with bammos and whistles, arm waving and mimicry, he might well have been regaling a bunch of boys around a campfire. I must admit out of the three of them your mother-in-law struck me as the most sane, but somewhat doty, and taken up with herself. I unfortunately commented on her jumpsuit and she went into a long account of the store she'd got it finally rounding up with 'isn't it divine of course it's the uniform of the '70s and as you can see it fits so tightly that getting into it is a chore.' All this followed by showing me some photos of herself in low-cut gown, shot from above, and in jumpsuit, shot from below. Meanwhile Mr. was back onto his chauffeur 'one has to consider the evidence that the Negro may be inherently inferior to the white and incapable of competing with him - look at the ones who have succeeded they're almost all light-coloured.'

Finally the crunch came, was I intending to marry you! What do they want of you? Do you owe the old man money? Is the menopausal jumpsuit bitch lusting after you? Is she out for revenge? I just don't know, but all the time I had the impression they were trying to warn me not to shack up with you. Well as you know since K. K. left I'm all for it, marriage included.



Appendix G

break out into a stream of verbal images. The pulpit could become an extension of my voice, my skin, my dreams. Leaning over the wood, staring at the spluttering candles, the slanting eyes of the statues all around me, their shadows like kachina gods dancing in the walls of earth. Earth moving out into the world. I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems. A power I did not want to possess. The Inquisition.



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