Science Fiction's Ethical Modes: Totality, Infinity, and the Unenglobable Literary Space

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that the assumptions and values that underpinned pulp science fiction (SF) from the USA predisposed it to totalising themes and modes of representation that influenced subsequent genre traditions. I contend, however, that SF from beyond this popular genre core, including Eastern European SF and certain US traditions following SF's New Wave movement, has often demonstrated more ethical engagements with otherness, underpinned by non-totalising approaches to representation. Through in-depth engagement with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, I delve into ethical dimensions of US pulp SF's approaches to representation, which would present the world, and other people, as fixed and knowable concepts, contrasting this to the more ethical approaches to alterity and unknowability demonstrated in other SF traditions. The relationship between literary form and Levinas's ethics of alterity is illuminated throughout readings of Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Derek Attridge, while an understanding of the nature of the SF field and its dominant literary forms emerges from engagement with the genre theories of John Rieder and Andrew Milner, alongside other SF critics and authors, including Samuel R. Delany, Ursula Le Guin, and Joanna Russ. The final chapters of this thesis also highlight the relevance of these questions of ethics, politics, and literary representation given recent controversies and debates in SF fandom concerning genre boundaries and different approaches to otherness. I conclude that there is enormous ethical potential in SF through texts that, using inventive literary forms and content, stage

the reader's encounter with otherness and the inexhaustible interpretive potential of an infinite literary space.

The study explores the ethical potential of SF through three key case studies. Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy (1951–1953; originally serialised 1942–1950) is taken as a reflection of the crystallisation of US pulp SF genre conventions in John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science-Fiction*, including the assumption that the universe, and its inhabitants, can be known fully and finally, and that this knowledge can be communicated through writing. I argue that such an approach to the Other, underpinned by a totalising approach to writing that Barthes would characterise as *readerly*, can be recognised as unethical and violent, in a Levinasian sense, and ultimately contributes to a generic predisposition toward fascist politics. Next, a Levinasian reading of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), a milestone of Russian SF and the modern dystopian novel, demonstrates the potential of SF to engage in more ethical ways with the Other, including the disruptive face-to-face encounter and the idea of infinity, and realise this through a challenging and non-totalising literary form. Finally, a reading of Gene Wolfe's "Seven American Nights" (1978), framed around an interrogation of the singularity of Wolfe's challenging oeuvre and the critical responses it has received, further demonstrates the formal inventiveness that can be found in SF, the ethical significance of open writing (that Barthes would characterise as *writerly*), and the responsibilities of the reader in interpretation.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction:

Ethics and Science Fiction

In literary studies, researchers have often asked whether certain genres or literary traditions demonstrate intrinsic political predispositions. Such arguments need not imply that *all* stories in a particular vein are either conservative or progressive—authors can re-shape or invert literary and genre norms to create space for their own politics—but they indicate political tendencies built into the form and content of certain genre traditions.[1] This question of politics has been asked of science fiction (henceforth SF) numerous times, although with little agreement between scholars. Carl Freedman, for example, posits that SF is a "privileged and paradigmatic genre" for Marxism and critical theory, since it has "the deepest and most interesting affinity with the rigors of dialectical thinking," thus explaining the genre's attraction to Marxist critics such as Darko Suvin, Raymond Williams,

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[1] A classic example is the argument that the detective genre is inherently conservative, since its heroes usually seek the reinforcement of the status quo, with its social hierarchies and power structures. See, for example, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 3rd ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2004), 175. This assertion, however, has been contested by other researchers of detective fiction—see, for example: Merja Makinen, *Feminist Popular Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 92–128.

Fredric Jameson and Andrew Milner.[2] By contrast, Aaron Santesso finds that the genre leans in a much more regressive direction, being replete with "fascist energies and ideas."[3] These vastly different conclusions are possible, in part, because critics tend to set different boundaries around SF. Freedman, for example, largely excises the American pulp magazines that were essential to the development of SF as a popular genre, whereas these genre pulps are central to Santesso's study.

Although the question of the political disposition of SF looms in the background of this thesis, my primary aim here is to address a distinct, but related, question concerning SF's dominant ethical modes: *has science fiction's traditional form and content predisposed it to a particular ethical outlook?* Answering this question means, first, coming to an understanding of SF as a genre (or as interrelated fields of different generic and literary traditions) and, second, adopting a robust ethical framework through which SF can be critiqued. These points will both be addressed in some detail in this introduction, where they are considered in relation to recent scholarship on SF genre theory and different strands of ethical criticism.

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[2] Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), xv.

[3] Aaron Santesso, "Fascism and Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 41, no. 1 (2014): 156, https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.41.1.0136.

In order to articulate this thesis's subsidiary questions, however, I shall briefly state the scope being adopted for SF and indicate the study's ethical foundations. Following recent studies of SF and genre, primarily John Rieder's *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (2017) and Andrew Milner's *Locating Science Fiction* (2012), I am opting for a largely historical understanding of SF, recognising it not as a single, coherent genre, but as an interconnected field of different literary traditions. In this thesis, I focus primarily on the subcultural pulp SF that developed in the American pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s, contrasting this tradition with examples of SF from elsewhere and at other historical moments, including works from Eastern European SF traditions and innovative uses of SF that emerged with the New Wave movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In examining these significant points in SF literary history, this thesis centres three in-depth case studies: Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy (1951–1953; originally serialised 1942–1950), which reflects the crystallisation of genre conventions in the US SF pulps; Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), a milestone of Russian SF and the modern dystopian novel; and Gene Wolfe's "Seven American Nights" (1978), which demonstrates the formal inventiveness that flowed through SF with the genre's New Wave movement. These three representative texts allow us to glimpse some of the influential traditions that have contributed to the SF field over the past century. They also reveal, I contend, dramatically different approaches to ethics, alterity, and the representation of otherness.

For the ethical framework of this thesis, I will be engaging directly with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity, with the ethical and philosophical core of my analysis being grounded in close readings of Levinas. I contend that Levinas's powerful critique of totalisation—the cognitive effort of reducing everything, including other people, to graspable concepts and integrating them into a comprehensible whole—allows for the recognition of narrative themes and a kind of literary representation that are inherently violent in their attempts to eliminate otherness. Such an approach to the irreducible and unknowable Other,[4] Levinas contends, ultimately leads to fascism, tyranny and war—and thus politics is drawn into the fray, with politics as the praxis of ethical orientation. The approach to ethics I have adopted continues a largely poststructuralist and deconstructionist tradition of drawing on Levinas's philosophy to frame the examination of literature's approaches to, and representations of, otherness.

With these parameters in mind, the question of SF's predispositions toward certain ethical orientations gives rise to several subsidiary questions, each of which will be addressed over the course of this thesis. First, given the centrality of form to Levinas's writing on literature, one must ask: *1. What roles do literary representation and form play in*

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[4] Following conventions often used in studies influenced by Levinas, I use the capitalised term *Other* to indicate the other that resists the ego's attempts at totalisation (concepts that will be explored in depth in chapter three). *The Other* thus refers to the other person, the alien other, or the divine other, as opposed to simply something (an object, perhaps) that is unfamiliar.

US pulp SF and other SF traditions? Then, to delve deeper into Levinas's ethical thought: *2. How can Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of ethics and alterity help us understand the ethical dimensions of different narrative themes and literary forms?* And, consequentially: *3. How are these ethical dimensions reflected in different SF traditions?* Because the question of politics is largely inescapable, the following question also keeps resurfacing: *4. Do the ethical orientations of SF result in predispositions to particular politics?* Finally, I want to interrogate what the answers to these questions mean for us, as readers and critics. This final question, which itself points in the direction of avenues for further research, can be articulated thus: *5. What would an ethical, non-totalising approach to SF look like, and what responsibilities, if any, does the reader have for undertaking such ethical readings?* These subsidiary questions run throughout the thesis, although each chapter deals with one or more of them directly.

In this thesis I argue that US pulp SF, as it developed in pulp magazines of the early twentieth century and their related subcultures and communities, was dominated by themes and modes of literary representation that can be described as *totalising*, in the negative sense afforded the term in Levinas's writings on ethics. These totalising approaches, I argue, were born of a certain scientific positivism that insisted on the comprehensibility of the universe and the others who inhabit it. Yet they were also dependent on pulp SF's closed literary forms—modes of writing (and, importantly, reading) that Roland Barthes describes as *readerly* and which, to use terms developed in

Levinas's later writings, immobilising the *Saying* in the *Said*. SF created beyond this pulp genre core, however, has often taken an attitude toward totalisation that differs greatly from its niche, subcultural counterpart, evincing more ethical orientations toward the Other in both narrative themes and literary forms. I will also argue, however, that the dominance of these totalising themes and forms has been waning in mass cultural and subcultural SF since the 1960s, as the Anglo-American genre tradition opened up to more diverse content, literary forms, and indeed authors, many of whom have evinced non-totalising approaches in their writing. Finally, as with Barthes's distinction between readerly and writerly texts being reflected in readerly and writerly modes of reading, totalising and ethical modes of representation likewise find concomitant modes of reading. These different modes of reading (and literary criticism) can allow totalising narratives to be approached in disruptive ethical ways and, conversely, texts with more ethically nuanced modes of representation to be read in totalising and reductive ways. I contend that, as readers, we have an ethical responsibility to approach texts in their singularity and engage in open, non-exclusive readings when encountering SF. In what remains of this introduction, I will situate my own research in relation to recent developments in SF genre studies, ethical criticism, and the interaction between these discourses.

My second chapter, "Science Fiction and Literary Form: The Readerly and the Writerly," focuses on US pulp SF and delves deeper into SF genre theory, bringing this into dialogue with poststructuralist literary theory. In seeking to understand the forms and

modes of representation that dominate pulp SF and related SF sub-genres and movements, this chapter first considers the relevance of notions of realism, modernism, and postmodernism to SF, finding that these terms, while useful for understanding some aspects of the history of SF, are ultimately too interwoven with mainstream literary traditions and social movements to be useful analytic tools for SF genre studies. This leads to an engagement with Barthes's differentiation between writerly and readerly texts, as well as his later and more recognisably poststructuralist distinction between texts of *plaisir* (or "pleasure") and texts of *jouissance*. Barthes's frameworks, I argue, provide vital insights into the literary forms, pleasures, and kinds of inventiveness at play in SF, helping us understand the role of the reader in co-creating the meaning of these texts. Engaging with Barthes's work also raises the question of the *value* of the writerly text (and the text of *jouissance*), which I will suggest is a distinctly *ethical* value.

Chapters three and four develop the ethical core of this thesis, turning to Levinas's writings to arrive at an understanding of the ethical value of writerly SF that challenges totalisation in its form and content. The first of these chapters, "The Ethics of Science Fiction: Totality and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* Trilogy," begins by developing a broad understanding of Levinas's ethics of alterity and his apparent condemnation of literature as essentially totalising. I will argue that, contrary to more simplistic interpretations, Levinas does not condemn literature *per se*, but critiques a particular kind of writing (and a corresponding mode of reading) that can be recognised as readerly. This is in turn related

to the generic predispositions of the American SF of the niche genre pulps and their immediate successors, where I contend that tendencies toward totalising themes and forms can be identified. This generic predisposition toward totalisation is demonstrated through a close reading of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, one of the most iconic and well-loved series of the SF pulps from the genre's so-called "golden age." I will argue that, despite the author's generally progressive social and political views, the trilogy's adherence to the dominant themes and forms of pulp SF results in the appearance of fascist tropes and totalising modes of representation, thus reflecting an unethical approach to otherness.

The next chapter, "The Ethics of Science Fiction: Infinity and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*," continues to explore the implications of Levinas for SF studies, focusing on Levinas's writings on ethics and literature, interrogating how and why his attitude toward literature changed after intertextual dialogues with Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. This leads to the recognition of literary themes that reflect more ethical approaches to the singular and unknowable Other and, importantly, the recognition of what constitutes an ethically significant literary form capable of staging the reader's encounter with an irreducible literary space. Throughout this chapter, the potential for SF to stage and represent more ethical encounters with otherness, particularly through disruptive and non-totalising literary forms, is explored with reference to SF traditions beyond the American "genre SF"

core.[5] Centrally, the chapter presents an extended Levinasian reading of Zamyatin's *We*, a highly influential Russian dystopian novel that, with its positive focus on infinity and the irrational, and its modernist literary forms, stands in diametrical opposition to the ethical and political orientations of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy. Where Asimov's trilogy is premised on a utopian vision of the mathematically rigorous totalisation of all things, Zamyatin's *We* reveals the dystopian horror that results from allowing society to be governed by mathematical formulae and the suppression of alterity.

In the fifth chapters of this thesis, "Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Gene Wolfe's 'Seven American Nights'," I consider the implications of previous chapters for how we

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[5] The US pulp SF tradition and its spiritual successors are referred to simply as "genre SF" in the latest edition of *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, where Peter Nicholls and John Clute offer the following narrow definition of the term: "a genre-sf tale will be a story written after 1926 … conspicuous for its signals that it is honouring the compact between writers and readers to respect the protocols embedded in the texts which make up the canon." It is worth noting that this is a distinctly American tradition, with the date 1926 chosen by Nicholls and Clute to coincide with the publication of the first US pulp SF magazine, Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, in April 1926. Throughout this thesis, references to the US pulp SF tradition and its direct descendants can be understood to be referring to this "genre SF." Peter Nicholls and John Clute, "Genre SF," *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight, updated April 2, 2015, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/genre_sf.

understand the reader's responsibilities when encountering SF texts. Through a theoretical framework that draws on Levinas, Barthes, Derek Attridge, and Wolfgang Iser, I examine the work of Gene Wolfe, a significant American SF author who emerged during the genre's disruptive New Wave movement. I contend that Wolfe's SF is ethically significant, in a Levinasian sense, for its openness and singularity, which disrupt totalising approaches to the Other. Wolfe's highly distinctive writerly forms, including metafiction, self-conscious intertextuality, unreliable narrators, fragmentary writing, and open endings, eschew the closed structural forms of US pulp SF and actively resists final interpretations. Close engagement with Wolfe criticism runs throughout the chapter, which begins by considering the ethical and political implications of recent "Sad Puppies" and "Rabid Puppies" controversies in SF fandom. I suggest that the conflicting perceptions of Wolfe's work found on each side of this culture war ultimately depend on whether his work is read in totalising, readerly ways or more ethical, writerly ways. Wolfe's work, I argue, demonstrate the fragility of open, writerly texts, which can encourage non-totalising thought on the one hand, but is susceptible to reductive, closed readings on the other. I suggest that the ethical significance of Wolfe's SF is best understood through Levinas's philosophy of ethics and alterity, and that this implies a responsibility to engage in open, non-totalising readings that acknowledge the text's irreducible plurality of meaning.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I return to broader questions of SF's ethical orientations and consider the implications of the present study for contemporary debates

in SF fandom and criticism concerning genre boundaries and the socio-political dimensions of an increasingly diverse field of SF. I conclude that the pulp SF certain conservative and reactionary groups of fans valorise was dominated by totalising modes of representation that provided the foundation for unethical approaches to the Other, frequently underpinning conservative, and at times even fascist, political orientations. Extending our understanding of SF to include SF traditions beyond this niche genre core (and its spiritual successors), including non-Anglo-American SF, the writerly SF that emerged in the genre's New Wave movement, and past and contemporary SF works by women, LGBTIQ+ authors, and people of colour, allows the ethical potential of SF to be realised.

Opening their 2017 collection *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts, and the Power of Narrative*, Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis call for researchers to "shift the emphasis of the discussion on the ethics of representation towards thinking about the ethical potential of storytelling in terms of imaginative reconfiguration."[6] It is my intention that this thesis should reflect such a motivation, as I seek to highlight the ethical significance of different modes of representation and explore the potential for SF to draw on its rich traditions in more ethical ways. The major case studies on Zamyatin's *We* and

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[6] Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis, "Introduction: Intersections of Storytelling and Ethics," in *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts, and the Power of Narrative*, ed. Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315265018.

Wolfe's "Seven American Nights" demonstrate this ethical potential of SF and its imaginative resources.

The gap this thesis seeks to fill is the almost complete lack of engagement with the Levinasian vein of ethics in SF criticism. Although mainstream literary theory has been grappling with Levinas's ethics of alterity since its critique and refinement by Blanchot and Derrida in the 1970s, as yet no major studies have emerged considering the implications of this foundational approach to ethics for SF (or any other speculative literary tradition, for that matter). Although Levinasian ethics can be recognised as influencing various studies of SF and ethics, the work presented here intends to make the value of this ethical framework for genre studies much more explicit.

The scope of this thesis is necessarily limited and there are certainly many more SF traditions and authors worthy of examination through the lens of Levinasian ethics, beyond the Asimov, Zamyatin and Wolfe studies provided. Further development of this study would be enriched by examining the works of other disruptive SF authors, such as the ground-breaking feminist SF of Ursula K. Le Guin or Joanna Russ, the rich reflections on otherness in Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (*Xenogenesis*) trilogy (1987–1989) and the work of Polish SF author Stanisław Lem, or recent genre-redefining works of Afrofuturist SF such as N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) or clipping.'s *Splendor & Misery* (2016). It is my hope that this thesis can be followed by further studies into SF that demonstrate the great scope of the genre's ethical potential.

1.1. Science Fiction and Genre Systems

Any attempt to provide a systematic and definitive definition of SF—a universal and ahistorical definition that would include works generally recognised as SF, exclude (if desired) works of other genres, and somehow navigate a growing body of "post-genre" or "slipstream" works that blend different genre conventions—would today be both impossible and, for its rigidity, undesirable. Furthermore, and contrary to claims made by certain reactionary groups of SF fans and critics, SF (broadly conceived) has always been a diverse field of literature, interacting fluidly with other speculative and mainstream genres. Samuel R. Delany has praised the SF field for its diversity and openness to interpretation, recognising "historical, theoretical, stylistic, and valuative plurality" across the genre.[7] Carrying this one step further, Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould assert that "there never was such a *thing* as SF"—that is, there never was a coherent or uniform body of literature that fit a universally agreed-upon genre definition—although "readers, fans, editors, critics and other discursive agents" have long been "preoccupied with … border-policing, trying to fix

[7] Samuel R. Delany, "Science Fiction and 'Literature'—or, The Conscience of the King," in *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 110.

SF as one clearly defined *thing*."[8] Thus it is perhaps more accurate to speak of a multitude of SF literary traditions, all of which contribute to contemporary SF as a broad, and indeed global, literary field.

Rieder makes an important distinction between different genre systems in *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, positing SF and similar popular genres as *distinct* from the theoretical, and apparently universal, genres typically posited by scholars:

> Science fiction and the other genres usually associated with so-called genre fiction, such as the detective story, the modern romance, the western, horror, and fantasy, collectively compose *a system of genres distinct from the preexisting classical and academic genre system* that includes the epic, tragedy, comedy, satire, romance, the lyric, and so on; and that this more recently formed genre system is an important historical phenomenon worthy of, and in need of, further study.[9]

Rieder thus articulates a distinction between two fundamentally different approaches to genre. The first is the classical-academic genre system, which seeks to theorise timeless and universal genre definitions (the epic, the tragedy, the comedy, and so on). This kind of

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[8] Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould, "There Is No Such Thing as Science Fiction," in *Reading Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn, Marleen S. Barr and Matthew Candelaria (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 49.

[9] John Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 1. Emphasis mine.

approach has dominated SF criticism in the academy, the tendency being for critics to posit definitions of SF that include more "literary" works of SF, while excluding not just fantasy and other such genres, but also the "popular" SF enjoyed by many of the genre's fans. This approach to genre tends to be ahistorical, with little consideration of how material is published, disseminated, or received. It is what allows Adam Roberts, for example, to write of "Ancient Greek SF" and point to genre origins in Lucian Samosata's *Ἀληθῆ διηγήματα* (*True Histories*) (second century CE), and to claim that "modern science fiction 'begins' in the year 1600," due to late-sixteenth-century and early-seventeenth-century scientific advancements and developments in the wake of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, representing Cyrano de Bergerac's *L'Autre monde ou les états et empires de la Lune* (*A Voyage to the Moon*) (1657) as an example of such SF.[10] This approach is also adopted by Mike Ashley, who in his curation of the British Library's 2011 *Out of This World* exhibition on SF claimed that the field "has an ancient pedigree, dating back, in Western cultures, at

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[10] Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 31, 51, 53, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56957-8. *Ἀληθῆ διηγήματα*, literally "True Narratives," has traditionally been translated as *True Histories*; *L'Autre monde ou les états et empires de la Lune*, literally "The Other World or The States and Empires of the Moon," has most often appeared in English as *A Voyage to the Moon*. Following Chicago Manual of Style 17th ed. conventions, titles provided in parentheses here and below are of the most prominent English translations, not necessarily the literal translations of the original titles.

least as far as the ancient Greeks."[11] Both Roberts and Ashley depend on a classical-academic definition of SF that is ahistorical and distinctly academic, reflecting little of how SF has tended to operate historically as a series of related fields of cultural production. As such, Milner describes Ashley's framing of the *Out of This World* exhibition as "an academic or quasi-academic intervention into the SF field," noting that "the vast majority of SF readers have almost certainly never heard of Lucian."[12] Both Rieder and Milner prefer more historically grounded approaches to genre, although they approach it from different angles. The approach to genre adopted in this thesis is positioned somewhere between Rieder and Milner, synthesising Rieder's observations on the development of SF genre traditions through different "communities of practice" with Milner's exploration of SF's "selective tradition," a term he borrows from Raymond Williams.

Although Rieder initially posits SF as part of a "mass cultural genre system" (in contrast to the classical-academic genre system), he ultimately identifies three strands of SF that have been recognisable since the mid-twentieth century: (1) SF as a mass cultural genre with a popular audience and broad appeal, from the *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century A.D.* comic strips from 1929, to the *Flash Gordon* serials of the 1930s, through to the *Star Wars* (1977–present) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014–present) blockbuster movie

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[11] Mike Ashley, *Out of This World: Science Fiction but Not as You Know It* (London: British Library, 2011), 7.

[12] Andrew Milner, *Locating Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 137.

franchises; (2) SF as a subcultural genre, which developed in American niche genre pulps and digests, beginning with Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* in April 1926 and crystallising in John W. Campbell Jr.'s *Astounding Science Fiction* in the 1940s; and (3) SF as a loose set of literary ideas and practices, including those first appearing outside the American popular and niche genres (such as the work of Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, and H. G. Wells, then the modern dystopias of George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley, and authors such as Margaret Atwood today), and SF traditions from Eastern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere.[13] The first two of these are certainly historically traceable cultural genres, each notably originating in the US and spreading out from this core, first to other English-speaking countries, then globally. Rider's third strand of SF, however, ultimately reflects a more theoretical and ahistorical approach to genre—something unavoidable if a more open approach to the SF field is to be adopted. Rieder's identification of these three strands of SF also sits uneasily with his reference to SF as "a single genre"—a term that can imply a uniformity and coherence that the diverse and varied field of SF surely resists.[14] Nonetheless, it is the second of the strains Rieder identifies above, that of US pulp SF, on which the bulk of my study is focused, although this tradition will be contrasted to examples of SF from the traditions indicated in Rider's third strand.

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[13] Rieder, *Science Fiction*, 92.

[14] Rieder, *Science Fiction*, 9.

Rieder's historical approach to SF can be helpfully extended by bringing across Williams's notion of "selective tradition," effectively brought to bear on SF in Milner's *Locating Science Fiction* (2012). For Williams, "a tradition is always selective," with this "process of selection" typically being "related to and even governed by the interests of the class that is dominant."[15] Later, Williams describes a selective tradition as "an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification."[16] Thus conceived, SF's cultural traditions are, as Miler concludes, "the outcome … of a set of interested selections made in the present," making SF "*essentially and necessarily a site of contestation*."[17] The heatedness of this contestation can be recognised when we consider the tensions between the various SF canons that have been formed by, as Rieder notes, "multiple communities of practice whose motives and resources may have little resemblance to one another," including readers, critics, publishers, authors, editors, and fan communities of different social and political dispositions.[18] By way of example, Rieder points to the tendency in SF academia to offer Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the first SF text, against the tendency in Anglo-American SF fan circles to name the first issue of

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[15] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), 320–321.

[16] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 115.

[17] Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 37, 40.

[18] Rieder, *Science Fiction*, 11.

Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* (April 1926) as the origins of the genre.[19] Thus we find different selective traditions being formed by different communities of practice in the SF field—in this example, an academic tradition and that of a niche genre fandom. It is also worth noting that although Williams is focused on the role of economic class in cultural selection, the processes of selection at play in SF's various communities of practice demonstrate further biases with respect to race, gender, LGBTIQ+ recognition, and other social, cultural and political dimensions—the cultural selection at play in "genre SF" and "golden age" SF canon formation, for example, have historically been dominated by white, male, heteronormative biases.[20] As a broad literary and cultural field today, however, SF also draws in, through processes of selection undertaken by its various communities, speculative traditions beyond the SF of the American pulp magazines and their immediate successors, from earlier scientific romances to utopian and dystopian traditions from around the world.

The ethical implications of the selective decisions made by different communities of practice and the interests they represent will be considered throughout the chapters that follow. These selections are often been influenced by border policing, actively selecting against works considered "outside" the desired boundaries of SF. This may be because stories' ideas or settings are deemed insufficiently scientific or innovative to warrant the SF

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[19] Rieder, *Science Fiction*, 66.

[20] Rieder, *Science Fiction*, 30.

label. Sometimes, including during the controversies surrounding the 1960s and 1970s New Wave movement, it goes beyond story content to select against works of a certain literary form (for example, excluding texts with open or experimental modes of writing). And as demonstrated recently, certain retrograde communities can reveal the socio-political biases of their definitions of SF by actively excluding works deemed too "progressive," typically targeting works by women, people of colour, and other minority groups.[21]

Even within academic SF studies, as noted above, different selective practices have been practised since the field emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Earlier SF scholars have tended to focus on formal, ahistorical definitions of the genre—Darko Suvin's definition of the genre as one of "cognitive estrangement" being the classic example—resulting in prescriptive articulations of genre boundaries.[22] As Vint and Bould note, however, such a prescriptive approach "establishes certain elements as worthy of critical

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[21] Take, for example, the attacks from far-right groups of SF fans on Anne Leckie's Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning *Ancillary Justice* (2013), a novel that addresses issues of gender normativity and exclusion but is an otherwise run-of-the-mill hard SF space opera. These exclusionary communities, which were clustered around the alt-right Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies online groups of SF fans, will be discussed further in chapter five.

[22] Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," in *Science Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Mark Rose (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1956), 58.

attention while relegating others to the background, and thus fashions and presents a particular version of SF as the only correct one."[23] And, as noted earlier, SF scholars have often sought to sanitise SF by excluding popular fiction, such as that of the American pulp magazines. Milner and Robert Savage observe that such studies either place their emphasis "on the European 'literary' utopias and dystopias of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Verne, Morris, Wells, Zamyatin, and Čapek) or on their much later American counterparts (Russ, Le Guin, Piercy, Delany, and Robinson)."[24] The sometimes-fascist dimensions of pulp SF's utopian impulses, alongside a general embarrassment at the low literary quality of the pulps in general, drove SF studies scholars away from the Gernsback and Campbell pulp eras of SF, striving instead to find a definition of the genre that would provide it with a more palatable (and "literary") content.

Such an approach has been falling out of favour in genre studies, however, and Milner emphasises the importance of adopting a non-prescriptive approach to SF and a broad view of the genre. Building on Williams with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the "cultural field," Milner seeks to break SF free from narrow genre confines and acknowledge the range of SF produced and in play globally, from more popular "heteronomous" works (mass-market SF) to more niche "autonomous" ones (an "art for art's sake" often produced

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[23] Vint and Bould, "There Is No Such Thing," 44.

[24] Andrew Milner and Robert Savage, "Pulped Dreams: Utopia and American Pulp Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (2008): 32, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25475104.

with little regard to market demands).[25] Like Bourdieu, Milner recognises the value of engaging with cultural productions driven by either economic profits ("low art") or symbolic profits ("high art") and everything in between, with *Locating Science Fiction* presenting popular British SF comics, niche American pulp SF, Russian dystopian literary fiction, the scientific romances of Welles and Verne, popular SF radio dramas and commercial SF film and TV as all being equally worthy of consideration as SF and interrogation by academic SF studies.[26] The approach to SF adopted in this thesis thus resonates strongly with Milner's conception of SF as a broad cultural field formed by selective traditions. In so doing it also follows the recent trend of adopting historical approaches to genre development, reflected in the work of Rieder and Milner, by considering the predispositions and ethical orientations of pulp SF and related traditions within the context of this broader SF field.

Williams explains that although a selective tradition can create, positively, "a general human culture" and, on another level, "the historical record of a particular society," it also necessarily involves "a rejection of considerable areas of what was once a living culture."[27] Only by recognising SF as a conglomeration of competing selective traditions, each with a necessarily limited view of the field, can we begin to piece together a clearer

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[25] Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 40.

[26] Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 45.

[27] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 51.

and more inclusive understanding of the scope (and potential) of SF. The case studies presented in this volume thus reflect core texts of different SF selective traditions: Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy from the "canon" of US pulp SF, highly esteemed by genre SF fan communities; Zamyatin's *We* from an Eastern European tradition, effectively brought into Western academic canons by SF studies and utopian studies scholars; and from the post-pulp American SF tradition influenced by the New Wave, Wolfe's "Seven American Nights," which in turn will reveal some of the tensions that exist in these selective traditions.

1.2. Ethics and Ethical Criticism

Studies of ethics in literature today are many and varied, with a vast array of methodologies, philosophies, and motivations on display. This has resulted in a cacophony that leads Lawrence Buell to describe much of what passes for ethical criticism in literary studies as so much "*earnest noise*."[28] But we can nonetheless identify some broad trends in studies of ethics and literature in order to establish an ethical framework for this study and clarify the sense in which ethics is used throughout the thesis. First, however, I must address the question that lurks behind all studies of ethics: *what is ethics?* The difficulty in answering this question or arriving at any consensus around the boundaries of ethical

[28] Lawrence Buell, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

enquiry has contributed to the splintering of ethical criticism. Nonetheless, it is worth making some broad observations on the scope and nature of ethics before laying out different traditions of ethical criticism.

The domain of ethics, as understood in this thesis, is where considerations of the Other give rise to questions of responsibility and how one ought to live. According to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, concern for the Other is "the decentered centre of ethics," with ethics being "the arena in which claims of otherness—the moral law, the human other, cultural norms, the-good-in-itself, etc.—are articulated and negotiated."[29] And as Neil Easterbrook notes, this conception of ethics as accounting for "the conditions and consequences of the self's relation to otherness (alterity)" has been enormously influential on literary studies in recent decades.[30] At the core of ethical enquiries into otherness, however, is the question of the subject's responsibility to (or for) the Other, and often resultant practical questions of how one ought to respond to and interact with otherness—whether human others, animal others, the natural environment, or other encounters with alterity. In short, ethics addresses questions of what constitutes right and wrong behaviour, although different approaches to and conceptions of ethics will arrive at different

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[29] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 26.

[30] Neil Easterbrook, "Ethics and Alterity," in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (London: Routledge, 2009), 383.

conclusions as to whether any kind of codification of actions on a straightforward moral axis is possible. Such questions came to the fore in literary studies during the so-called "ethical turn" of the 1980s, which saw the publication of numerous ground-breaking studies of ethics and literature.[31] Subsequently, research into ethics and literature has coalesced around several broad schools, although it has been dominated by two strains: rhetorical narratology and poststructuralist, or deconstructive, criticism. [32]

The narratological approach grew out of structuralism and has been predominantly concerned with moral philosophy and normative ethics. As Meretoja and Davis note, it brings together revivals in "the neo-Aristotelian humanist tradition in moral philosophy … and in rhetorical narrative theory," with the aim of providing "concrete narratological tools for analyzing the narrative strategies through which the (implied) author communicates ethical values or an ethos to the (implied) reader."[33] Such narratological ethical analysis

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[31] Michael Eskin, "The Double 'Turn' to Ethics and Literature?" *Poetics Today* 25, no. 4 (2004): 557–572, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-25-4-557.

[32] Charles Altieri, "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience," in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 34–36; Liesbeth Korthals Altes, "Ethical Turn," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), *ProQuest*, 144.

[33] Meretoja and Davis, "Introduction," 4–5.

typically focuses on how texts encourage particular moral judgements in their readers, whether concerning characters' actions or other narrative events, or extending judgements to real-world matters, such as politics. For Wayne C. Booth, whose *The Company We Keep: The Ethics of Fiction* (1988) was one of the pioneering works of the narratological approach to ethics, this involves conceiving of "authors and readers as characters" and examining how their interactions instil or reinforce particular values.[34] After all, he notes, "*stories* are our major moral teachers."[35] Booth is interested in how the implied authors and literary characters whose "company we keep" influence our moral judgements by either creating or eroding ethical virtues. This narratological approach has been carried forward by James Phelan in such works as *Living to Tell about it: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (2005), where he delves deeper into the notion of the implied author and their role in constructing a text's "attitudes, beliefs, [and] values," exploring, in turn, how these affect readers.[36]

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[34] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 12.

[35] Wayne C. Booth, "'Of the Standard of Moral Taste': Literary Criticism as Moral Inquiry," in *The Essential Wayne Booth*, ed. Walter Jost (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 241. Original emphasis.

[36] James Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 45.

Another significant figure developing this approach to narrative is Martha C. Nussbaum, who emphasises the role narratives can play in cultivating readers' capacities for judgement and, importantly, empathy, in both private and public life. Nussbaum's position was strongly articulated in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), which focused on bringing literary studies into dialogue with moral philosophy, and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1995), where she explored literature's capacity to stimulate readers' empathetic imaginations and their adoption of moral stances on social and political issues. In a recent book on the importance of the humanities to a flourishing democracy, Nussbaum stressed the need for public engagement with literature that stimulates our "narrative imagination"—that is, "our ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have"—thus making stories "crucial preparation for concern in life."[37] This association of literature with empathy is reflected in recent studies coming out of the cognitive sciences, including the 2013 study by psychologists David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, published in *Science* and widely reported in news

[37] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 95–96, 99.

outlets such as *The Guardian*, into the short-term effects of reading "literary fiction."[38] Kidd and Castano's research suggests that readers who are exposed to "writerly and polyphonic" fiction, as opposed to nonfiction and "more readerly" popular fiction, demonstrate, at least in the short-term, a better understanding of "others' mental states" and a more developed capacity for empathy.[39] As Meretoja and Davis note, however, such empirical studies on literature's short- and long-term effects are notoriously difficult to replicate and verify.[40]

Perhaps the overriding objection to this narratological approach, as represented by Booth, Nussbaum, and Phelan, is that it too often assumes and validates a pre-existing set of moral or ethical values that is not responsive to different situations or individuals. By presupposing an entire ethical schema or moral philosophy, then judging texts' ethical value from characters' actions and (implied) authors' perspectives, such an approach can be seen as normative, allowing insufficient space for the singularity of unique ethical

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[38] See, for example: Liz Bury, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Empathy, Study Finds," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/oct/08/literary-fiction-improves-empathy-study.

[39] David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* 342, no. 6156 (2013): 377–380, http://doi.org/10.1126/science.1239918. The terms "readerly" and "writerly" used here are borrowed from Roland Barthes, whose use of the terms will be explored in some depth in chapter two.

[40] Meretoja and Davis, "Introduction," 5–6.

situations. This leads on to another critique of this approach and the way it configures empathy, which depends on the recognition of similarity between the self and the other. As Tammy Amiel-Houser and Adia Mendelson-Maoz note, such "empathetic reading" is ultimately "unethical, since it involves (even if unconsciously) an essential disregard for the inaccessible singularity of the other's experience," instead of addressing "the ethical demands that arise when we face a radical stranger."[41] The poststructuralist strain of ethical criticism, developed in parallel with the narratological approach during the later decades of the twentieth century, seeks to address these concerns by adopting a distinctly Levinasian approach to ethics.

Levinas's philosophy of ethics, to be explored in detail in chapters three and four of this thesis, is a kind of meta-ethics less interested in codifying right and wrong behaviours than in examining the fundamental responsibilities that result from of our encounters with otherness. In his first major essay on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida wrote: "Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine *a*

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[41] Tammy Amiel-Houser and Adia Mendelson-Maoz, "Against Empathy: Levinas and Ethical Criticism in the 21st Century," *Journal of Literary Theory* 8, no. 1 (2014): 207, https://doi.org/10.1515/

jlt-2014-0009.

morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation … an Ethics of Ethics."[42] Avoiding a normative approach, Levinas instead articulates an ethical responsibility grounded in singularity and difference, instead of similarity. His ethics of alterity thus became central to poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches to ethics and literature, being particularly influential on the literary theories of Derrida and Blanchot. Indeed, Levinas's philosophy was one of the pillars of the "ethical turn" in literary studies, as demonstrated by such ground-breaking works as J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987), Adam Zachary Newton's *Narrative Ethics* (1995), Robert Eaglestone's *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (1997), Jill Robbins's *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999) and Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), all of which turn to Levinas for their ethical foundation. Indeed, as Simon Critchley argues in *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (3rd ed., 2014), deconstruction and (Levinasian) ethics are inextricably connected—"the textual practice of deconstructive reading can and, moreover, *should* be understood as an ethical demand."[43]

The Levinasian vein of poststructuralist and deconstructive ethical criticism tends to focus on the ways that texts, in their narrative form as well as their story content,

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[42] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 111.

[43] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 3rd ed (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1.

represent and engage with otherness. Texts' ethical value is thus located in how effectively they facilitate or stage (or even just represent or depict) a drawing into question of the self, or the ego, and its often-totalising approach to the other, which would destroy the other's alterity and immobilise it as a finite concept. Challenging readers' expectations is central, and Liesbeth Korthals Altes characterises this mode of ethical criticism as showing "how texts undermine the reader's expectations and his or her desire for totality and closure."[44] To use the terminology of Levinas that will be explored in subsequent chapters, this kind of criticism is interested in literature that stages an ethical encounter with the Saying, disrupting the concrete fixity of the Said.

This strand of ethical criticism is not without its critics, of course, and many of these objections centre on its avoidance of normative ethical models and its focus on openness and ambiguity. On the latter point, Wayne C. Booth claims that although openness can play a role in staging encounters with otherness, "no beast that will prove genuinely other will be describable as merely 'open' or 'openness.' The otherness that bites, the otherness that changes us, must have sufficient definition, sufficient identity, to threaten us where we live."[45] There is an element of truth to this—a reader will likely lose interest in a text that has no definition or comprehensible substance—but it also neglects

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[44] Altes, "Ethical Turn," 144.

[45] Wayne C. Booth, "Are Narrative Choices Subject to Ethical Criticism?" in *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology*, ed. James Phelan (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 72.

the enormous challenge that extreme openness can present to dominant modes of totalisation and rationalisation. By refusing definition and identity, such openness does indeed "bite" and "threaten us where we live," as we live within the totalising frameworks of Western philosophy.

Objections of the first kind—that such ethical criticism is, in its avoidance of normative ethical models, not only amoral but *immoral*, for its tendency to avoid casting moral judgements—reflect broader accusations often made against deconstruction and poststructuralism.[46] Part of this tension lies in different expectations around what constitutes ethics, with practitioners of the narratological models working with ethics as a branch of moral philosophy often seeking concrete codification of right and wrong behaviour, while Levinasian ethics sets itself up as an "ethics of ethics" that avoids the ontological assumptions and totalising trajectories of traditional philosophy. Yet the claim that this "ethics of ethics" has no bearing on discussions of right and wrong behaviour, or that Levinasian ethics is necessarily disconnected from practical concerns, is disconnected from most actual ethical criticism of this kind. Critchley, like other scholars following on from Levinas, replaces the distinction between the ethical and the moral (the theoretical and the practical), with a concomitant distinction between the ethical and the political. The same distinction, which traces the originary ethical encounter with the Other through to our treatment of others in political concepts and systems, will flow through this thesis.

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[46] See, for example, the discussion in Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics*, 18–26.

In addition to the narratological and poststructural modes of ethical criticism discussed above, Meretoja and Davis identify three additional methodologies that have been used in studies of ethics and literature. One of these is the approach of the cognitive sciences, including the work of Kidd and Castano discussed above. Another is the vast array of "cultural and social approaches to narrative" that have proliferated in recent decades, including ethical studies framed around feminism, critical race theory, postcolonialism, queer theory, ecocriticism, or animal studies.[47] Such studies still tend to come at ethics via either the moral philosophy frameworks adopted by Booth and Nussbaum, or the Levinasian ethics of deconstructive and poststructuralist criticisms and their descendants. Levinas's concerns for difference and the Other, for example, often resonate with the concerns of feminist literary theory,[48] while his disregard of environmental concerns and

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[47] Meretoja and Davis, "Introduction," 5.

[48] See, for example, discussions and critiques of Levinasian ethics in Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984) and the essays in Tina Chanter's *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (2001). Other feminist scholars have been less receptive to Levinas's work—in *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir brushes off Levinas's early conception of the other in a footnote, accusing his (early) work of being "an affirmation of masculine privilege" by adhering to the philosophical tradition of the subject being assumed male—which is a valid critique, and echoed by Irigaray, but need not rule out a deeper and more nuanced engagement with Levinas's thought.

reluctance to bring the animal within the ethical relation has led to a more limited recourse to his work in ecocriticism. Finally, Meretoja and Davis identify a recent trend in the study of ethics and literature toward "hermeneutic approaches to narrative" that foreground the ethical dimensions of "narratives as culturally mediated interpretative practices."[49] Key figures here have included Meretoja herself who, along with Jens Brockmeier, builds on the work of Paul Ricoeur. Importantly, whereas Nussbaum and studies from the cognitive sciences focus on commonality and sameness as sources of empathy (*the other is just like me*), "hermeneutic approaches to empathy and perspective-taking emphasize *difference* as the starting point for ethical understanding and narrative as a mode of engaging with the singularity of the other's experiences in specific situations in the world."[50] This more recent development of "*hermeneutic narrative ethics*" thus reflects some of the concerns of Levinas's ethics of alterity.[51] The approach to ethics adopted in this thesis, while remaining closely tied to Levinas's own writings, nonetheless resonates strongly with this hermeneutic

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Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), 38n3.

[49] Meretoja and Davis, "Introduction," 6.

[50] Meretoja and Davis, "Introduction," 6. Emphasis mine.

[51] Hannah Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2. Original emphasis.

mode, focusing on the reader's role in interpretation and considering texts within different culturally mediated contexts.

As indicated above, this thesis follows in the poststructuralist and deconstructive traditions of ethical criticism, in the vein of Eaglestone, Robbins and Attridge, by drawing on Levinas to frame an examination of SF literature's approaches to, and representations of, otherness. Thus, references to ethics throughout this thesis refer to a distinctly Levinasian understanding of the term. Although my engagement with other strands of ethical criticism will be very limited, this is not intended to belittle the validity of studies that adopt a different ethical framework, such as a more practical or humanist ethics, which may in turn find different kinds of ethical value in SF narratives. Indeed, SF works that may be problematic from the vantage point of a Levinasian ethics of alterity, may engage very positively with moral philosophy and related discussions of, say, environmental ethics. Kuisma Korhonen notes an interesting example of this, comparing Booth's and Levinas's vastly different readings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932), in which Booth condemns the lack of narratorial reliability or clear authorial voice for not providing access to concrete ethical judgements, while Levinas praises the ruptures and innovations created by the text.[52] Differently motivated, these thinkers are looking for

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[52] Kuisma Korhonen, "Towards a Post-Levinasian Approach to Narrativity: Facing Baudelaire's 'Eyes of the Poor,'" *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 6, no. 2 (2008): 464-465, https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0012.

different things in the text: for Booth (like Nussbaum), this is a didactic authorial judgement that can instil certain values in the reader; for Levinas (and those of the deconstructive mode), it is a refusal of closure that can challenge the reader's totalising orientations. This is not to say that one is right and the other wrong, even if the approaches are sometimes at odds—it is not my intention in this thesis to invalidate other approaches. As Booth states, "only a fully developed critical pluralism—of principles, of methods, of purposes, and of definitions of subject matter—can ever reduce the quantity of pointless quarreling over ethical matters. Different genres, different intentions, invite or reject different ethical judgments."[53] Harpham likewise suggests that the lack of consensus around ethical criticism is ultimately positive, as "articulating perplexity, rather than guiding it, is what ethics is all about."[54] Furthermore, this thesis will not attempt to synthesise a complete and systematic Levinasian criticism or narratology, which, as Korhonen notes, would be an enormous task.[55] Rather, I seek to use Levinas's insights into the value of difference and the dangers of totalisation to consider the ethical dimensions of

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[53] Wayne C. Booth, "Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple," in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 21.

[54] Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics*, 27.

[55] Korhonen, "Towards a Post-Levinasian," 460.

different SF traditions, articulating the value and potential of these traditions from a Levinasian perspective.

1.3. Science Fiction and Ethical Criticism

Meretoja and Davis have emphasised the need for "more reflection on different narrative modes of engagement from an ethical perspective."[56] This thesis is intended to address gaps in the scholarly fields of both SF studies and ethical criticism, which have seldom brought Levinasian ethics into dialogue with SF literature and its distinctive narrative modes. Although there exists scholarship that considers the ethics of SF literature, these studies have tended to follow in the traditions of Nussbaum and Booth, or approaching the issue of ethics from specific cultural, social, or political perspectives, typically focusing on normative ethics and SF's representation of specific ethical issues, while steering clear of the Levinasian approaches of deconstructive and poststructuralist traditions. Examples include: the animal ethics informing Sherryl Vint's *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (2012); the environmental ethics underlying recent studies into climate fiction ("cli-fi"), including those in Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson's edited volume *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (2014); and the postcolonial ethics that underlies Bill Ashcroft's *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (2016). SF studies have also found particular resonance with bioethical lines of inquiry, as evidenced in Lars

[56] Meretoja and Davis, "Introduction," 7.

Schmeink's *Biopunk Dystopias* (2016) and Evie Kendal's *Sex and Speculation* (2018). "Necessarily concerned with the sociopolitical aspects of an altered world," Kendal writes, "utopian sf yields a rich source of hypotheticals for bioethicists to explore."[57] Further examples of this kind of theme criticism can be found in the collection *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction* (2020), which brings together studies of ethics and SF from a range of methodological approaches, including animal ethics, environmental ethics, postcolonial ethics, and the intersections of ethics and global politics.[58] SF's tendency to speculate on the outcomes of technological innovations, as well as social, cultural, and political changes more broadly, make it an ideal domain for working through ethical issues, and studies into these aspects of SF can provide valuable insights.

The relevance of a Levinasian ethics of alterity for studies of SF—a genre which often seeks to represent otherness—has been noted by various critics, including Easterbrook in his chapter on "Ethics and Alterity" in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2009). Yet very few major studies into ethics and SF have adopted an explicitly Levinasian framework. The foremost example of such an approach in SF criticism is

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[57] Evie Kendal, "Utopian Visions of 'Making People': Science Fiction and Debates on Cloning, Ectogenesis, Genetic Engineering, and Genetic Discrimination," in *Biopolitics and Utopia*, ed. Patricia Stapleton and Andrew Byers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 108.

[58] Zachary Kendal, Aisling Smith, Giulia Champion and Andrew Milner (eds.), *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Michael Pinsky's *Future Present: Ethics and/as Science Fiction* (2003), which draws on Levinas, Derrida and contemporary continental philosophy to inform a study into the representation of the other in SF literature, film, and television. Andrew M. Butler also engaged with Levinas in his PhD dissertation, *Ontology and Ethics in the Writings of Philip K. Dick* (1995), reflecting on the importance of Levinas's notions of responsibility and theology for Dick's works (Dick was also, notably, a major case study in Pinsky's *Future Present*). The question of SF's ethical predispositions, however, has not been addressed from a Levinasian standpoint.

In exploring the relevance of Levinas's philosophy and writings on literature to SF, this thesis seeks to delve into the unexplored connections between Levinas and SF in order to understand the ethical dimensions of the dominant modes of different SF traditions. In another break from earlier studies into ethics in SF, which have focused predominantly on theme criticism, this thesis foregrounds the role of literary form in shaping SF's ethical orientations, that is, in being either complicit in a text's totalising approach to otherness or facilitating a text's disruption of totalisation and representing a more ethical engagement with alterity. Furthermore, of the three major case studies presented in this thesis (Asimov, Zamyatin and Wolfe), only Zamyatin's *We* has been the subject to a brief study from the

perspective of Levinasian ethics.[59] The studies of Asimov and Wolfe thus represent entirely new approaches to these authors' works.

[59] Niko Kwiatkowski, "Zamyatin and 'the Other': The Ethics of Revolution," *Nomad* 5 (2006): 8–18. https://complit.uoregon.edu/issues/.

2. Science Fiction and Literary Form: The Readerly and the Writerly

> Around every text there is a space for interpretation. There is no way to abolish the interpretive space from around the text: it comes into existence as soon as we recognize that words have meanings, most more than one each.[1]
>
> – Samuel R. Delany

A common refrain about SF is that the genre "privileges content, that is, ideas, over form."[2] While it is certainly true that SF's generic markers tend to be located in the scientific grounding of its speculative ideas (this, arguably, being what separates it from fantasy and other speculative genres), SF criticism has tended to neglect the significant role that literary form plays in the genre's different traditions, preferring theme-based criticism. Coming to an understanding of SF's dominant modes of writing is necessary in order to bring the genre's traditions into dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas's writings on ethics and aesthetics.

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[1] Delany, "Science Fiction," 110.

[2] Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 22.

Focusing primarily on the US pulp SF tradition that has underpinned common conceptions of "genre SF," this chapter thus sets the stage for those that follow, where the ethical significance of how the Other is represented, and the kind of readings texts encourage, come to the fore.

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the development of the American pulp SF magazines and the SF traditions they spawned, before moving into a discussion of the concepts of realism, modernism and postmodernism, relating these complex terms to the particular literary history of SF. Although these concepts bring with them some helpful ways to articulate changing approaches to literary representation, their shortcomings when applied to SF force us to turn to other, less culturally and historically specific concepts to understand the dominant formal modes of pulp SF and related traditions. The chapter will therefore turn to Roland Barthes's distinction between readerly and writerly texts for a nuanced poststructuralist approach to literary form, which foregrounds the role of the reader in interpretation and resonates strongly with the generic tendencies of SF. I will suggest that Barthes's valuation of the open and disruptive writerly text is fundamentally ethical in ways that chapters three and four will elucidate.

In this chapter, I will argue that the genre SF of the American pulp magazines, at its height during the late-1930s and 1940s, has been dominated by closed or readerly modes of representation, which encourage readers to approach SF texts in closed or readerly ways. Conversely, literary forms that challenge such modes of writing—open or writerly forms

that draw the reader's attention to the unknowability of things, the inability of writing to adequately represent the Other and the world we inhabit, and the plurality of interpretations that literature opens up—have traditionally been resisted by pulp SF's more ardent supporters. The chapter will conclude with brief discussions of the different kinds of inventiveness displayed in SF and the different kinds of pleasure SF literature can provide.

2.1. Pulp SF Traditions and Literary Form

Despite the impossibility of identifying a single unifying essence of SF, we can recognise a series of dominant genre conventions and values that developed in the US pulp SF magazines between the 1920s and 1950s and played a crucial role in shaping SF as a popular genre. This specific SF tradition is what Rieder calls "niche market SF," an emergent "subcultural strain" deeply rooted in the American pulps, a tradition that Nicholls and Clute simply term "genre SF."[3] Although general fiction pulp magazines had been printing stories now recognisable as SF in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, it was only with Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, founded in 1926 and the first of the niche SF pulps, that what we now call SF began to emerge with a distinct identity and

[3] Rieder, *Science Fiction*, 92; Nicholls and Clute, "Genre SF." The term is avoided in this thesis, however, as it reinforces the US-centrism that has historically dominated SF genre studies. Instead, the term "US pulp SF" is used to refer to this tradition and, by implication, the SF traditions and sub-genres that continue pulp SF's generic conventions.

readership. Gernsback, seeking to define the genre and provide its *raison d'être*, emphasised the need for scientific accuracy in the stories he published, adopting the term "science fiction" after his preferred coinage, "scientifiction," failed to resonate with readers.[4] As he wrote in his editorial to the first issue of *Amazing Stories* in April 1926, he sought to publish "the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allen Poe type of story," which drew upon "scientific fact and prophetic vision" to "supply knowledge" to the reader.[5] As Gary Westfahl notes, SF, for Gernsback, had three functions: "the narrative could provide 'entertainment,' the scientific information could furnish a scientific 'education,' and the accounts of new inventions could offer 'inspiration' to inventors."[6]

This approach to the emergent genre proved highly influential. T. O'Conor Sloane, Gernsback's successor at *Amazing Stories* who edited the magazine from 1929 to 1938, likewise saw the purpose of SF as to provide "instruction" and "amusement" for readers; as

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[4] Jess Nevins, "Pulp Science Fiction," in *The Oxford Handbook to Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 94.

[5] Hugo Gernsback, "A New Sort of Magazine," *Amazing Stories*, April 1926, 3. https://archive.org/details/AmazingStoriesVolume01Number01. Gernsback's comments, and frequent publication of stories by Wells and Verne in particular, indicate the influence of earlier European SF traditions on the emergent US pulp SF tradition.

[6] Gary Westfahl, "The Popular Tradition of Science Fiction Criticism, 1926–1980," *Science Fiction Studies* 26, no. 2 (1999): 189, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4240783.

did F. Orlin Tremaine, editor of *Astounding Stories* during the mid-1930s, who echoed Gernsback's view of SF as providing "entertainment, education, and stimulating ideas."[7] Although Campbell, Tremaine's successor at *Astounding Stories* (renamed *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1938), opened up the genre to a limited treatment of sociological and religious themes in the 1940s, Campbell nonetheless remained fundamentally true to Gernsback's vision. The SF "golden age" that was driven by Campbell's *Astounding* and dominated niche SF genre publishing in the 1940s and 1950s continued to focus on stories that provided scientific education and pleasurable narratives, promoting a stable of authors that included Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, A. E. van Vogt, L. Ron Hubbard and Lester del Ray.[8]

These niche SF pulps, led by *Amazing* and *Astounding*, also targeted a very specific audience. Unlike the broad readership aimed at by the general all-story magazines, they sought an audience of younger, working-class men with an interest in science and technology.[9] The success of *Amazing* was, as John Cheng observes, highly contingent on finding the right audience and cultural milieu—and interwar America, with its optimistic enthusiasm for scientific progress and a large working class aspiring to middle-class status

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[7] Westfahl, "Popular Tradition," 190.

[8] Westfahl, "Popular Tradition," 193; Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 287–288.

[9] For a fascinating discussion of how this audience was targeted in the advertisements found in the first issue of *Astounding Stories*, see Rider, *Science Fiction*, 52.

and fulfilling the American dream, provided both.[10] These young men became the dominant voices in the fan groups and communities of practice that emerged in the 1930s through the magazines' letters columns and, increasingly, fan groups and conventions. Williams notes that cultural traditions are formed by selective processes "governed by many kinds of special interests, including class interests," and it was precisely this male-dominated working-class readership that drove the selective tradition of pulp SF in its formative years.[11]

The mode of SF established in the early US pulp magazines can be recognised as a kind of "hard SF." This term was coined in the late 1950s to distinguish traditional pulp SF from innovative SF by emerging authors that demonstrated a growing interest in sociology, psychology and philosophy—all themes that would become central to the experimental fiction of the genre's New Wave movement.[12] As David G. Hartwell explains, the term "hard SF" is derived from the hierarchy of the sciences that Campbell—whom Hartwell identifies as "*the* editor of Modern science fiction"—sought to ingrain within SF:

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[10] John Cheng, *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 5–7.

[11] Williams, *Long Revolution*, 51.

[12] David G. Hartwell, "Hard Science Fiction," in *The Ascent of Wonder: The Evolution of Hard SF*, ed. David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer (New York: Tor, 1994), 38.

> At the top of the scientific hierarchy are physics, chemistry, and astronomy, whose knowledge and laws are mathematically verifiable. On the next level are the biological sciences, because they are in part descriptive or impure (dealing with living creatures); then the social sciences—anthropology, economics, political science, and experimental psychology. All of these are the meat of hard science fiction. But below them, one finds the humanities: theology, philosophy—and clinical psychology(!)—to which Modern science fiction is opposed.[13]

Thus, the SF favoured by Campbell, his preferred authors, and the loyal readers of *Astounding*, privileged a particular kind of content: stories that focused on the "hard," quantifiable, and rigorous sciences of mathematics, physics, astronomy, and chemistry.

It was through this focus that many of the tropes and story archetypes of popular genre SF gained their distinctive content: the starships and interstellar travel of space opera, the risks of building robots and artificial intelligences, and the development of other marvellous technologies and gadgets.[14] Essays on hard SF by its authors, editors, and

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[13] Hartwell, "Hard Science Fiction," 37. Original emphasis.

[14] Most of these apparent innovations, however, pre-dated their appearance in the genre SF of the US pulps. The robot uprising, for example, and the word *robot*, have their origins in the 1920 Czech play *R.U.R.* by Karel Čapek, while voyages to the moon date back to at least Lucian's *True History* (second century CE).

readers tend to define this tradition as the "core" of SF.[15] This is because, as Kathryn Cramer notes, "hard sf began undifferentiated from sf as a whole"—or at least, undifferentiated in the pulp SF of the Gernsback and Campbell eras.[16] Even the terms typically use to describe SF history elevate this mode of SF; Roberts notes, for example, that the tendency to refer to the pulp SF of the late-1930s to 1940s as the genre's "golden age" "valorises a particular sort of writing: hard SF, linear narratives, heroes solving problems or countering threats in a space-operatic or a technological-adventure idiom."[17] US pulp SF, then, coalesced around the ideas, expectations and values of what has, since the 1950s, been called hard SF—a distinctly Campbellian form of SF that emphasises the "hard" sciences, displays hostility to the humanities and social sciences, and promises a focus on scientific rigour and objectivity.

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[15] Hartwell, "Hard Science Fiction," 35; David Samuelson, "A Softening of the Hard-SF Concept," *Science Fiction Studies* 21, no. 3 (1994): 407, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4240375.

[16] Kathryn Cramer, "Hard Science Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 186.

[17] Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 287. Likewise, the distinction between "hard SF" and "soft SF," still maintained by some SF fans and critics today, depends upon a questionable hierarchy of the sciences that seeks to delegitimise means of social inquiry, with the latter term being more often used in a derogatory way than not.

Pulp SF's dual requirements of scientific education and entertaining stories, as developed in the pulps by Gernsback and Campbell, did more than govern thematic and narrative content; they also necessitated a particular literary form. This form tended to place high value on exposition and descriptive writing, which were used to explain scientific concepts to readers and tell straightforward stories. As Hartwell notes, pulp SF typically privileged the omniscient, third-person, past-tense narrative voice and generally resisted forms of writing that could introduce ambiguity or uncertainty to a narrative.[18] In part, SF's adoption of this approach was due to the existing conventions of the general pulp magazines, as Jess Nevins explains:

> Pulp fiction, regardless of genre, has some easily identifiable characteristics: … a privileging of plot over characterization; use of dialogue and narration as means for delivering information rather than displaying authorial style; … repeated use of common tropes, motifs, and plot devices, to the point of rendering them clichés; adherence to the real or perceived limits of specific genres, with a concurrent lack of literary experimentation; and a clear-cut moral stance, with good usually triumphing over evil.[19]

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[18] Hartwell, "Hard Science Fiction," 37.

[19] Nevins, "Pulp Science Fiction," 93.

These characteristics can certainly be traced through pulp SF, which was replete with character types in service of formulaic plots, yet its commitment to this form and its resistance to literary experimentation was grounded in more than its pulp medium.

Given the emphasis editors and authors placed on educating readers, US pulp SF was typically didactic in nature. As Joanna Russ observes, the educational aim of SF came at the expense of complex characters and a more sophisticated literary style, instead requiring a more transparent and straightforward mode of writing. "Didactic art," wrote Russ, "must wear its meaning on its sleeve."[20] This focus on didactic writing and the communication of scientific ideas made dependence on mimetic representation and comprehensibility core features of the genre, leaving little room for literary inventiveness or the burgeoning modernist styles, which were believed to stand in the way of the effective communication of scientific information. This dual requirement of new ideas and straightforward writing is also evident in Suvin's early and highly influential definition of SF as a genre of "cognitive estrangement," wherein a scientific "*novum*" is developed "with extrapolating and totalizing ('scientific') rigor."[21] This definition, at least as prescriptive as it is descriptive, again required SF narratives to retain a level of comprehensibility and logico-temporal consistency.

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[20] Joanna Russ, "Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 2 (1975): 113, 115. https://www.depauw.edu/site/sfs/backissues/6/russ6art.htm.

[21] Suvin, "On the Poetics," 58, 60.

Ultimately, such definitions of SF rest on the belief that writing can accurately convey knowledge of the world in its totality, and here we reach what I will argue in subsequent chapters is a significant foundation of genre SF's approach to literary form: its scientific positivism. Clute identifies "two essential assumptions" as governing "genre SF": first, that "both the 'world' and the human beings who inhabit it can be seen whole, and described accurately, in words;" and, second, "that the 'world' … does in the end have a story which can be told."[22] In short, the values and generic expectations of genre SF, which Clute primarily associates with the US pulp magazines, assume that it is possible to know the world (and its inhabitants) totally, and in turn represent this totality through the supposed transparency of writing. These values were further reinforced in the hard SF tradition from the 1950s, which James Gunn notes, "like science, took as its first premise that the universe could be understood by an organized application of observation and thought."[23] The two-fold belief that the world is knowable and representable reflects genre SF's often dogmatic scientific positivism, which validates only empirical and conclusive

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[22] John Clute, "Fabulation," *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight, updated January 23, 2018, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/fabulation.

[23] James Gunn, "The Readers of Hard Science Fiction," in *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 87.

scientific knowledge and would extend "hard" science approaches into areas of social science and philosophy. The result is a generic disposition to totalising themes, narratives, and literary forms.

These aspects of the US pulp SF tradition were not without their challenges, however, first in 1950s with the more diverse and creative SF, fantasy and speculation digest magazines, as well as the formal shifts required by the novel form in the paperback boom. More forcefully, however, this US genre SF tradition was shaken up in the 1960s with the coming of the SF New Wave movement, which had its origins in the UK. Finding many of the tropes, traditions and forms of SF stifling and tiresome, the authors driving the New Wave sought to introduce radical stylistic and content changes, bringing much-needed critical attitudes into the genre. The scientific positivism that had underpinned pulp SF thus came to be recognised as a mythological system worthy of the same scrutiny as any religious worldview.[24] Characterised by the work of J. G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Samuel R. Delany, as well as the fiction that appeared in the UK in Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* magazine (from 1964) and was brought to the US in Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* (1967) and Judith Merril's *England Swings SF* (1968), this movement opened up genre SF's US and UK mainstreams to new possibilities of form and content. Whereas the SF of the pulps was dominated by "hard science" speculation and

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[24] Patrick Parrinder, "Science Fiction and the Scientific World-View," in *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (New York: Longman, 1979), 87.

technological invention, the New Wave displayed much greater openness to "soft science," inviting stories focused on psychology, sociology, religion and philosophy. As Ballard declared in a guest editorial for the May 1962 issue of *New Worlds*, SF had spent long enough retelling the same space operas and it was high time to start exploring the infinite riches of "*inner* space, not outer"—delving into the human mind.[25] Although there are certainly examples of these soft science concerns in earlier SF, they were often actively excluded from the genre's mainstream, dominated as it was by the scientific positivism of the American pulps. The most significant changes that came through the New Wave were stylistic—experimental literary forms, such as fragmentary writing, self-conscious metafiction, unreliable narrators and open endings. The openness brought to SF by the New Wave allowed the emergence of authors such as Gene Wolfe, whose complex writing actively resists the closure and consistency sought by pulp SF, thereby challenging the underlying assumptions of the genre's dominant traditions.

My next chapter will delve deeper into the ethical ramifications of the dominant literary forms of US pulp SF. Here, I will further interrogate pulp SF's formal tendencies and their effects on readers by way of different literary concepts: first, notions of realism, modernism and postmodernism; then through Barthes's poststructuralist distinction between readerly and writerly texts; ultimately returning to consider what this means for SF in terms of the distinctive kinds of inventiveness and pleasure it offers readers.

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[25] J. G. Ballard, "Which Way to Inner Space?" *New Worlds*, no. 118 (May 1962), 117.

2.2. Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism

Discussions of form and literary representation have often tended to focus on distinctions between realist, modernist and postmodernist fiction. Even in studies of genre fiction these terms are invoked to distinguish between different kinds of written style and a text's interpretive possibilities, so it becomes necessary to unpack them to determine their usefulness for understanding different SF traditions. These categories, however, tend to refer to narrative content, themes and attitudes at least as much as to literary form and style, and further problems arise when attempting to use these culturally specific concepts in studies of popular genres. When relying on notions of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, distinctions between different literary forms and the modes of reading they encourage tend to be obscured by the historically specific cultural movements in which these traditions emerged.

2.2.1. Realism and SF

The notion of the realist novel is inextricably connected to nineteenth century attempts to accurately depict contemporary life and society and is epitomised by the works of authors such as Honoré de Balzac, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jane Austen and George Eliot. Realism's goal of verisimilitude was carried further by naturalism, a mode of writing exemplified by Émile Zola that aimed at the transparent representation of objective social realities. Pam Morris suggests that realism is complicit in a "functional rationalism," as it

depends on an epistemology wherein the world is knowable and rationalisable, and language can have "mathematical certainty."[26] This approach to the certainty of writing is followed through in most realist narratives by their commitment to narrative closure—"the culmination of the plot in resolution of all mysteries and uncertainties," Morris notes, "functions to reassure us that human existence is ultimately meaningful."[27] As observed by the modernist critique of realism, however, this kind of verisimilitude basically fails to reflect the complexities of reality and, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the unknowability of the Other. Thus Barthes's declaration that the straightforward realism that dominated the nineteenth-century novel, like the writing of history, is "a lie made manifest," since it presents a world "purged of the uncertainty of existence" and given "the stability and outline of an algebra."[28]

The similarities between realism and US pulp SF are readily apparent. Both are founded on the assumption that clear and unambiguous writing can accurately represent the world and the others who inhabit it, and that the world is ultimately comprehensible. Clute thus asserts that "genre SF" is "essentially a *continuation* of the mimetic novel," due

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[26] Pam Morris, *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003), 18.

[27] Morris, *Realism*, 98.

[28] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 37, 38.

to its formal and stylistic similarities to realist fiction and their shared assumptions.[29] This observation has been made by many critics: Timothy Bagwell emphasises SF's formal characteristics when he identifies the genre as "a species of realism"—a realism that "is a matter of code rather than fact, of form rather than content"—and Veronica Hollinger likewise identifies genre SF as being "closely related to the realist novel in its rhetorical verisimilitude."[30] In an extensive study on the rhetoric of speculative fiction, Christine Brooke-Rose likewise acknowledges that pulp SF "took over wholesale the techniques of the realistic novel," including the narrative's provision of a "(pedagogic) plethora of information" and its "(pedagogic) need for clarity and readability."[31] The formal and epistemological similarities pulp SF maintains with realism, however, leaves it open to the same kinds of critique, in that by presenting reality stripped of its complexity and ambiguity, it is maintaining a lie. As Stanisław Lem wrote in one of his blistering condemnations of popular SF, "literature which furnishes the reader with godlike

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[29] Clute, "Fabulation."

[30] J. Timothy Bagwell, "Science Fiction and the Semiotics of Realism," in *Intersections: Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 39, 41; Veronica Hollinger, "Genre vs. Mode," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 139.

[31] Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 99.

omniscience about all narrated events is today an anachronism which neither the theory of art nor the theory of knowledge will undertake to defend."[32]

Yet despite its similarities with realism, it is ultimately problematic to describe US pulp SF and its descendants (including hard SF) as simply realist for two fundamental reasons: first, because *realism* and *realist literature* connote more than just a literary style or approach to writing; and second, because the speculative, other-worldly content of SF does not sit easily with such terminology. As M. A. R. Habib notes, the specific historical background of realism has meant that it is "not just a literary technique but a vast historical phenomenon with economic, ideological, philosophic and religious ramifications."[33] Fredric Jameson likewise finds realism to be "one of the most complex and vital realizations of Western culture, to which it is … well-nigh unique."[34] Although realism as a style or mode of writing can be recognised as continuing to the present day—remaining, perhaps, the dominant mode of popular fiction—the term carries with it a host of implications

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[32] Stanisław Lem, "Philip K. Dick: A Visionary Among the Charlatans," trans. Robert Abernathy, *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 1 (1975), https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/5/lem5art.htm.

[33] M. A. R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 474.

[34] Fredric Jameson, "Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986*, vol. 2, *Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 120.

relating to the content, settings and purpose of the nineteenth-century novel.[35] To fully understand why describing pulp SF traditions as realist ultimately falls short, we must first come to an understanding of how SF has been understood in relation to modernism and modernist literature.

2.2.2. Modernism and SF

The term *modernism* is perhaps more loaded than *realism* as it simultaneously refers to a particular cultural milieu, distinctive literary styles and an *avant-garde* literary movement. Most commonly identified with the period between 1890 and 1930, modernism emerges as a response to the cultural and political climate of the late nineteenth century—namely, cosmopolitan, industrial, urban society dealing with the aftereffects of the industrial revolution and, later, the devastation of the First World War. In literature, it is also recognised as a response to the conventions of the realist novel, particularly its mimetic approach to language and literary representation, and the apparent failure of realism to capture the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary life.[36] Through writers such as Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka, the modernist *avant-garde* introduced experimental literary forms and styles that

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[35] Peter Childs, *Modernism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 2–3.

[36] Childs, *Modernism*, 19; Jameson, "Beyond the Cave," 121.

challenged the illusion of transparent representation and engaged more deeply with the notion of human subjectivity.

In terms of its form, modernist literature came to be associated with a particular approach to language, representation and character that reacted against the dominant approaches of realist fiction. Discussing this distinctive modernist style, Peter Childs observes a range of formal characteristics, including: a concern with "self-referentiality, producing art that was about itself and texts that were self-contained rather than representational"; a tendency towards the "disjointed, disintegrating and discordant in opposition to Victorian harmony"; and "a suspicion of language as a medium for comprehending or explaining the world."[37] For Childs, it is the last of these that becomes the central and, to some degree, unifying focus of literary modernism, which he identifies with "a wide-ranging and far-reaching series of vigorous and persistent attempts to multiply and disturb modes of representation."[38] These modernist characteristics amounted to an outright rejection of the assumptions of literary realism, avoiding the kinds of omniscient third-person narrations, narrative cohesion and tendency toward closure that dominated the nineteenth-century novel.

Taking modernism primarily as a rejection of the content of the realist novel and downplaying the significance of its formal inventiveness has allowed some SF critics to cast

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[37] Childs, *Modernism*, 19–20.

[38] Childs, *Modernism*, 20.

the genre as essentially modernist. Alexei Panshin and Cory Panshin, for example, have argued that the imaginative content of SF marks the genre as a clear break from "the mimetic novel" and the "real factual world of materiality" it claimed to represent.[39] But this suggestion that SF is necessarily a break from the mimetic foundations of realism ignores the genre's conventional form to emphasise the unreality of its content. Phillip E. Wegner also suggests that SF is a "modernist genre," due to the estrangement and other-worldliness of its content, although he is also forced to acknowledge the dependence of most popular genre SF on realist forms of mimetic representation, coming to the somewhat addled conclusion that SF is a kind of "*realist* (cognitive) *modernism* (estrangement)."[40] For Wegner, SF's modernism is purely one of content, but, as Milner notes, "modernism of content … is not really modernism at all."[41] Indeed, the distinction between modernist texts and works that confront modernity—the sense of estrangement found in the post-industrial modern era—seems to be glossed over far too often in discussions of modernism and SF.

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[39] Alexei Panshin and Cory Panshin, *The World Beyond the Hill: Science Fiction and the Quest for Transcendence* (1989; ebook edition, n.p.: ElectricStory.com, 2002), chap. 2.

[40] Phillip E. Wegner, "Jameson's Modernisms; Or, the Desire Called Utopia," *Diacritics* 37, no. 4 (2007): 5, 9, https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.0.0034. Original emphasis.

[41] Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 28.

Even when associated with the content of modernism, however, US pulp SF is out of step with many of the movement's key themes and attitudes. One of these distinctly modernist concerns, for example, centres upon the psychological complexity of characters—a rejection of the simplistic character types that ran through realist fiction and dominated the pulps. Other definitions of modernism have focused on this challenge it presents to the knowability of things, with Brian McHale arguing that modernism's dominant concern was, indeed, epistemological, as it interrogated the nature and limits of knowledge, and the ability of writing to communicate knowledge.[42] Yet these assumptions of knowability were fundamental to US pulp SF and its successors. Indeed, Hartwell posits that SF "evolved in opposition to the Modernist aesthetic," with hard SF continuing as a distinctly "anti-Modern" tradition.[43] Attempts to connect SF with modernism, such as those made by Paul March-Russell who, echoing art historians such as Rory O'Dea, asserts that SF is closely connected to modernism's "twin poles of immanence and transcendence," although he depends primarily on works outside the pulp SF tradition to support these claims, preferring Russian SF, for example.[44]

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[42] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), 9–10.

[43] Hartwell, "Hard Science Fiction," 36.

[44] Paul March-Russell, "Science Fiction, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 120, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316694374.

2.2.3. Postmodernism and SF

Discussions of postmodernism and SF are similarly fraught, although the definitional ambiguity of modernism is significantly heightened when dealing with a proudly indefinable postmodernism. Andrew M. Butler and Bob Ford highlight this uncertainty when they define postmodernism as:

> a movement, a set of aesthetics, a cultural logic, an ideology, a Zeitgeist, an age, an ethos, a mood. It's a bandwagon. It's a scam, a con trick, an example of the emperor's new clothes, nihilistic nonsense, dangerously fascist and right wing. It's the only surviving form of Marxism. It's a continuation of modernism. It's a rejection of modernism. It is what you need before you can have modernism. It is nothing to do with modernism.[45]

The difficulty is further exacerbated by the distance between postmodern form and postmodern content. In terms of form, postmodern literature demonstrates a development of modernism's self-reflexivity, self-conscious intertextuality, narrative openness and disruption of traditional modes of representation. As Attridge notes, when "modernism is viewed through the lens of the post-structuralist theory for which it functioned as the preeminent exemplar, postmodernism is likely to appear less as a break with than an

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[45] Andrew M. Butler and Bob Ford, *Postmodernism* (Harpenden: Picket Essentials, 2003), 7.

intensification of modernism's own detotalizing pressures."[46] Such detotalising formal qualities appear to take centre stage in Broderick's understanding of postmodern literature as implying "showy playfulness, genre-bending, and denial of neat aesthetic or moral closure, but also, above all, writing that knows or even struts itself as writing, rather than as innocent or emotionally insinuating 'true-to-life' portrayal."[47] Such definitions that emphasise the formal continuity between modernist and postmodernist literature make distinguishing between them quite difficult.

The contrast is more distinct when it comes to content, with postmodern literature displaying a different set of cultural attitudes and asking different kinds of questions. Whereas McHale associated modernism with *epistemological* questions ("What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and to what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; … What are the limits of knowledge?"), he argues that postmodernism's dominant concern is *ontological*, as it addresses itself to questions of the nature of the world ("What is a world?; What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? … What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world

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[46] Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

[47] Damien Broderick, *Unleashing the Strange: Twenty-First Century Science Fiction Literature* (n.p.: Borgo Press, 2009), 50.

(or worlds) it projects?").[48] Jameson, by contrast, takes a more Marxist approach to postmodernism, identifying it as "the cultural logic of late capitalism."[49] For Jameson, a "fundamental feature" of postmodernism is its "effacement … of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture."[50] It is the distinctive content and attitude of postmodern fiction that sets it apart from modernist fiction, even though both utilise similar stylistic and formal techniques to achieve their goals.

The relationship between postmodernism and SF has fascinated postmodern theorists and SF critics for decades (and there is significant overlap between these groups). McHale, for example, identifies SF as "*the* ontological genre *par excellence*," and thus a prime form of postmodernism, due to SF's fascination with "different worlds" set apart from ours by a significant new feature (what Suvin would call a *novum*) "in the structure of the represented world itself."[51] As Peter Stockwell notes, however, that US genre SF's investment in narrative coherence and closure conflicts with the "ontological uncertainty"

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[48] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 9, 10.

[49] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984): 53, https://newleftreview.org/issues/I146/articles/fredric-jameson-postmodernism-or-the-cultural-logic-of-late-capitalism.

[50] Jameson, "Postmodernism," 54.

[51] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 59. Original emphasis.

and "ambivalence" that dominates postmodern literature, with SF's interest in ontology tending to be markedly different to that of postmodernism.[52] As Roger Luckhurst observes, McHale himself is also as careful to reinstate boundaries *between* SF and postmodernist fiction, lest the latter inherit the bad name of the former—so much for breaking down barriers between "high" and "low" culture.[53] More commonly, however, SF scholars tend to identify particular movements or subgenres of SF with postmodernism, such as New Wave SF or cyberpunk, thus contributing to broader problems concerning the periodisation of SF.

2.2.4. Periodising SF

The inability to move past the apparent realist-modernist-postmodernist divide has caused wildly different articulations of the nature of SF, with theorists struggling to identify SF as a whole with one term or the other. In order to deal with these tensions, some critics have attempted to connect certain movements or subgenres within SF with either realism, modernism or postmodernism. Departing from his conception of modernism as purely a question of content, Wegner proceeds to periodise SF history in terms of realist and modernist phases, finding the genre's "realist emergence" in the work of H. G. Wells and

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[52] Peter Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction* (Routledge: London, 2014), 104.

[53] Roger Luckhurst, "Border Policing: Postmodernism and Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 18, no. 3 (1991): 358–366, https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/luckhurst55art.htm.

his contemporaries, a "first modernist moment" in the 1920s fiction of Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aleksey Tolstoy, Aldous Huxley, Karel Čapek, and Olaf Stapledon, another prolonged realist stage beginning with the 1920s American SF pulps and continuing through their 1940s "golden age," until another "modernist period" arrives with the New Wave SF of the 1960s and 1970s.[54] Indeed, the association of New Wave SF with modernism is common—Damien Broderick, for example, sees the New Wave as the result of a "high point of kinetic sf modernism in the 1950s" represented by authors such as Alfred Bester, Theodore Sturgeon and Cordwainer Smith,[55] while Fred Pfeil hails the New Wave as the coming of an "unprecedentedly *literary* SF … full of impressionistic imagery and psychological insight," marking the moment when "science fiction briefly *becomes modernist*."[56] One apparent problem with this periodisation is that it appears to assume a single SF tradition, instead of acknowledging the various selective traditions these bodies of writing reflect, each with

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[54] Wegner, "Jameson's Modernisms," 9–10.

[55] Damien Broderick, "New Wave and Backwash: 1960–1980," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 50.

[56] Pfeil is primarily interested in the appearance of "formalist interests and concerns" in American genre SF which, as he puts it, sets New Wave SF apart from "those prepubescent technotwit satisfactions" of the pulps. Fred Pfeil, *Another Tale to Tell: Politics and Narrative in Postmodern Culture* (London: Verso, 1990), 84–86. Original emphasis.

their own generic tendencies and influences. Such periodisations are also inclined to attempt to find a linear trajectory which mirrors that of mainstream literature and the novel, moving from realism (pulp SF) to modernism (New Wave SF).

Such periodisations typically also seeks to account for the emergence of postmodernism. McHale, like Wegner, identifies "realist poetics" in the 1930s SF pulps, "modernist poetics" in the 1960s New Wave movement, and finally the "postmodernization" of the genre in the later New Wave SF of the 1970s and its successors.[57] Wegner's periodisation, on the other hand, subsumes 1970s SF within a second modernist phase, instead identifying the appearance of cyberpunk fiction in the early 1980s as the coming of a distinctly postmodern SF.[58] Jameson likewise suggests that cyberpunk, as epitomised in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Bruce Sterling's *Mirrorshades* anthology (1986), is "the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself."[59] This identification of cyberpunk with postmodernism has become common in SF criticism, reiterated by scholars such as Andrew M. Butler and Hollinger, due to the subgenre's focus on exploring the nature of the individual in the globalised postmodern world and tracing out the direction of postmodern

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[57] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 69.

[58] Wegner, "Jameson's Modernisms," 10.

[59] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 419.

society.[60] Needless to say, such discussions of SF and postmodernism tend to focus much more on content than form, since the former is more central to most understandings of postmodernism.

Yet despite some similarities in either form or thematic concern, mainstream and SF movements (such as modernism and the New Wave) should be recognised as quite distinct *avant-gardes*, responding to different historical circumstances, communities of practice, and generic traditions. Following Jameson's assertion that "SF is a sub-genre with a complex and formal history of its own, and with its own dynamic, which is not that of high culture," Milner notes that SF has "its own avant-gardes" that do not "necessarily have anything to do with modernism."[61] Thus Milner posits that "SF is neither realist nor modernist, but rather an entirely distinct third term."[62] With the complications that the concepts of realism, modernism and postmodernism bring—their intertwining of content with form and their association with specific cultural and historical moments—Milner is

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[60] Andrew M. Butler, "Postmodernism and Science Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, 137–148 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Veronica Hollinger, "Science Fiction and Postmodernism," in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. David Seed, 232–247 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

[61] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 283; Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 29.

[62] Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 30.

no doubt correct that the realist-modernist binary is insufficient, if not entirely inappropriate, for the study of genre fiction. Although certain SF traditions and movements do resonate with those of the mainstream—pulp SF's form and epistemological assumptions undoubtedly mirror those of realism; the New Wave does embrace some modernist forms; hard SF is indeed anti-Modernist; cyberpunk does resonate with some of the concerns of postmodernism—the relationships between them are too complex to be accounted for in simple associations, and the terms are ultimately unhelpful for understanding the formal and stylistic tendencies of SF.

2.2.5. Categorising Gene Wolfe

As an example of the confusion that can be caused by dependence on mainstream literary movements in discussions of SF, I wish to turn briefly to the example of Gene Wolfe, pre-empting the exploration of his work found in chapter five. Given the description of modernist form above, it is unsurprising that Wolfe's fiction is often identified as modernist. Discussing Wolfe's work as the successful "marriage" of "genre SF" and modernism, Clute declares that his "greatest texts are Modernist in a central understanding of the term: they are at one and the same time utterly present and implacably remote."[63]

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[63] John Clute, "Wolfe, Gene," *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight, updated April 17, 2019, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/wolfe_gene.

Modernism's concern with individual subjectivity is certainly echoed in the depth and psychological complexity of Wolfe's characters, especially his narrators and protagonists, who are often rendered "implacably remote" through narrative unreliability and openness. This is certainly evident in the case of Severian, the protagonist of *The Book of the New Sun* (1980–1982), who remains "close" as the first-person narrator, yet whose motivations remain forever out of reach—part of a rich interiority. Modernism's attentiveness to the disjointed and discordant is likewise evident in Wolfe's disruptive fragmentary writing and sometimes-indecipherable prose. This can be observed in Wolfe's highly fragmentary novella "V.R.T." (1972), which presents fragments purporting to be from a multitude of documentary sources without any coherent sequence, requiring the reader to attempt to reassemble some trace of a chronological narrative. The eschewal of narrative closure that Childs associates with modernism is perhaps the most distinctive feature of most of Wolfe's fiction, which is known for its open and ambiguous endings, and Wolfe's overall scrutiny of language's ability to represent the world (and the Other) certainly brings it in line with modernist writing that challenges the transparent representation of realist fiction. The epistemological questions McHale associates with modernism likewise resonate with some of the major themes of Wolfe's work: since his early novel *Peace* (1975), Wolfe has combined high modernist written stylistics and complex protagonists to raise questions about the unreliability of memory, memoir writing and storytelling. However, the association of an SF and fantasy author who emerged in the late-1960s and early-1970s

with a movement generally held to have ended by the 1950s raises significant problems. Wolfe is not responding primarily to realism *per se*, but to pulp SF specifically, bringing an inventive approach to the tropes and forms of this earlier SF, interrogating their assumptions and challenging their positivist and empiricist approach to representation.

Further problematising Wolfe's association with modernism is his relationship to the purportedly modernist New Wave SF movement. Wolfe himself became associated with the New Wave when he had early stories published in Moorcock's *New Worlds* and Ellison's *Again, Dangerous Visions* (1972).[64] When questioned about this connection, however, Wolfe stated that "belonging to a literary movement doesn't consist so much in using a certain set of techniques, as it consists in running with a certain set of people, and only to a very small degree did I run with that set of people."[65] Certainly Wolfe emerged within the fringes of the New Wave and his dense, literary work of the 1970s and 1980s benefited from the openness the movement introduced into the SF field. But Wolfe's reluctance to be considered a "New Wave" author highlights a major problem when dealing with movements such as modernism or the New Wave: as much as they may refer to

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[64] Wolfe's "The Green Wall Said" was published in the August 1967 issue of *New Worlds*, while "Robot's Story," "Against the Lafayette Escadrille" and "Loco Parentis" (collected together as "Mathoms From the Time Closet") appeared together in *Again, Dangerous Visions*.

[65] Gene Wolfe, "On Encompassing the Entire Universe: An Interview with Gene Wolfe," by Larry McCaffery, *Science Fiction Studies* 15, no. 3 (1988): 344, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239902.

specific literary styles or content, they are also very closely connected to a specific time and place, and often to a specific group of authors.

If Wolfe's work sits uncomfortably under the modernist label, its relationship with postmodernism is even more fraught. The tendency within SF criticism has been to associate Wolfe solely with modernism, rejecting any possible association with postmodernism. Broderick, for example, includes a host of New Wave authors in his discussion of postmodern SF, including Ballard, Delany, and Philip K. Dick, but is careful to exclude Gene Wolfe, Brian Aldiss and (early) Thomas M. Disch, noting that these authors are "exemplary sf modernists all, but not postmodernists."[66] Broderick provides no justification for this assertion, but it seems likely that, in the case of Wolfe, it is due to a perception that the concerns and attitudes of his fiction are much more distinctly modernist. Wolfe's Catholicism and generally positive approach to religion, for example, can be seen as at odds with the more relativistic approaches that dominate postmodernism.[67] Assertions of Wolfe's modernism, however, might also be connected to assumptions by certain SF critics that there is some objective and final meaning, or truth,

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[66] Broderick, *Unleashing the Strange*, 50.

[67] "I am a practicing Catholic," Wolfe said in an interview, "although I don't think that designation would give people much of an idea about what my beliefs are." And indeed, it would be difficult for a reader to ascribe many of the ideas and thematic concerns of Wolfe's work with any understanding of Catholic orthodoxy. Wolfe, "On Encompassing," 353.

hiding within his fictions waiting to be discovered by the puzzle-solving reader. Such assumptions are the focus of chapter five of this thesis, but suffice to say here that this approach is often at odds with the reader's experience of the openness of Wolfe's fiction and its resistance to final and exclusive interpretations.

Yet Wolfe's work does seem to fit within Broderick's largely formal understanding of postmodernist fiction, despite his active exclusion therefrom. Wolfe's metafictional tendencies and self-conscious intertextuality certainly demonstrate a "showy playfulness" that "knows or even struts itself as writing," his creative blend of SF and fantasy tropes with mainstream literary traditions and styles is definitely "genre-bending," and the extreme openness of his narratives actively denies "neat aesthetic or moral closure."[68] Such formal postmodernism is often overlooked in SF criticism, as Butler observes: "Within sf studies, postmodernism became primarily associated with cyberpunk and vice versa, with the postmodernism present within … the metafictive games of Gene Wolfe, Pat Murphy and Geoff Ryman, receiving little critical attention."[69] In terms of content, Wolfe's undeniable epistemological themes are often blended with the ontological concerns typically found in SF: speculation on alien worlds (*The Book of the Short Sun* [1999–2001]), future worlds (*The Book of the New Sun*, "Seven American Nights" [1978]), the nature of reality (*Peace, There Are Doors* [1988]), identity and individuality (*The Fifth Head of Cerberus* [1972], *A*

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[68] Broderick, *Unleashing the Strange*, 50.

[69] Butler, "Postmodernism and Science Fiction," 146.

Borrowed Man [2015]), and time and history (*The Book of the New Sun*, *Pirate Freedom* [2007]). These are, however, the ontological concerns McHale associates with postmodernism. Furthermore, the way Wolfe brings the formal experimentation of modernism and postmodernism to bear on US SF traditions disrupt the high-low culture divide often attributed to modernism, a move that is central to Jameson's understanding of postmodernism. It might be possible to carve up Wolfe's oeuvre into more "modernist" and more "postmodernist" works, but there would be little benefit to going through and labelling his works in this way, and it might well prove be an impossible task, since his fiction often contain thematic elements of each. Such terms are ultimately both impoverished (not speaking to SF traditions) and overloaded (carrying too many implications in terms of form, content and context) to deal with SF authors like Wolfe.

The complexities and unique histories of SF, and the distinctive form and content of work such as Wolfe's, require us to move beyond loaded notions of realism, modernism and postmodernism. Although each concept contains implications in terms of open or closed literary styles and different approaches to literary representation, these formal qualities are too easily lost among assumptions on content and attitude. To develop a clear understanding of the role of form in SF, and thus be able to draw SF into dialogue with Levinasian ethics and its largely formal approach to literary representations of otherness, we must seek out terms more appropriate for the discussion of openness, formal inventiveness, and disruptions of totalising representation. Here the work of literary critics

focusing on reader response can be particularly helpful, shedding light on how different literary forms work to draw readers into particular kinds of engagement with texts.

2.3. The Readerly and the Writerly

Barthes created an influential poststructuralist analysis of literary forms and their effects on readers in his ground-breaking 1970 study *S/Z*, where he distinguished between readerly (*lisible*) and writerly (*scriptible*) texts. Barthes's articulation of these terms will be essential for understanding the ethical potential of SF, particularly in later chapters when we turn to Zamyatin's *We* and Wolfe's "Seven American Nights" to examine how these texts draw readers into encounters with otherness.

Before delving into *S/Z*, however, it is worth noting a significant structuralist precursor to Barthes in Umberto Eco's distinction between closed and open works. According to Eco, the "closed work," associated with realism and popular fiction, depends on the reader's passive consumption of a straightforward narrative, "structured according to an inflexible project" that aims at "pulling the reader along a predetermined path" to arrive at a "rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretative solution."[70] In contrast, Eco identifies a distinctly "modern" type of work of art that incorporates "indeterminacy and

[70] Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 8, 51.

discontinuity" to elicit a different response from the reader.[71] For Eco, these "open works" are "characterised by the invitation to *make the work* together with the author," thus positing the reader as co-creator.[72] Yet there is a certain uneasiness in Eco's articulations of these terms that sets it apart from Barthes's later approach. Eco's insistence on the work of art's organic coherence keeps his approach in line structuralism's more rigid and totalising foundations. Although open works are said to be "incomplete," requiring audience participation to create their meaning, Eco is careful to affirm that such works remain governed by "an organizing rule" that prevents them from degrading into "complete chaos."[73] In line with the traditionally humanist notion of the primacy of authorial intent, Eco posits the work's openness as an "invitation" made by the author to the reader, not for "indiscriminate participation," but for "an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author."[74] Throughout his writings on the open work,

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[71] Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 61.

[72] Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 63. Original emphasis.

[73] Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 62-63.

[74] Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 62. Eco's author-centred paradigm is even clearer when he clarifies as follows: "The author offers the interpreter … a work *to be completed*. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own … even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen. The author is the one who proposed a number of

Eco undertakes a distinctly structuralist project as he searches for generalisable "laws" he believes govern open works and limit their interpretive potential. As David Seed notes, this emphasis on organicity, with its "connotations of closure," tends to "sit very oddly with Eco's main emphasis on the openness of the work of art, its status as an intertext, and its dependence on the reader as co-creator."[75] This leads to Eco's muddled conclusion that closed works "can be read in various ways, each independent from the others" and are thus "open to any possible 'aberrant' decoding," while the same openness does not seem to hold for open works: "You cannot use the [open] text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however 'open' it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation."[76] An ambiguity thus pervades Eco's analysis of closed and open works: it is torn between declaring the limitless plurality of the open text and its infinite potential for interpretation, and reaffirming traditional concerns for authorial intent and structuralist dependency on reducing works to the totality of their structural relations.

The emergence of poststructuralism in the late 1960s and early 1970s came largely as a response to the totalising notion of the organicity of the work of art and the many

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possibilities which had already been rationally organised, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development."

[75] David Seed, "The *Open Work* in Theory and Practice," in *Reading Eco: An Anthology*, ed. Rocco Capozzi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 77.

[76] Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 8–9.

restrictions placed on interpretation by structuralism and its humanist precursors. As new approaches to language came to emphasise the inherent instability of the signifier-signified relation, texts came to be seen not as natural, organic structures, but as necessarily unstable and replete with potential meaning. Out of a desire to avoid the reductive and totalising tendencies of previous critical models, poststructuralist thinkers sought out new ways to approach texts, attentive to their plurality of meaning, internal conflicts and rich intertextualities. Modernist literature was recognised as harnessing this instability of language to produce texts that were radically open to interpretation. Thus, writing in the late 1960s, Gilles Deleuze could declare that the openness of modern art, far from constituting a structurally sound organic totality, revealed "a formless *ungrounded* chaos which has no law other than its own repetition, its own reproduction in the development of that which diverges and decentres."[77] Although a diverse movement, poststructuralism

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[77] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 69. Original emphasis. In a footnote, Deleuze identifies Eco as revealing that the modern work of art is "precisely the absence of any such centre or convergence." András Bálint Kovács, however, rightly observes that Deleuze "puts his own conclusion in Eco's mouth," as Eco actually maintains the opposite position, holding fast to the notion of the structural organicity of the work of art. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 313 n. 23; András Bálint Kovács, "Notes to a Footnote: The Open Work According to Eco and Deleuze," in *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy*, ed. D. N. Rodowick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 41.

introduced an acknowledgement of the plurality of meaning in all texts, while recognising in modernist literature new formal techniques that made readers aware of this plurality by playing with the inherent instability of language.

Barthes introduced the concepts of the readerly and the writerly in *S/Z*, a volume that marked a shift from the critic's high structuralist works of the 1960s and came to be recognised as his first major poststructuralist work. According to Barthes, the reader passively consumes the readerly text as a commodity, drawn through a straightforward narrative that depends on the illusion of transparent representation in which the plurality of meaning is ostensibly limited. Barthes likens the readerly text to classical music, in which the listener is pulled along by the "tonal determination" of "melody and harmony," elements he identifies with "the revelation of truth and the coordination of the actions represented" in the readerly narrative.[78] Here Barthes finds "the same constraint in the gradual order of melody and in the equally gradual order of the narrative sequence," which in turn "*reduces the plural of the classic text.*"[79]

By offering closure and comprehensibility up front, the readerly text also conforms to the consumerist impulses of capitalist society. As Barthes puts it, the readerly text is at

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[78] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 30.

[79] Barthes, *S/Z*, 30. Original emphasis. Barthes provides an example of the mechanism behind this reduction of plurality in what he calls "the law of solidarity," which sees the narrative discourse repeating certain facts and information to emphasise consistency and compatibility (181).

home in a society "which would have us 'throw away' the story once it has been consumed ('devoured'), so that we can then move on to another story, buy another book."[80] Were the text to encourage re-reading or more sustained engagement, it would detract from further sales and challenge the consumer-driven system. Furthermore, Barthes finds that the readerly text is "committed to the closure system of the West, produced according to the goals of this system, devoted to the law of the Signified," that is, devoted to the meaning, or truth, presumed to be provided by the author through their work.[81] This description of the readerly text parallels Barthes's definition of the "work," used throughout his poststructuralist writings of the 1970s. Like the readerly text, the work is described as closing "upon a signified"—a final signified held to be either self-evident in the work or a secret to be uncovered through hermeneutics—and is associated with passivity, consumerism and what Barthes calls the "pleasure of consumption."[82] Throughout *S/Z*, Barthes associates the readerly with classic or realist texts, which he notes "make up the enormous mass of our literature."[83]

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[80] Barthes, *S/Z*, 15–16.

[81] Barthes, *S/Z*, 6–7.

[82] Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 58–59, 63. First published in French in 1971.

[83] Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

Barthes, however, finds value in the writerly text, which he associates primarily with modernist literature.[84] The writerly text is said to draw the reader into an act of co-creation (co-*writing*) and thus fulfils the ultimate goal of literature: "to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text."[85] Like Eco, Barthes distinguishes between the reader's passive consumption of the readerly (closed) text and their active participation in the creation of the writerly (open) text, but the reader's act of co-creation is much freer in Barthes's articulation than in Eco's. Barthes characterises the quintessential writerly text thus:

> In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the

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[84] Eco and Barthes both associate the closed (or readerly) text with the "traditional" or "classic" realist work and the open (or writerly) text with the modernist work, although Barthes is more hesitant about reinstating the realist-modernist binary, emphasising instead that the reader can still find elements of the writerly (of Text) in works of realism and declaring "we must not exaggerate the distance separating the modern text from the classical narrative." Roland Barthes, "Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe," in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 293.

[85] Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.

> codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the system of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.[86]

The writerly text, being free from the law of the signified, is held to be completely reversible, to demonstrate an undecidability between the interpretive codes it mobilises, to show an absolute plurality of meaning. It is also evident that for Barthes, readerly and writerly texts, like realist and modernist literature, operate with different approaches to the possibility of transparent literary representation. Whereas the readerly text depends on a mimetic view of language, taking the relation between signifier and signified as natural and language as able to represent the world (transparently, reliably), the writerly text embraces the instability of language and signification and brings it to the foreground, acknowledging the diegetic or mediating role of language in narrative.

Just as the concept of the readerly found a parallel in the notion of the work, Barthes's writerly finds a rearticulation in his notion of the Text. Held in opposition to the work, the Text is described by Barthes as practising "the infinite postponement of the signified," through "the engendering of the perpetual signifier."[87] Barthes emphasises the limitless potential of this signifier, which brings not some "ineffable" or "unnamable"

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[86] Barthes, *S/Z*, 5–6 (original emphasis).

[87] Barthes, "From Work to Text," 59.

signified, but a notion of *play* that carries with it an irreducible plurality of meaning. As with the writerly text, Barthes associates the Text with the reader's co-production of meaning: the Text "solicits from the reader a practical collaboration"; it attempts to "abolish (or at least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading"; it "decants the work (if it permits it at all) from its consumption and recuperates it as play, task, production, practice."[88]

Barthes's distinction between the readerly and the writerly (and between the work and the Text) is fundamentally connected to different *modes of reading*. Whereas the readerly text is associated with a passive and comfortable reading practice that accepts the limited meaning offered up by the irreversible narrative, the writerly text elicits a participatory mode of reading that explores the text's plurality of meaning. According to Barthes, "the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages."[89] To undertake a writerly reading, then, is to resist any

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[88] Barthes, "From Work to Text," 62–63. Original emphasis.

[89] Barthes, *S/Z*, 5. Original emphasis. It is perhaps here that Barthes's readerly/writerly and work/Text distinctions most clearly intersect with his controversial essay "The Death of the Author," which decries (readerly) modes of reading which attempt to ascribe to a text an "Author-God": "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified,

totalising system of interpretation and so free oneself from any restrictions that would seek to limit the scope of one's reading, including the rigidly controlled narrative of the readerly text. Whereas the writerly text draws the reader into such a writerly reading from the outset, turning them to face the instability of language and the openness of the text, the readerly attempts to resist such an approach, reinforcing a mimetic illusion of stable signification and transparent representation.[90] But this resistance can be overcome, and in *S/Z* Barthes

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to close the writing." Barthes instead encourages an "anti-theological" (writerly) mode of reading that refuses to "assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text" and thus allows the reader to encounter the "multiplicity" of the text. Similarly, in "From work to Text" Barthes writes: "The work is caught up in a process of filiation. What is postulated are a *determination* of the world … over the work, a *consecution* of works among themselves, and an *appropriation* of the work to its author. … The Text, on the other hand, is read without the Father's inscription." Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," trans. Stephen Heath, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 170–171; Barthes, "From Work to Text," 61.

[90] This notion of different texts encouraging different modes of reading is not, of course, a new one. Eco, for example, elucidates a similar concept when describing the "Model Readers" of closed and open works, although his articulation proves more prescriptive than Barthes's. A parallel can also be established between Barthes's writerly texts and Joshua Landy's more recent notion of "formative fictions" as "texts whose function it is to fine-tune our mental capacities." Specifically, writerly texts can be identified as "training" the reader in the "skill" of deconstructive reading and attentiveness to plurality. The "manual for reading" of such texts is one of conscious engagement with the

sets out to demonstrate how a productive, writerly reading can rehabilitate the plurality of a readerly text. In effect, Barthes deconstructs his own apparent binary between readerly and writerly texts by connecting the terms with different modes of reading and undertaking a deconstructive reading of Balzac.

S/Z is structured around the painstakingly close reading of a readerly narrative: Balzac's realist short story "Sarrasine." Barthes breaks Balzac's text into 561 fragments, or *lexias*, of varying length (sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences), observing in each fragment the workings of one or more of the five codes chosen for his analysis. He suggests that such ruthless fragmentation is necessary to affirm the text's plurality and free his commentary from the "ideology of totality" that governs traditional criticism and would approach the text as an organic whole to isolate a single overriding meaning.[91] The codes Barthes identifies in these fragments consist of: the *hermeneutic* code, which addresses the various enigmas the narrative poses, develops and resolves; the *proairetic* code, which examines the actions, behaviours and events presented in the narrative; the *semantic* code, which plays with the instability of signs; the *symbolic* code, which draws upon the text's

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production of meaning. Landry, however, is reluctant to consider more extreme writerly texts, such as aleatory writing, as "formative," believing they leave too much work for the reader and do too little themselves. Eco, *Role of the Reader*, 7–11; Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10, 12.

[91] Barthes, *S/Z*, 15.

limitless symbolic meanings; and the *cultural* code, which traces references that depend on specific cultural or scientific knowledge. Throughout this analysis, Barthes identifies various formal characteristics of Balzac's text that manipulate the hermeneutic and proairetic codes to impose an "irreversible order" on the narrative, while contrasting these to the inherently unstable, open and reversible meanings staged by the semantic, symbolic and cultural codes, which "establish permutable, reversible connections, outside the constraint of time."[92] Here, the reasoning behind Barthes's description of the plurality of the readerly text as modest and incomplete becomes clearer, being rooted in the inflexibility of the narrative's hermeneutic and proairetic codes. As Barthes notes in a 1973 analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), readerly narratives are characterised by an "*irreversibility*" based on "two codes which maintain a vectorized order, the actional code (based on a logico-temporal order) and the code of the Enigma (the question is crowned by its solution)," that is, the proairetic and hermeneutic codes respectively.[93]

For Barthes, this is connected to the readerly text's privileging of denotation, the narrative's apparently mimetic or representational element, over connotation, the limitless meanings available through the more open codes. As Michael Moriarty explains: "Denotation appears to anchor the text in reality, it deals in the literal, calls a spade a spade,

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[92] Barthes, *S/Z*, 30.

[93] Barthes, "Textual Analysis," 292–293.

and a very old man a very old man. Meanings beyond this appear as parasitic, secondary; as mere interpretations."[94] Barthes suggests that this attempt to concentrate meaning in the denotative, and thus render the text univocal, is in turn a "return to the closure of Western discourse."[95] This privileging of denotation is artificial, however, since it depends on the illusion of a *natural* connection between language (and grammar) and reality. Barthes challenges the capacity of language to denote, finding it "a system like any other," too highly dependent on cultural and historical circumstance to represent any objective reality transparently.[96] He thus finds that connotation "is the way into the polysemy of the classic text, to that limited plural on which the classic text is based."[97] What Barthes demonstrates in his writerly reading of "Sarrasine" is the plurality of meaning available through connotation (semantic, symbolic and cultural codes), which always remains open to different approaches (from different readers in different cultures or at different times). Furthermore, by refusing to determine a hierarchy between his five codes—"How can one code be superior to another without abusively closing off the plurality of codes?"—Barthes

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[94] Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 130.

[95] Barthes, *S/Z*, 7.

[96] Barthes, *S/Z*, 7.

[97] Barthes, *S/Z*, 8.

undermines the traditional privileging of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, maintaining connotation on equal footing with denotation.[98]

What Barthes thus foregrounds is the text's *difference*. As distinct from the difference *between works*, that which makes each work unique, this is a difference *within the text*, found in those disruptive and open elements of the text that can make it *other* to any interpretation, undermining belief in the text's univocity and challenging the readerly narrative's apparent closure—"a difference which does not stop and which is articulated upon the infinity of texts, of languages, of systems: a difference of which each text is a return."[99] As Barbara Johnson explains, the text's difference is "that which subverts the very idea of identity, infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text's parts or meanings and reaching a totalled, integrated whole."[100] The text's difference is precisely its resistance to totalisation; it is the plurality of meaning that will never allow the text to be reduced to a single meaning, including the readerly text's supposedly denotative meaning. Whereas the readerly text attempts to reduce or conceal its difference through its solidarities, internal logic and illusion of transparent representation, the writerly text draws attention to its own difference through its instability, indeterminacy and openness.

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[98] Barthes, *S/Z*, 206.

[99] Barthes, *S/Z*, 3.

[100] Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 4.

Yet it is important to note that for Barthes the *purely* writerly text is an unattainable ideal: "the writerly text is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore."[101] All texts, no matter how writerly, will contain some trace of "a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic," which would make them "incompletely plural."[102] Thus, rather than maintaining the readerly/writerly distinction as a binary opposition, Barthes appears to conceive of them as a spectrum between two impossible limit-texts: the purely readerly, which is completely closed off to all interpretations bar one, and the purely writerly, with absolutely no logico-temporal consistency that would allow for the slightest narrative structure or cohesion.

I noted earlier that Barthes finds value in the writerly, although Eco had refrained from such evaluation between open and closed works. As Moriarty notes, the "affirmation of value" evident in Barthes's privileging of the writerly text is part of his burgeoning "critique of structuralism."[103] This value, as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, is of a distinctly *ethical* nature, since it is concerned with the challenge presented to totalisation in the affirmation of the infinite and the introduction of otherness. Indeed, Barthes's preoccupation with the writerly (and related concepts), and his privileging of the writerly over the readerly, forms part of what Seán Burke identifies as an overriding concern for the

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[101] Barthes, *S/Z*, 5.

[102] Barthes, *S/Z*, 6.

[103] Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 118.

"ethics of representation."[104] Barthes, however, is seldom explicit on the ethical nature of this critique, and it is here, as we shall see, that Levinas's ethics of alterity can become very informative.

2.4. Readerly and Writerly SF

Barthes's distinction between the readerly and the writerly proves a more suitable framework through which to understand the literary configurations of the SF field than the classic realist-modernist binary or structuralist differentiations between closed and open works. It is free from the cultural baggage and implications on themes and narratives that come with notions of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, which sit uneasily with SF's diverse traditions, histories and movements. Barthes's articulation of readerly and writerly texts also foregrounds the role of the reader in interpretation and breaks free of the dependence on totalisation, organicity and authorial intent that had characterised earlier criticism. Finally, as noted by Milner, Barthes's terms avoid the "explicitly hostile" tendency to carve SF into "literary" and "popular" forms—a distinction that is often used to support highly subjective judgements of literary worth.[105]

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[104] Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 52.

[105] Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 26.

With the breakdown of SF's dominant forms outlined earlier, it is not difficult to see how Barthes's terms resonate with different SF traditions. US pulp SF is, of course, dominated by the readerly—something it shares with the realist novel and with other popular genres. As suggested earlier, however, pulp SF's adherence to readerly conventions is also rooted in its scientific positivism and ideological commitment to the knowability of things. When SF's aims are didactic, openness to other interpretations only impedes the clear communication of scientific ideas. When examining this predominantly American SF tradition, Patrick Parrinder notes that there is "a lack of freedom about such fiction, a determination to insist upon particular meanings," acknowledging that "few if any science-fictional works can claim to be the 'writerly' texts celebrated in some post-structuralist theory."[106] Likewise, Brooke-Rose, upon concluding that pulp SF "does take over wholesale and unmodified most of the techniques" of realism, including "the post-dated narrative in the past tense, the explanatory flashback and the abuse of free indirect discourse for a character's thoughts," notes that such SF "tends to go back to Balzacian narrator," thereby acknowledging the connection between pulp SF and the intensely readerly narrative analysed by Barthes in *S/Z*.[107]

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[106] Patrick Parrinder, "Revisiting Suvin's Poetics of Science Fiction," in *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 40.

[107] Brooke-Rose, *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 102.

To use Barthes's terms, this dominance of the readerly in US pulp SF is evident in its overdependence on the hermeneutic and proairetic codes and its tendency to suppress symbolic, cultural and semantic codes. The denotative register of most pulp SF narrators—typically third-person, omniscient, and keeping with the past-tense—attempts to render the proairetic code concrete, while the promise of closure (narrative closure with mathematical certainty) pins down the hermeneutic code. This narrative closure and irreversibility of interpretive paradigms are central to Stockwell's three aesthetic characteristics of (popular genre) SF: its "immersive function," which draws the reader into the world of the story; its "beauty of structure that engages a narrative drive, aims at a satisfying resolution, and feels pacy and urgent"; and its "richness of world-building."[108] Indeed, inflexibility is essential to this "beauty of structure," with the narrative's promise of "a resolution, dilemma, or catastrophe to be fulfilled or averted."[109] Thus Stockwell finds that "most science fiction is end-directed, and rarely if ever ends in the sort of aporia that is characteristic of many modernist short stories and postmodern novels."[110] Through such readerly discourses, in which all enigmas are resolved and "everything holds together," the reader is encouraged to

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[108] Peter Stockwell, "Aesthetics," in *The Oxford Handbook to Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 42–44.

[109] Stockwell, "Aesthetics," 43.

[110] Stockwell, "Aesthetics," 43.

accept the meaning offered without critically evaluating the text or exploring other possible meanings.[111]

The typical pulp SF narrative attempts to close the plurality of interpretive avenues available through semantic, symbolic and cultural codes. The uncertainty at play in these codes, particularly the semantic code, sits at odds with what Damien Broderick calls traditional SF's "adherence to a 'clear windowpane' theory of writing," whereby words can unambiguously represent the world.[112] This suppression of the more open and reversible codes often carries through to SF criticism and reading communities, resulting in the kinds of policing of reading strategies Vint and Bould identify in "There Is No Such Thing as Science Fiction." Focusing on interpretations of Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" (*Astounding Science Fiction*, August 1954), held by James Gunn and others to encapsulate the mindset and aesthetic of SF's Campbellian "golden age," Vint and Bould note the "purifying impulse" that drives some SF readers to exclude meanings available through the text's ambiguities, connotations, cultural dimensions and symbolic aspects, limiting their interpretations to the denotative hermeneutic and proairetic codes they presume intended by the work's author.[113]

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[111] Barthes, *S/Z*, 156.

[112] Broderick, "New Wave and Backwash," 55.

[113] Vint and Bould, "There Is No Such Thing," 47.

This is not to suggest that writerly SF cannot be found, nor, for that matter, that these readerly narratives cannot be approached in writerly ways. The first major challenge to the dominance of the readerly in popular genre SF came with the innovations of the SF New Wave movement in the 1960s. As noted earlier, the New Wave is typically associated with modernism, largely for the challenge it presented to US pulp SF forms, introducing a distinctly *writerly* element to the increasingly intermingled Anglo-American genre SF tradition. Broderick acknowledges the significance of the New Wave using Barthes's terms when he suggests that US SF prior to the 1960s "was predominantly *empirical* or *readerly*: however gaudy or galactic its venue, you accepted what was on the page as if seeing it through clear glass," whereas the New Wave opened the genre to "radically *epistemological* or *writerly* invitation to endless interpretation."[114] Freedman points to New Wave author Delany as an example of this kind of SF, suggesting that "no other science-fictional text is, as Barthes might also say, more *writerly* … than [Delany's] *Stars in My Pocket [Like Grains of Sand]*."[115] It is this mode of SF that will be examined through engagement with Wolfe in chapter five. But well before the New Wave, writerly SF was already being produced beyond the popular and niche genre SF of the US, including Eastern European SF traditions which gave rise to Lem and Zamyatin. These examples of writerly SF, which stage encounters with a plural interpretive space and draw readers into the active co-creation of meaning,

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[114] Broderick, "New Wave and Backwash," 62.

[115] Freedman, *Critical Theory*, 164.

demonstrate the ethical potential of SF to disrupt totalisation and represent unknowable otherness more ethically. Before turning to ethics and the thesis's major case studies, however, I wish to touch briefly on two concepts closely related to literary form and the readerly-writerly spectrum, concepts that are particularly relevant to discussions of SF and its communities of practice, which will be important in the chapters ahead: inventiveness and pleasure.

2.5. Inventiveness and Pleasure

It is worth noting an important difference between the inventiveness, or newness, of ideas commonly found in SF and the more writerly inventiveness experienced in the more open, writerly examples from the wealth of SF traditions. Attridge observes that in some texts, "the author's creative labor is centered on the manipulation of ideas, the construction of arguments, the representation of existing entities in a new light, or the imagination of hitherto non-existent entities."[116] This appears an apt description of the dominant mode of SF—a "genre of ideas," as Milner describes it—which often brings something new to the reader through the description of hypothetical technologies or scientific developments, or through the exploration of otherworldly scenarios.[117] Indeed, SF has given rise to many significant ideas, from the anticipatory technological inventions of Jules Verne, to the

[116] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 107.

[117] Milner, *Locating Science Fiction*, 14.

possibilities of space travel and encounters with alien species common in pulp SF, to the challenges to gender norms present in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) and the anarchist utopianism of Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974).

Suvin, adapting a term used by Ernst Bloch, called such inventive ideas the text's *novum*, the "strange newness" introduced by a text.[118] Such ideas, he contended, had to be "*validated by cognitive logic*."[119] Suvin summarises his approach to the novum as follows:

> SF is distinguished by the narrative hegemony of a fictional yet cognitive novum—a term adapted from Bloch to mean a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied addressee's norm of reality. The (as yet) Unknown or Other introduced by the novum is the narrative's formal and cognitive *raison d'être* as well as the generator, validation and yardstick of its story or plot (*siuzhet*). … Born in history and judged in history, the novum has an ineluctably historical character. … Finally, the novum can be differentiated according to its degree of magnitude (from one discrete new 'invention' to a whole radically charged locus and agents), according to the cognitive believability of its

[118] Suvin, "On the Poetics," 58–59.

[119] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 63. Original emphasis.

> validation, and according to its degree of relevance for a given epoch and class of readers.[120]

It is significant, here, that for Suvin the SF narrative's "otherness" *is* its novum, and the aim of the SF author should be to domesticate this strange otherness by "connecting the addressee's Self with the Other [i.e. the novum]."[121] As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. notes, Suvin's "standard for determining whether a text is 'authentic' sf and worthy of consideration in literary history lies ultimately in its power to demystify."[122] This puts Suvin at odds with Bloch, for whom the Novum took on messianic and Utopian dimensions, extending into the realm of the irrational, a "transcendental tug" Suvin resists.[123] The reader's ability to comprehend and accommodate the SF text's novum is essential to Suvin's valuation of SF since the novum must, after all, be "cognitive."

Critics often point to the significance of this cognitive inventiveness—in the pulp SF tradition as a reason for its readerly predisposition and avoidance of experimental literary

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[120] Darko Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988), 76–77.

[121] Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions*, 77.

[122] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 51.

[123] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 51.

forms. In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Csicsery-Ronay indicates the dominance of this pulp aesthetic in US genre SF when he posits that:

> Because truly new conditions differ radically from consensus reality, they are usually embedded in familiar narrative frames in order to be intelligible. Some artistically ambitious works (Delany's *Dhalgren* … Russ's *The Female Man* … Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* …) stretch the frames to make storytelling technique embody the novum's disruptions. But most sf writers abide by the convention that the strangeness of one narrative element—character, setting, point of view, voice—requires others to be familiar, in order to have a stable ground against which the strange can come into relief. In terms of narrative framing, sf is a conservative genre in two respects. Its writers generally adhere to the conventions of epic world-building, and to the conventions of circumstantial realism, both of which depict the world as a relationship among objects and events externalized with respect to their agents.[124]

This kind of inventiveness takes centre stage in Stockwell's analysis of the aesthetics of genre SF, where he finds a "richness of world-building" that deploys unnecessary detail and description in the development of new ideas and "evocation of nonfactual worlds"—an SF version of Barthes's "reality effect," which describes the false sense of reality created by an increase of superfluous narrative detail, in this case deployed to make the novum and

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[124] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 82.

science-fictional world sufficiently *cognitive*.[125] The reception of Asimov's pulp SF demonstrates the emphasis placed on the inventiveness of ideas in the genre. Robert Scholes, for example, writes that although Asimov is "rarely more than adequate in the traditional literary qualities of style, plot, and characterization, he has been superior in the qualities peculiar to science fiction: the generation and extrapolation of ideas about the development of science and technology, along with the imagination of the human results of scientific developments."[126] Asimov's lack of literary inventiveness ultimately seems unimportant, given the ideas he developed in his writing.

The otherness that such inventiveness of ideas brings can, however, be learnt by the reader and accommodated into what Attridge calls their "idioculture"—their unique ideological, social and cultural constitution as a subject.[127] Once the idea has been comprehended, it is no longer experienced as inventive, so this aspect of the text does not introduce a sense of newness to the reader upon re-reading. Furthermore, as Russ notes,

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[125] Stockwell, *Aesthetics*, 44; Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 11–17. For Barthes, this impetus toward "useless detail" derived from the "tyrannical constraints of … aesthetic plausibility" required by the "imperatives of 'realism'" (12–14).

[126] Robert Scholes, Foreword to *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction*, by James Gunn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), ix.

[127] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 21, 67.

not all SF attempts to introduce something new nor aims at such inventiveness, even in the didactic SF characteristic of the pulps: "Of course didactic fiction does not always tell people something new," Russ writes, "often it tells them what they already know, and the re-telling becomes a reverent ritual, very gratifying to all concerned."[128] This gratification, of course, is founded in the comfort of the same, the pleasure of the familiar and the expected.

Thus we come to one of the cores of the SF reading experience, the element that creates so many avid fans and communities of practice, the kinds of pleasure that can be found in SF, and in the genre SF of the pulps in particular. To understand these kinds of pleasure, it is helpful to return to Barthes and consider his 1973 book *The Pleasure of the Text*, where he develops his distinction between readerly and writerly texts by exploring an erotics of reading. What Barthes refers to as the text of *plaisir* (usually translated simply as "pleasure," but connoting amusement and enjoyment) he associates with the pleasures of contentment and passivity and the comfort of the familiar. Barthes calls the text of *plaisir* "the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it," and thus finds it "linked to a comfortable practice of reading."[129] Like the readerly text, the text of *plaisir* is associated with the law of the signified and the mimetic

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[128] Russ, "Towards an Aesthetic," 114.

[129] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 14.

illusion of the classic realist text, being a "pleasure of pure representation."[130] And like the readerly text, it also takes on a dimension of commodification, reinforcing the consumerism of capitalist society. In US pulp SF, it is specifically a pleasure of consumption (consumption of ideas, of cognitively validated novums), presented in a comforting, non-threatening, easy-to-digest narrative form.

Given the emphasis Gernsback, Campbell, and other early figures of pulp SF placed on entertainment and amusement, it is unsurprising that pulp SF and its spiritual successors have traditionally aimed at eliciting pleasure of this kind—Barthes's pleasure of contentment. The principle source of this amusement is often the novum, the idea, which offers itself up for the reader's consumption. This is what makes the novum, a source of "imaginative pleasure," one of Csicsery-Ronay's seven beauties of SF: "For me," he writes, "the underlying satisfaction of the novum is not primarily critical analysis or utopian longing, but a vertiginous pleasure … in accommodating new relationships under controlled and friendly conditions."[131] It is in the accommodation, or cognition, of this novum in a comfortable narrative that Csicsery-Ronay finds pleasure. In his early description of SF, Suvin likewise associates the pleasure of reading SF specifically with cognition: "Once the elastic criteria of literary structure have been met, *a cognitive—in most cases strictly scientific—element becomes a measure of aesthetic quality, of the specific*

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[130] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 45.

[131] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 55.

pleasure to be sought in SF."[132] This kind of pleasure, which for Suvin is integral to SF, rests on the logico-temporal consistency of the readerly and the comfort of familiar forms of writing, without which this cognitive element could be challenged. It is incompatible with the literary inventiveness of the writerly. As John Huntington notes, formal conventions "offer the security of the recognizable and thereby cushion the impact of any new idea, of anything unknown," and the pulp SF fan's "pleasure" and "satisfaction" comes less from a text's "ingenuity, originality, or foresight," than from their reinforcement of a "sense of the genre," that is, their repetition of the (formally) familiar and conventional.[133] Alongside Zola and Proust, Barthes identifies Jules Verne as an author he can read with pleasure "for hours on end," but this, he notes, is not the kind of pleasure that comes from "the *absolutely new*, for only the new disturbs (weakens) consciousness."[134] Verne, an author revered by Gernsback and regularly published in *Amazing Stories*, certainly presented incredible new ideas in his tales of technological invention and exploration, but the literary form of his work was nonetheless strictly conventional.

There is another kind of inventiveness, concomitant with another kind of pleasure, more characteristic of the writerly text. For Attridge, the reader's experience of a literary

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[132] Suvin, "On the Poetics", 70–71. Original emphasis.

[133] John Huntington, "Science Fiction and the Future," *College English* 37, no. 4 (1975): 349, 352, https://www.jstor.org/stable/376232.

[134] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 40.

text as inventive is central to the literary event of singularity, that is, the reader's experience of an irreducible otherness or alterity in a given text. Attridge summarises his position as follows:

> The singularity of the literary work is produced not just by its difference from all other works, but by the new possibilities for thought and feeling it opens up in its creative transformation of familiar norms and habits: singularity is thus inseparable from *inventiveness*. And the singular inventiveness of the work is what constitutes its *otherness*—not as an absolute quality, but as one that is meaningful only in relation to a given context; otherness is always otherness *to* a particular self or situation.[135]

The otherness introduced by the text's inventiveness is experienced as a challenge to the reader's idioculture. In Attridge's terms, this is a distinctly *literary* inventiveness, one unique to written language and literary form, to be distinguished from other kinds of inventiveness, such as the cognitive inventiveness of the novum characteristic of most SF.[136]

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[135] Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee*, 11, original emphasis.

[136] Easterbrook recasts "literary" as "textual" in his essay on singularity in SF, avoiding the connotations of "literary" (as against versus "popular") fiction mentioned above. In the sense the word "literary" is used by Attridge, "textual" is a sound alternative capturing the nature of the inventiveness and singularity that is of interest. Neil Easterbrook, "Singularities," *Science Fiction Studies* 39, no. 1 (2012): 22–23, https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.39.1.0015.

Whereas the experience of new ideas in literature can be separated from the words that communicate them (the same ideas could be expressed in film, for example, or in a scientific report) and can in turn be learnt and accommodated by the reader, the experience of literary inventiveness, rich with writerly ambiguity and inseparable from the words through which it is encountered, resists such accommodation. Attridge notes that literary inventiveness is achieved by "destabilizing" available literary materials, "heightening their internal inconsistencies and ambiguities, exaggerating their proclivities, and exploiting their gaps and tensions, in such a way as to allow the otherness implicit in these materials—the otherness they exclude in order to be what they are—to make itself explicit."[137] Such inventiveness comes from heightening the *difference* of the text, as Barthes would use the term. Through such creative refiguring of existing literary forms and conventions, this inventiveness, as an encounter with otherness, is experienced as a "sense of newness and freshness" that refuses to be fully accommodated or integrated into the reader's idioculture.[138]

The writerly text—analogous to what Attridge terms the *literary* text—combines a creative labour centred on ideas and stories with an at least equally creative "selection and arrangement of words."[139] Attridge writes:

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[137] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 56.

[138] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 44.

[139] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 107.

> In these works, otherness and singularity arise from the encounter with the words themselves, their sequence, their suggestiveness, their patterning, their interrelations, their sounds and rhythms. To re-experience the otherness of a work of this type, it is not enough to recall the arguments made, the ideas introduced, the images conjured up; it is necessary to re-read or recall the words, in their created order. One way of saying this is that a creative achievement in the literary field is, whatever else it may be, a *formal* one.[140]

Such formal, literary inventiveness resists accommodation or totalisation as it harnesses the signifying potential of language to challenge the reader. In the writerly text, this inventiveness can be recognised in a utilisation of language that draws the reader into an interpretive space, challenging expectations of closure and comprehensibility and making the reader a co-creator of meaning.

The experience of such literary inventiveness can bring with it a distinctive kind of pleasure. Barthes holds in contrast to the text of *plaisir* the text of *jouissance*, which he associates with a rapturous, disruptive pleasure quite unlike the pleasure of contentment.[141] According to Barthes, the text of *jouissance* is characterised by discomfort—it unsettles "the

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[140] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 107. Original emphasis.

[141] In the English translation of *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Howard translates *jouissance* as "bliss," although this proves inadequate, as the French word has strong connotations of orgasm and rapture.

reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions."[142] The text of *jouissance* is also said to bring "to a crisis" the reader's "relation with language" by highlighting semiotic instability, or what Barthes calls "the sumptuous rank of the signifier."[143] Barthes's emphasis, here, on the play of the signifier over the law of the signified will recall his description of the writerly text—both the text of *jouissance* and the writerly text are said to empower the reader as the co-producer of meaning. He thus finds *jouissance* created through the text's introduction of newness or otherness to the reader, and his focus on literary form allows this to be identified as the experience of a distinctly literary inventiveness. Thus, it is in the encounter with irreducible, non-totalisable otherness that *jouissance* is to be found. Attridge calls this "the peculiar pleasure of the literary response" made possible by the "apprehension of otherness and in the demands it makes," as distinct from "the pleasure to be gained from new information, sensuous patterning, stirring of memory, moral exemplification, and so on."[144] In the literary inventiveness of the writerly text, readers are urged to find pleasure in the text's plurality of meaning, its resistance to reduction or totalisation, and the challenge it presents to the reader's idioculture.

It is worth noting that *The Pleasure of the Text* also sustains Barthes's distinction between different modes of reading, since the kinds of pleasure a reader can find in a text

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[142] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 14.

[143] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 14, 66.

[144] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 131.

are said to depend largely on how the text is read. Barthes draws the implicit binary opposition between texts of *plaisir* and texts of *jouissance* into question, just as he did with the neat divide between readerly and writerly texts, when he declares that the reader can find sites of *jouissance* even in the so-called text of pleasure.[145] This is due, first of all, to the inherent openness of language, which will always allow the reader to become lost in the play of the signifier. But Barthes also describes how this can happen through *tmesis*, when the reader breaks up the classic text during reading, creating their own tears and disruptions in the text (the kind of reading of Balzac that Barthes undertook in *S/Z*). Likewise, in the text of *jouissance* Barthes maintains that the reader may be unwilling or unable to find enjoyment in the sites of *jouissance* the text makes available. "Boredom," Barthes writes, "is not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure."[146] That is to say, unless the reader is willing to abandon, to some degree, the reading practice governed by the pleasure of contentment, they will find in the limitless play of the signifier only boredom or frustration. This certainly explains the reaction of many US pulp SF fans

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[145] The clear distinction between the two types of text is further disrupted through the instability of the erotic terminology Barthes develops in *The Pleasure of the Text*. As Barthes himself was eager to point out, his use of the word "pleasure" (*plaisir*) is inconsistent, sometimes referring specifically to the pleasure of contentment as distinct from (and opposed to) the rapturous pleasure of *jouissance*, and sometimes being used to encompass both kinds of pleasure. Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 19.

[146] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 26.

to the more writerly Anglo-American SF that emerged during the New Wave movement, which left unfulfilled their genre-based expectations for closure, consistency and cognition.

Indeed, genre SF communities of practice that valorise the pulps have historically been quite hostile to the kinds of literary inventiveness and pleasure valued by Attridge and Barthes. The more writerly form of much New Wave SF was met with opposition from some of the more traditional US SF writers of the day, who saw the soft science content, darker nihilistic attitudes and experimental literary forms as affronts to core genre traditions.[147] Lester del Rey, an SF author and editor who gained prominence in Campbell's *Astounding* during the "golden age," wrote a scathing critique of New Wave SF in which he derided its focus on "the handling of style and attitude, rather than in story development, plotting or ideas."[148] For del Rey, New Wave authors such as Ballard were "tossing out all the normal rules for crafting stories" in order to produce the kind of work "deemed worthy of study by professors" and, although such stories were favoured by "college-oriented readers," the genre's "older fans regarded it as a betrayal of the whole spirit of science

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[147] Rob Latham, "The New Wave," in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. David Seed (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 209–215.

[148] Lester del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926–1976: The History of a Subculture* (New York: Garland, 1980), 253.

fiction."[149] While New Wave authors were accused of betraying the ideas-focused tradition in favour of literary experimentation, they themselves accused pulp SF of lacking sophistication in style and form. The tensions that played out in the SF field throughout the 1960s and 1970s reveal the degree to which cognitive and literary invention—inventiveness of ideas and inventiveness of form—can come into conflict. Experimentation with open and disruptive literary forms presented a challenge to the kinds of didacticism and comfortable entertainment that had dominated pulp SF, as well as the tradition's epistemological foundations. Nevertheless, the literary inventiveness of the New Wave did change the SF field and by the 1980s open hostility toward more writerly texts was much less apparent. Although more readerly forms remain popular in genre fiction, SF texts can now be found throughout the readerly-writerly spectrum.

Wolfe benefitted from the openness introduced to Anglo-American SF traditions by the New Wave, with the inventiveness typically experienced by his readers tending toward the kind of literary inventiveness identified by Attridge, rather than the cognitive kind common in pulp SF. Although the reader can find in Wolfe's work science-fictional ideas,

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[149] Del Rey, *World of Science Fiction*, 253, 255, 257. This lament over the muddying of the so-called spirit of SF was an earlier version of the genre wars that have been carried out in SF fandom over the last few years, which will be discussed in detail in chapter five. Like these recent reactionary movements, however, this earlier protest was ultimately unable to prevent the opening up and diversification of popular SF.

such as multigenerational starships crafted from hollowed-out asteroids or artificial intelligences posing as powerful gods, and experience them as inventive (as new), these are ideas that can be accommodated and known. Most of them are also not entirely new, having their origins in pulp or "golden age" SF. As Clute writes: "It may be that Wolfe has never had an original sf idea, or never a significant one, certainly none of the calibre of those generated by writers like Larry Niven or Greg Bear. His importance does not reside in that kind of originality."[150] The inventiveness Wolfe's fiction introduces lies in his use of rich and complex language, his meticulous crafting of disruptive open texts and his creative reconfiguration of genre materials. By taking the ideas and concepts of SF and fantasy traditions and reworking them—taking them in new directions and challenging the straightforward readerly form in which they typically appear—Wolfe's writerly SF makes a distinctly literary inventiveness and singularity available to the reader. The experience of reading Wolfe, of experiencing the otherness foregrounded in his work, cannot be separated from the open literary form of his texts.

This chapter has explored the dominant literary forms of different SF traditions, focusing on the readerly predisposition of US pulp SF, considering how different SF texts can elicit different kinds of reading. The next chapter delves into Levinasian ethics to explore the distinctly ethical value that this literary inventiveness and approach to otherness can make possible. It is worth emphasising here, in closing, that the more

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[150] Clute, "Wolfe, Gene."

readerly works of SF can certainly hold value—in their communication of new and challenging ideas, for example, or in their moral arguments concerning technological development—but the ideas and lessons they impart can always be assimilated into the reader's idioculture, often leaving the reader's totalising predispositions unchallenged. The value of more writerly SF, to be explored in coming chapters through the work of Zamyatin and Wolfe, lies elsewhere. It is a distinctly *literary* value, created through a particular use of language and form. It is a value derived from the text's openness, its staging of an encounter with an irreducible plurality of meaning that cannot be assimilated by the reader or contained in a straightforward story. It is a value found in disrupting comfortable reading practices, challenging traditional readerly modes of mimetic representation, and drawing the reader into a critical and creative relationship with the text as a co-producer of meaning. It is, as I will demonstrate, a distinctly *ethical* value, principally for the text's resistance to totalisation and its staging of an encounter with otherness.

3. The Ethics of Science Fiction:

Totality and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* Trilogy

> Literary fascism exploits the totalizing tendencies implicit in literature itself and constitutes a technique or mode of fabrication, a form of fictionalizing or aestheticizing not just of literature but of politics as well, and the transformation of the disparate elements of each into organic, totalized *works of art*.[1]
>
> – David Carroll

The previous chapter explored the kinds of literary form that have dominated different SF traditions, from the distinctly readerly mode of US pulp SF, to the more writerly modes found in Eastern European and New Wave SF. This chapter returns to the core question of the thesis to ask whether SF's dominant themes and forms predispose it toward certain ethical orientations, focusing here on the US pulp tradition. The valuative framework at

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[1] David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 7.

play in Roland Barthes's poststructuralist literary theory forces us to ask what is valuable about writerly SF and the *jouissance* it can elicit, as well as what is at risk in the comfortable readings encouraged by more readerly SF. I will contend that this is, ultimately, a question of ethics and of our approach to the unknowable Other. It will therefore be necessary, over this chapter and the next, to consider in greater depth Levinas's approach to ethics, which guides this study and differs fundamentally from the moral or normative ethical frameworks that typically drive discussions of ethics and literature.

In this chapter, I will argue that US pulp SF was dominated by themes and modes of literary representation that can be described as *totalising*, in the negative sense afforded the term by Levinas. Through a robust engagement with Levinas's philosophy, I will explore the ethical dimension of this totalising tendency, which strives to reduce the universe, and all its human and non-human inhabitants, to fixed, finite and knowable concepts. Against this reductive, at times violent, totalisation, I will set Levinas's notion of infinity and the ethical encounter with the other person. Subsequent chapters will consider more fully the ethical potential of SF and the engagement with unknowability and the face-to-face encounter found in SF texts beyond the niche US genre pulps.

This chapter presents a close reading of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, which I will argue represents a powerful articulation of the scientific positivism and totalising tendencies that dominated US pulp SF. Originally published as a series of short stories and novellas in Campbell's *Astounding Science-Fiction* between 1942 and 1950, then re-worked

into the novels *Foundation* (1951), *Foundation and Empire* (1952), and *Second Foundation* (1953), Asimov's original trilogy is one of the most influential SF series of the pulp era. SF fans awarded it a one-off special Hugo Award for Best All-Time Series at the 1966 World Science Fiction Convention, cementing its position as one of the iconic series of SF's "golden age."[2] Its popularity also appears to be enduring, with The Folio Society issuing a fine slip-cased edition in 2012 (with an introduction by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman) and Apple commissioning a new TV adaptation for its streaming services in 2018.[3]

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[2] Asimov did not return to the *Foundation* series until some 30 years later, first with the sequels *Foundation's Edge* (1982) and *Foundation and Earth* (1986), then with the prequels *Prelude to Foundation* (1988) and *Forward the Foundation* (1993). As I am most interested, here, in the generic dispositions of the US SF pulps and their golden age, the scope of study is limited to the stories that appeared in the original trilogy. Although there were minor alterations in some of the stories between their original publications in *Astounding Science-Fiction* and their later release as novels, including, most significantly, the addition of a new opening story in *Foundation*, the 1950s novels are the most common and influential forms of the stories and remain distinctively "pulpish," adhering to the generic and aesthetic expectations of US pulp SF.

[3] Mike Fleming Jr. and Nellie Andreeva, "Apple Lands Isaac Asimov 'Foundation' TV Series From David Goyer & Josh Friedman," Deadline, April 10, 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/04/apple-isaac-asimov-foundation-tv-series-david-goyer-josh-friedman-skydance-1202361072/.

Williams describes cultural tradition as "a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors," and one could safely identify Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy as such an ancestor in the American SF tradition.[4] The series is also what Rieder might classify as a "boundary object" of the SF canon, since it satisfies the inclusion requirements of various SF communities of practice—including fandom, as evidenced by its receipt of a Hugo award and continued popularity, and certain academic circles, the series having been the subject of numerous studies by SF critics.[5] Alongside the positronic robot stories collected in *I, Robot* (1950, originally serialised 1940–1950) and its sequels, the *Foundation* trilogy sustains Asimov's position as one of the key figures of American SF's golden age.

Given the trilogy's enormous success, SF critics who engage with it are often forced to ask what led to, and indeed maintains, its enormous popularity. This question frames studies by James Gunn and Charles Elkins, for example, but even Asimov himself was forced to ask the question when re-reading the original trilogy in preparation for the first of his later sequels, *Foundation's Edge* (1982):

> I read [the *Foundation* trilogy] with mounting uneasiness. I kept waiting for something to happen, and nothing ever did. All three volumes, all the nearly quarter of a million words, consisted of thoughts and of conversations. No action. No physical suspense.

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[4] Williams, *Long Revolution*, 52.

[5] Rieder, *Science Fiction*, 30.

> What was all the fuss about, then? Why did everyone want more of that stuff?[6]

A fair question. Gunn argues that the series' success lies in its commitment to "rationalism," as evidenced in its posing, then solving, different problems.[7] Indeed, Asimov's stories do tend to focus strongly on what Barthes would identify as the hermeneutic code, or the code of the enigma in his analysis of Poe. Elkins, by contrast, attributes the series' success to the deterministic "concept of history" that drives the stories and gives them an unstoppable momentum toward an apparently utopian future.[8] Although there is an element of truth in each of these conclusions, I wish to propose another, not unrelated, answer: that the trilogy's success lies in readers' frequent attraction to its utopian vision of absolute totalisation—a vision of total cognitive domination over the Other and the systematic elimination of difference—realised in clear and straightforward readerly narrative form.

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[6] Isaac Asimov, "The Story behind the Foundation," *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (December 1982), http://www.pannis.com/SFDG/TheFoundationTrilogy/theStoryBehindTheFoundation.html.

[7] James Gunn, *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 28, 44–45.

[8] Charles Elkins, "Isaac Asimov's 'Foundation' Novels: Historical Materialism Distorted into Cyclical Psycho-History," *Science Fiction Studies* 3, no. 1 (1976): 28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/i394134.

I begin this chapter by examining the concept of totality in Levinas's writing, exploring his critique of totalisation and introducing related concepts, including the ethical significance of the face-to-face encounter with the other person and their absolute alterity. I will then turn to Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy as an example of this totalising project finding a utopian expression in US pulp SF, focusing on the series' key themes and over-arching storyline, including its representation of Hari Seldon's "psychohistory." Here, the question of politics resurfaces, as the totalising orientation of the *Foundation* trilogy contributes to its repetition of unsettling fascist tropes, thereby highlighting the ethical risks of accepting, uncritically, a genre's totalising tropes, themes, and literary modes. The chapter will then shift focus to ethics and literary form, moving into a consideration of Levinas's ambiguous attitude toward art and literature, focusing on his early condemnation of art and artistic enjoyment, including literature and the reading of novels. Scrutinising this negativity, I contend that Levinas does not argue against literature *per se*, as more simplistic interpretations of his work would suggest, but against a totalising mode of writing (and the mode of reading it encourages) that can be recognised as readerly. These observations are then related back to the dominant literary form of US pulp SF as embodied in the *Foundation* trilogy. I will argue that Asimov's straightforwardly "pulpish" mode of representation ultimately supports and reinforces the totalising approach of the trilogy.

The next chapter will further develop the thesis's ethical framework by considering how Levinas's approach to literature changes, largely through his engagement with Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, allowing him to recognise, and even practice, more ethical modes of writing and reading.[9] What becomes apparent in these chapters is the need to use poststructuralist literary theory to inform the reading of Levinas, particularly given his sometimes-conflicted writings on art and literature. I will contend that Barthes's reader-centred theories, particularly his distinctions between readerly and writerly, *plaisir* (or "pleasure") and *jouissance*, can facilitate a helpful rearticulation of Levinas's approach to literature and its ethical potential.

3.1. The Critique of Totality: Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*

Levinas's writings are founded on a powerful critique of totalisation and the philosophical primacy of ontology. This, Levinas insists, is in turn a critique of the very history of Western philosophy, which he regards as being dominated by "an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experiences, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaving nothing other outside of itself, and thus

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[9] The impact of Derrida and Blanchot on Levinas's thought will be considered in the next chapter. See also: Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (3rd ed., 2014) and William Large's *Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing* (2005).

becomes absolute thought."[10] It is also, we find, a critique with significant implications for certain SF traditions, including US pulp SF, that rest on such notions of universal synthesis.

In totalisation, according to Levinas, everything that is other is, through comprehension, stripped of its alterity in order to become known and integrated into the same. Indeed, this is the ego exercising its very freedom: "The process of cognition is … identified with the freedom of the knowing being encountering nothing which, other with respect to it, could limit it."[11] Freedom, here, is precisely the freedom of the self to assert power over the other through cognition; it is thereby a freedom from responsibility or obligation to or for the other. Levinas attributes the priority placed on this freedom to G. W. F. Hegel, whose theory of dialectics brought the search for an objective conceptual totality to the forefront of Western philosophical traditions.[12] This comprehension of the other by the ego, this reduction of the other to the same, can only be done by way of a third or neutral term, such as a concept that can (ostensibly) encompass the other. One can look around a room, for example, and comprehend the things in it by way of concepts, such as *chair* and *desk*. These things offer little resistance to such conceptual domination and thus

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[10] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 75.

[11] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 42.

[12] Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 78.

we have an adequation between the thought (*chair*) and the object (the thing on which one sits).

In his analysis of this project of totalisation, Levinas often refers to Edmund Husserl's transcendental idealism, particularly his notion of intentionality, which Levinas identifies as "one of the culminating points in Western philosophy."[13] Levinas finds in Husserl's intentionality a dependence on intelligibility and the "total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought, in which the object's resistance as an exterior being vanishes."[14] In his critique of Husserl, Levinas highlights the "privilege of representation" established in this intentionality, which strives to comprehend and master every other.[15] "This mastery is total," he writes, "it is accomplished as a giving of meaning: the object of representation is reducible to noemata."[16] Importantly, it is in this reduction to a concept, a *noemata*, that the other loses its alterity: "Intelligibility, the very occurrence of representation, is the possibility for the other to be determined by the same without determining the same,

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[13] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 78.

[14] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 123–124.

[15] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 122.

[16] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 124.

without introducing alterity into it."[17] The other's alterity is thus "dissolved" in the concept, or generality, through which it is identified, becoming an integrated part of a totality.[18]

This critique of totalisation also guides Levinas's engagement with Martin Heidegger, which is sustained throughout his oeuvre. According to Levinas, Heidegger's "*Being and Time* has argued perhaps but one sole thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being."[19] That is to say, no relation can be free from comprehension and mastery, which has already begun upon every encounter with an object or other (an existent), thus making ontology, the comprehension of Being, the first philosophy. As Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*: "The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same."[20] This philosophical primacy of ontology finds no resistance in the world of things: "things do not resist the ruses of thought," Levinas affirms, "and confirm the philosophy of the same, without ever putting into question the freedom of the I."[21] Things offer themselves up freely

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[17] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 124.

[18] Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 50.

[19] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.

[20] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45–46.

[21] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 50.

to the domination of comprehension and totalisation, allowing the ego to maintain its power, its freedom. But Levinas then asks whether this is also true of people, of the human *Other*, and here his powerful critique of ontology takes form.

Against ontology and totalisation Levinas posits metaphysics and the idea of infinity. According to Levinas, "the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea."[22] This guarantees the externality of the infinite, which always remains infinitely distant from the finitude of its idea, eternally separated from the ego that attempts to think it. In the idea of infinity, the adequation that usually holds between the thing and its mental image breaks down—the distance between the infinite and its idea is beyond all adequation, becoming non-adequation *par excellence*. Because of this disruption of the usual processes of representation and intelligibility, the idea of infinity presents an "ethical resistance" to the "imperialism of the same."[23]

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that the idea of infinity is engendered in the ego by the face of the other person, which "at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me."[24] The face, here, is not to be conceived of as simply a physical object, reducible to the skin one can see and touch. Rather, the face is every aspect of the other's countenance and speech, their very presence; it is the expression that can always

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[22] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 49.

[23] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 55.

[24] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50–51.

surprise and thus exceeds "the idea of the other in me."[25] The face can always break apart any image that can be formed of it, since it can never be completely predictable or fully known. "The face is present in its refusal to be contained," Levinas writes, "it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed."[26] It is the other person's "dimension of interiority," expressed in the face, that "declines the concept and withstands totalization."[27] Thus, as Diane Perpich stresses, the face is necessarily beyond all representation: "*there is simply no way to do justice to the singularity of a face in a description*," and the transcendence of the face points to the "*inadequacy of every representation to the singularity of the other who faces me*."[28] This critique of representation, we will see, has significant implications for discussions of literature and literary representation, particularly when it comes to SF traditions that extend a scientific positivism to the encounter with the Other. The face-to-face encounter with the other person becomes central to Levinas's philosophy, since in this encounter that calls the freedom of the ego into question. As Jill Robbins explains, the face-to-face encounter "interrupts the self's habitual economy and its tendency to conceive of

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[25] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51.

[26] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

[27] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 57.

[28] Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 47, 49. Original emphasis.

the world as a space of possibilities and power. … It interrupts the play of the Same."[29] The face's resistance to conceptualisation is, in turn, the other person's resistance to totalisation, which challenges the ego's powers of mastery.

Ethics, for Levinas, originates in this calling into question of the individual's totalising powers. The other person, the Other, in the face-to-face encounter becomes "the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself."[30] According to Levinas, the primordial discourse of the face of the Other is experienced as an ethical command: "thou shalt not kill."[31] "The face speaks," Levinas writes, "the manifestation of the face is already discourse."[32] Hence Levinas begins referring to the Other as the interlocutor. As Robbins explains, this ethical command is "a discourse before discourse," insofar as it is "'prior' to

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[29] Jill Robbins, "*Visage, Figure*: Reading Levinas's *Totality and Infinity,*" *Yale French Studies*, no. 79 (1991): 137.

[30] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

[31] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 87. In the desire to murder, Levinas argues, the face's resistance to totalisation—a "total resistance without being a force"—is mistaken for a forceful resistance and interpreted as a threat. The primordial discourse attributed to the face is said to be experienced as a command prohibiting this murder. See, in particular, the essay "Freedom and Command" in: Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 19.

[32] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 66.

language understood as an exchange of signs."[33] According to Levinas, the face's command against murder gives the face its "height"—"as if a master spoke to me"—and in its engendering of the idea of infinity, the face, "inasmuch as it is welcomed," *teaches* by bringing "more than I contain."[34] And yet the face simultaneously reveals "the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself."[35] This vulnerability and destitution drives a call to responsibility to and for the other person—"The stranger, the widow, and the orphan," to use the biblical terms Levinas prefers.[36] The responsible, ethical response to this encounter "takes the irreducible Other into account," acknowledging their "absolute singularity" as "unrepresentable."[37] "To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger," Levinas writes, "is hence not to think an object."[38] Such a response to the other person would mark a break from the adequation of intentional thought and ontology as first philosophy. It would also shake the foundations of literary traditions that are dominated by such instrumentalist and ontological ways of thinking.

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[33] Robbins, "*Visage, Figure*," 138.

[34] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51.

[35] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 83.

[36] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

[37] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47; Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 116.

[38] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 49.

For Levinas, language is central to the ethical response to the primordial discourse delivered by the face of the other, which urges one to speak, to offer part of one's own "world"—what Attridge refers to as an individual's "idioculture"—to the other in an initial act of "generosity." As Levinas asserts, we are "incapable of approaching the other with empty hands."[39] He contends that it is only through language, through speech, that we can enter a social relation with this irreducible Other while allowing both terms to remain autonomous with respect to one another. Only language can maintain the other as Other: "language accomplishes a relation … such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same."[40] Levinas contrasts this mode of encountering the other, *language*, to the totalising and representational approach of *vision*, which would immobilise the other, and their face, in a static image. As we will see, this particular approach to language and discourse greatly privileges the spoken word over the written word, since the former implies proximity to the Other and the expressivity of the face, while the latter is, as Levinas sees it, discourse concretised and operating within a system of signs. In his later essays, however, Levinas significantly alters his approach to writing and rearticulates this understanding of language in terms of the Saying and the Said, concepts I will explore more fully in the next chapter.

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[39] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

[40] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

Throughout his work, Levinas explores the ethical ramifications of the absolute alterity of the other person. Herein lies Levinas's objection to Husserl's intentionality, Heidegger's ontology and the Western philosophical tradition they represent: when intelligibility through representation is taken as "the incontestable model," we find that "the whole of human lived experience" is reduced to fixed concepts, "converted into accepted doctrine, teachings, sciences."[41] Levinas therefore questions the primacy Husserl attributes to the objectifying act: "intentionality," he writes, "does not define consciousness at its fundamental level."[42] Likewise, Levinas attacks Heidegger's privileging of ontology, which depends upon the "supremacy of the same over the other."[43] For Levinas, ontology as first philosophy amounts to an affirmation of "the primacy of freedom over ethics," wherein freedom consists of maintaining "oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I."[44] Levinas argues that such an elevation of freedom makes Heidegger's a "philosophy of power" and of "injustice," since "thematization and conceptualization … are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other."[45] In such a philosophy, the human other is no longer maintained

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[41] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 77.

[42] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 27.

[43] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 51.

[44] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45–46.

[45] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.

"in the inexpungable fortress of its singularity," but is reduced to a generality, becoming only "a theme and an object."[46] As Levinas states: "The objective totality remains exclusive of every other."[47] The alterity and exteriority of the absolutely singular Other is thus suppressed, and this, according to Levinas, is an act of violence.

Totalisation has, as Levinas notes, dominated Western philosophy—"the primacy of the same," he writes, "marks the direction of and defines the whole of Western philosophy"—and with terrible consequences.[48] Such a conclusion was prefigured in his 1934 essay "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," where he warns against "the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself."[49] Levinas explores the political implications of this dominant mode of Western philosophy more fully in his later works, including *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence* (1981), which Howard Caygill describes as "works of mourning for the victims of National Socialism."[50]

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[46] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 50.

[47] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 221.

[48] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.

[49] Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," trans. Seán Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990), 63, https://doi.org/10.1086/448574.

[50] Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), 32. Levinas dedicates *Otherwise than Being* "to the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated

Haunted by the legacy of the Holocaust, these works draw a line from totalising philosophy that privileges ontology, to fascist politics and oppression of the Other. Nowhere is this clearer than in Levinas's comments on Heidegger, who as well as being one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, was a member of the Nazi Party from 1933 until the end of the war. "Heideggerian ontology," writes Levinas in one of his bolder attacks, "leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny."[51] Indeed, the "imperialism of the same," which dominates Heidegger's philosophy of being, is said to have determined "the whole Western civilization of property, exploitation, political tyranny, and war."[52] The relationship between totalisation and war is emphasised in Levinas's preface to *Totality and Infinity*: "The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy."[53] Although he does not write about political praxis at length, there is an undeniable political edge to Levinas's writings on ethics that connects the violence of totalising approaches to the other to fascism, imperialism, tyranny and war. Ethics and politics are inextricably linked, and thus

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by the national socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism." Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1981), v.

[51] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46–47.

[52] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 53.

[53] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21.

we find that the ethical predispositions of different generic traditions and literary forms carry with them significant political implications.

Against ontology and totalisation, Levinas posits ethics, or metaphysics, as first philosophy. He finds, in the face-to-face encounter with the other person, a non-intentionality—the idea of infinity—that precedes all representational acts of intentional consciousness and thus challenges the self's powers of totalisation. Prior to intentionality and the comprehension of being, Levinas finds a primordial social experience that places the individual's freedom in question and calls them to responsibility. This ethical encounter with the Other will be the focus of the next chapter and its close reading of Zamyatin's *We*.

In closing this section, it should be noted that Levinas is by no means the only philosopher or critic to have challenged the totalising approaches that have dominated Western philosophy. Take, for example, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School, who by-and-large adopted an approach to Marxism that ran contrary to its more totalising strains.[54] Or take Barthes and Derrida, who likewise challenged the totalising aspects of structuralism and classical hermeneutics in their poststructuralist and deconstructive writings. Levinas himself acknowledges that his thinking on totalisation was greatly influenced by Franz Rosenzweig, whose "radical critique of totality" was the first he

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[54] C. Fred Alford, "The Opposite of Totality: Levinas and the Frankfurt School." *Theory and Society* 31, no. 2 (2002): 229, https://www.jstor.org/stable/658110.

had encountered.[55] Each of these theorists, however, comes at the problem of totalisation and the imperialism of the same differently. Levinas's philosophy stands out in its powerful articulation of the dangers of totalisation, as well as its foundation in intentionality and the intelligibility of representation, while challenging this in a powerful new approach to ethics.

3.2. Totalising Themes and Politics in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* Trilogy

Resonances between the totalising tendencies Levinas critiques and the dominant thematic and formal concerns of US pulp SF run deep. Recall Clute's "essential assumptions" of the US pulp SF tradition: that the world and the others with whom we share it can be fully and accurately represented by words; and that the world and these others do, in the end, have a comprehensible story.[56] This two-fold belief that the other is fundamentally knowable and representable reflects pulp SF's overriding scientific positivism, which accepts only empirical scientific knowledge and seeks to force such "hard" closure and cognition into reflections on philosophy and the social sciences. It is founded on a faith in the possibility of a universal scientific synthesis that results in a generic disposition toward totalising themes and ideas. As indicated in the previous chapter, this is in turn reflected in the US pulp SF tradition's tendency toward readerly narratives and models of reading. Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy provides a clear example of these totalising forces at work in US pulp

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[55] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 78; cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 28.

[56] Clute, "Fabulation."

SF, while highlighting the influence that genre norms and magazine editors often exerted over SF narratives and the troubling politics that could find expression as a result.

Set in the distant future, the *Foundation* trilogy chronicles the decline and fall of a galaxy-wide empire and the struggles for power and survival that follow. It focuses primarily on a Foundation of scientists, established on the galaxy's periphery by Hari Seldon, intended to survive the Galactic Empire's collapse and greatly reduce the duration of the ensuing "dark ages." According to Seldon's plan, this First Foundation would eventually work with a Second Foundation—the nature and location of which is shrouded in mystery—to establish an even more powerful and far-reaching Second Empire.

Seldon can predict and manipulate events on a galactic scale through his mastery of *psychohistory*, a discipline that transforms psychology and the social sciences into empirical sciences governed by mathematical laws. Psychohistory allows Seldon to foresee the Empire's collapse and plan a way for his foundations to weather the tumultuous centuries ahead and preserve the Empire's scientific knowledge. "The future isn't nebulous," we are told, "it's been calculated out by Seldon and charted."[57] The *Foundation* stories are at pains to emphasise the concreteness and objectivity of psychohistory, which it defines as "*that branch of mathematics which deals with the reactions of human conglomerates to fixed social and economic stimuli … [under] the assumption that the human conglomerate being dealt*

[57] Isaac Asimov, *Foundation* (London: Granada, 1960), 80.

with is sufficiently large for valid statistical treatment."[58] The individual is thus erased entirely from the mathematical formulae that comprise psychohistory. Following Kingsley Amis, Brooke-Rose contends that in genre SF the hero of the story is usually its novum, rather than its protagonist.[59] This holds true for the *Foundation* trilogy, where psychohistory is both its central novum and its hero. The protagonist changes between each of the nine stories collected in the trilogy, and although Seldon is mentioned throughout, he only appears as a living character in one of them.[60] Instead, it is psychohistory that comes to the rescue to solve the problems characters face or provide the answers they seek.

The *mathematical* nature of psychohistory is a recurring theme of the series, serving to emphasise the objectivity and purity of the discipline. Unlike disciplines in the humanities or social sciences, mathematics (as invoked in the *Foundation* trilogy) is not open to interpretation—it offers a certainty that language and philosophy cannot. Take, for example, the following description from the final story in the trilogy:

> Psychohistory had been the development of mental science, the final mathematicization thereof, rather, which had finally succeeded. Through the

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[58] Asimov, *Foundation*, 16. Original emphasis.

[59] Brooke-Rose, *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 80.

[60] Seldon is, however, the protagonist of Asimov's two *Foundation* prequels, *Prelude to Foundation* (1988) and *Forward the Foundation* (1993)

> development of the mathematics necessary to understand the facts of neural physiology and the electro-chemistry of the nervous system, which themselves had to be, *had* to be, traced down to nuclear forces, it first became possible to truly develop psychology. And through the generalization of psychological knowledge from the individual to the group, sociology was also mathematicised.[61]

In *The Religion of Science Fiction*, Frederick A. Kreuziger observes that "the sacred language of mathematics … lies at the heart of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy," pervading the series' "concept of history" and being used as a language of "inevitability."[62] This deference to mathematics was by no means particular to Asimov's work—it is no surprise that Godwin's "The Cold Equations" (*Astounding Science-Fiction*, 1954), in which the mathematical formulae of physics are shown to overrule any strictly human values of compassion or morality and justify the execution of a young woman, has become a staple of the US pulp SF milieu and the "hard SF" tradition.[63] More nuanced handlings of mathematics can be found in other SF texts, including Zamyatin's *We* which, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, explores the complex relationship between mathematics and the world, including the former's dependence on abstract concepts such as imaginary

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[61] Isaac Asimov, *Second Foundation* (London: Granada, 1964), 84. Original emphasis.

[62] Frederick A. Kreuziger, *The Religion of Science Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986), 38.

[63] Cramer, "Hard Science Fiction," 189; Vint and Bould, "There Is No Such Thing," 43.

numbers. The deployment of the concept of mathematics in the *Foundation* trilogy is much more basic, however, being used to reinforce the certainty, objectivity, purity and (on full display in the quote above) finality of psychohistory—something Seldon refers to as his "*little algebra of humanity*."[64]

The powers of psychohistory are demonstrated in the series' earlier stories: each time the Foundation faces a crisis, such as invasion by neighbouring kingdoms, we find that the threat was anticipated by Seldon, who orchestrated events such that the Foundation would be victorious. An apparent caveat to the powers of psychohistory is that it "cannot predict the future of a single man with any accuracy," but even this is undermined throughout the series.[65] In "The Psychohistorians," the story written in 1951 to open *Foundation*, Seldon demonstrates that his proficiency with psychohistory is so great that he can accurately predict (and manipulate) the actions of the judge who hears his case when he's on trial for causing civil unrest, as well as those of the story's protagonist, Gaal. In the right hands, the powers of psychohistory would seem to be limitless. It thus represents an idealised freedom of the ego, in the Levinasian sense, allowing the individual to develop a mathematically pure cognitive synthesis that no human other can resist.

In "The Mule," however, Seldon's plan seems to unravel when a mutant with psionic powers of mind manipulation begins a campaign of galactic domination, eventually

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[64] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 82. Original emphasis.

[65] Asimov, *Foundation*, 22.

seizing control of the Foundation.[66] A holographic recording of Seldon, played to the leaders of the Foundation during the invasion, reveals that he had not predicted this precise turn of events. The nature of this tyrant—the Mule—is significant: since his powers are the result of a random genetic mutation, he is apparently "beyond calculation" in ways that ordinary human beings are not.[67] In the trilogy's final volume, however, the Mule is ultimately undone by Seldon's Second Foundation, to which there had been only passing references in the earlier stories. The Second Foundation, we learn, was established as a foundation of psychohistorians who would operate in secret to monitor the progress of Seldon's plan and re-work his psychohistorical equations as new data comes to light. After defeating the Mule, they use their psychohistorical prowess to manipulate individual members of the First Foundation and fade once again into obscurity, allowing them to quietly maintain Seldon's plan until the Second Empire is formed. Even the most unique and unexpected individual—the Mule—is ultimately unable to stand in the way of Seldon's plan.

The deterministic nature of psychohistory, which may allow a certain freedom to its practitioners but strips freedom from those subject to it, has seen it likened to a vulgar form of Marxism. Some strains of Marxism sought to expose the immutable laws governing socioeconomic development, often maintaining that the totality of social relations could be

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[66] Collected in Isaac Asimov, *Foundation and Empire* (London: Granada, 1962).

[67] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 163.

understood in terms of class relations. Georg Lukács, while not being one of the most deterministic Marxists, articulated the importance of totalisation for Marxism thus: "The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science. … *The primacy of the category of totality is the bearer of the principle of revolution in science.*"[68] Whereas totalisation has unavoidably negative implications for Levinas and many poststructuralist thinkers, for certain strains of Marxism it is seen as an essential concept for scientifically mapping social and economic structures. Donald Wollheim thus posits that "psychohistory is the science that Marxism never became," while Andrew Milner and Robert Savage note that "Marx's scientific socialism, yet another model for psychohistory, seems merely amateurish by comparison."[69] Elkins

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[68] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Merlin Press, 1967), chapter 2, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/ch02.htm.

[69] Donald A. Wollheim, *The Universe Makers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 40-41; Milner and Savage, "Pulped Dreams," 38. Wollheim suggests that this Marxist element was intentional on Asimov's part: "I conjecture that Asimov took the basic premise of Marx and Engels, said to himself that there was a point there [i.e. in Marxism]—that the movements of the human mass must be subject to the laws of motion and interaction, and that a science could be developed based upon mathematics and utilizing all the known data—millions and millions of variables certainly!—that would be what Marxism thought it was and never could be."

suggests that it is this concept of history as governed by "definite laws"—laws that "cannot only be made intelligible but can give insight into the course of future historical events"—that gives both the *Foundation* trilogy and classical Marxism their sense of wonder.[70]

Although Marxists of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor Adorno, tended to be more critical of the notion of totality and the reductive aspects of "scientific socialism," the Marxism that most widely circulated in 1930s and 1940s America followed a more totalising and deterministic strain—what Elkins calls "the vulgar, mechanical, debased version of Marxism."[71] Elkins argues that Asimov "takes this brand of Marxism to its logical end," resulting in both a "pervading fatalism" and a cynical resentment of the proletarian masses, who must always remain ignorant of Seldon's plan.[72] This is demonstrated in "The Encyclopedists," where it is revealed that although Seldon established the First Foundation with the ostensible goal of creating a galactic encyclopedia that would record all human knowledge, this was only a ruse to facilitate his manipulation of multiple generations of scientists. When a hologram of Seldon appears for the first time some fifty years after the Foundation's founding, it is with incredible coldness that he declares that the encyclopedia project, at which the Foundation's scientists have worked tirelessly, was "entirely fraudulent" and that he does not care whether "a single volume of the Encyclopaedia is ever

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[70] Elkins, "Isaac Asimov's 'Foundation' Novels," 29.

[71] Elkins, "Isaac Asimov's 'Foundation' Novels," 31.

[72] Elkins, "Isaac Asimov's 'Foundation' Novels," 34.

published," since its purpose was only to keep the scientists occupied so they "no longer have freedom of action."[73] Seldon's freedom to assert power over others, realised through the cognitive totality of psychohistory, does not allow the Other to retain their alterity or autonomy, reducing them to simple cogs in a finely tuned machine. The First Foundation also engages in this kind of mass manipulation of others, as when Salvor Hardin uses a fraudulent science-based religion, developed by the Foundation, to manipulate people on other planets into subservience. As Jari Käkelä notes, "the Foundationers are so preoccupied with achieving control that their ethics of treating those to be saved frequently becomes utilitarian at best."[74] Le Guin might well have had *Foundation* in mind when she wrote that when "the people" appear in pulp SF, they are only "masses, existing for one purpose: to be led by their superiors."[75] If some form of Marxism is at play here, it would

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[73] Asimov, *Foundation*, 64. The ostensible idea behind the encyclopedia—setting down in words all human knowledge—can be recognised as another totalising endeavour, and one that eventually gets realised, as we know from reading excerpts from the *Encyclopedia Galactica* throughout the novels.

[74] Jari Käkelä, "Foundations of Guardianship: Social Engineering and Individual Freedom in Asimov's Foundation Series," in *Critical Insights: Isaac Asimov*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Amenia, NY: Grey House, 2017) 82.

[75] Ursula K. Le Guin, "American SF and the Other," *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979), 98. "The only social

appear to be one that detests the working class and is resolutely authoritarian—hence Suvin identifying Asimov's psychohistory as "a poor man's version of 'vulgar Marxism'" and Carl Freedman calling it a "deterministic pseudo-Marxism."[76]

Whereas the pre-determined end-point of history from certain Marxist perspectives is global communism, Seldon's anticipated utopia is a new galaxy-wide empire. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that another strand of criticism has found an altogether different kind of politics at work in the *Foundation* trilogy, recognising many of the tropes and dispositions of fascism and the far-right. Donald M. Hassler, for example, suggests that Asimov's early work might have been unwittingly influenced by "fascist propaganda with its colorful art deco and its grand notions of the heroic and the large futurism of Empire and dominance," and that the *Foundation* trilogy is haunted by "echoes of the Third Reich."[77] Likewise, when reviewing *Foundation's Edge*, David Langford detects more than a trace of revisionism, suggesting that Asimov struggled with "certain implications of his original

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change presented by most [American] SF," she continues, "has been toward authoritarianism, the domination of ignorant masses by a powerful elite" (99).

[76] Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions*, 78–79; Freedman, *Critical Theory*, 70.

[77] Donald M. Hassler, "Skepticism, Belief, and Asimov," *Extrapolation* 40, no. 1 (1999): 3, ProQuest; Donald M. Hassler, "Isaac Asimov: The Complexity of Nature and Fannish Politics in the Galactic Empire," in *Critical Insights: Isaac Asimov*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Amenia, NY: Grey House, 2017), 75.

trilogy being slightly distasteful" and ultimately sounding "rather like fascism."[78] Frederick A. Kreuziger, meanwhile, has described the original trilogy quite bluntly as "elitist, fascist, sexist and mercenary."[79]

This underlying fascistic inflection, unsettling the work of an otherwise anti-fascist author, is the result of a text philosophically committed to totalisation and written within the politically and socially regressive traditions of US pulp SF. Aaron Santesso argues that fascist politics underlie much of this vein of SF, as "certain foundational tropes and traditions of the genre carry the DNA of fascism … to the extent that even liberal, progressive authors working within the genre's more refined strains often (inadvertently) employ fascistic tropes and strategies."[80] Among the tropes Santesso identifies are: the fear of alien invasion, which thinly veils nationalism and fear of the other; a militaristic inflection, coming through preoccupation with advanced weaponry and war; the presence of a heroic "strongman" leader, reflecting Nietzsche's "Übermensch"; an overarching glorification of masculinity; and a utopian technological optimism that suggests scientific progress will solve all our problems, rendering social change unnecessary.

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[78] David Langford, "Mystic Star and Psychohistorian Reborn," *New Scientist*, February 24, 1983, 540, https://books.google.com/books?id=dGloQlpCO_4C&pg=PA540.

[79] Kreuziger, *Religion of Science Fiction*, 38.

[80] Santesso, "Fascism and Science Fiction," 139.

A critical reading of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy reveals the extent to which these tropes permeate the stories. The fear of the other, for example, is embodied in the Mule, who is dangerous *because* of his difference—his mutation. Were he not a mutant—had the genetic purity of the human race been maintained—there would not have been an even temporary disruption to Seldon's plan. This theme of genetic purity is closely connected to the fascist trope of the master race, which also pervades the trilogy. Seldon is said to have selected the "youngest" and "strongest" individuals to populate his foundations and "breed" accordingly.[81] This rhetoric is intensified when we are properly introduced to the psychohistorians of the Second Foundation as "a higher subdivision of Man" that is "inherently able" to master the complex mathematics of psychohistory.[82] Although those of the Second Foundation are referred to as "supermen" in the series, there is a greater and more powerful scientific "superman" at work throughout the series, the infallible Hari Seldon.[83] As the founder of the Foundations, perfecter of psychohistory, and manipulator of events on a galactic scale, Seldon is worshipped across the galaxy, his name even coming to

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[81] We are told that Seldon established "Foundations of the best, and the youngest, and the strongest, there to breed, grow, and develop." Asimov, *Foundation and Empire*, 14.

[82] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 89.

[83] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 167.

stand in for "God"—"for Seldon's sake," characters awkwardly proclaim.[84] The dearth of female characters in the series reflects US pulp SF's masculinism: there are no female characters in the first six Foundation stories, and the women introduced later (Bayta Darell and Arkady Darell) do little to compensate for the complete absence of women in positions of power or influence in the Foundations, which remain resolutely patriarchal.[85] Then there is the ultimate, utopian goal of Seldon and his Foundations: the establishment of an even more powerful and far-reaching Second Empire, which would achieve total galactic domination under Foundation rule. Given the centrality of imperialism, authoritarianism, master races, and god-like "supermen" to the series, it is unsurprising that critics have long pointed to its fascist overtones.

No doubt Asimov would have been horrified by the suggestion that his work shares ideas and philosophical orientations with fascism. Born into a Russian-Jewish family that

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[84] Asimov, *Foundation*, 152. Seldon's own significance would seem to belie psychohistory's assumption that history is determined by masses, not individuals. As Milner and Savage note, psychohistory is "predicated on the statistical irrelevance of individual agency," yet Seldon's plan is itself "the work of an individual agent, a god-scientist whose unparalleled insight into the dynamics of socioeconomic relations has endowed him with unparalleled power to change them." Milner and Savage, "Pulped Dreams," 38.

[85] The ultimate significance of Bayta and Arkady to the narrative derives, we discover, from their having been manipulated by (the men of) the Second Foundation, undercutting their autonomy.

emigrated to the US when he was a boy, he was, in fact, quite left-leaning and progressive both politically and socially, and his memoirs demonstrate his disdain for fascism. As a teenager in Brooklyn, he joined the New York Futurians, an anti-fascist fan organisation that wanted to recruit SF for a broader leftist political movement. Counting among their members several high-profile SF authors, such as Wollheim, Frederik Pohl, and Cyril Kornbluth, the Futurians wanted to rid pulp SF of its fascist dispositions, including its militarism, nationalism, heroic strongmen, and uncritical technological utopianism.[86] Asimov, however, was the only Futurian to be published in Campbell's *Astounding Science-Fiction*, and here we reach the root of the problem: the *Foundation* series was heavily

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[86] The Futurians formed in 1937. At a science fiction convention that year, Wollheim read a speech, written by fellow Futurian Johnny Michel, drawing attention to fascist leanings in the SF pulps, denouncing this dominant political strain as "the Gernsback Delusion." This speech was not well received by many pulp SF fans in attendance. The tensions in SF fandom reached a crescendo in New York City in 1939, when the Futurians were barred entry from the first World Science Fiction Convention by its convenors, Sam Moskowitz, William S. Sykora and James V. Taurasi. Notably, Asimov was permitted to enter and spent the conference making professional connections and talking to Campbell. See: Milner and Savage, "Pulped Dreams," 37–38; Isaac Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green: The Autobiography of Isaac Asimov, 1920–1954* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 244; Dave Kyle, "The Great Exclusion Act of 1939," *Mimosa* 6, (1989), http://www.jophan.org/mimosa/m06/kyle.htm.

influenced by Campbell's editorial oversight and the generic conventions of US pulp SF that crystallised in *Astounding*.

Asimov conceived of *Foundation* as a science-fictional retelling of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789), but Campbell played a major role in shaping the finished product. Most significantly, Campbell appears to have been the driving force behind psychohistory, as Asimov reflects in a 1979 interview with Gunn:

> psychohistory originated in a discussion between myself and Campbell, as so many of the things in my early science-fiction stories did. And I think Campbell must have been reading about symbolic logic at the time. There is some reference to symbolic logic in the first story and that was more or less forced on me by John Campbell; it didn't come naturally to me, because I knew nothing about symbolic logic. And he felt in our discussion that symbolic logic, further developed, would so clear up the mysteries of the human mind as to leave human actions predictable.[87]

The idea of psychohistory was consistent with what Wollheim identified as Campbell's "mechanistic approach to psychology, sociology, and history," which contributed to his preoccupation with psionics and attraction to L. Ron Hubbard's dianetics.[88] In Levinasian

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[87] Isaac Asimov, "An Interview with Isaac Asimov," by James Gunn, in *Conversations with Isaac Asimov*, ed. Carl Freedman (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 2005), 40.

[88] Wollheim, *Universe Makers*, 77.

terms, this can be recognised as an overriding desire for the destruction of the Other's alterity and unknowability, aspects that seems to have bothered Campbell deeply.

Campbell's editorial involvement shaped the *Foundation* stories in other ways too, all contributing to the text's ethical and political orientations. Indeed, Adam Roberts argues that the so-called "golden age" of SF can be linked "to the personal taste of John W Campbell, who played a larger role than anybody else in disseminating prescriptive ideas of what SF ought to be."[89] One such idea was the trope of the superman, with Brian Attebery noting that Campbell "requested innumerable versions of 'Homo Superior'" from the authors he published in *Astounding*, even to the point of asking authors, including Asimov, to include particular versions of the trope in specific stories.[90] The *Foundation* stories also feature an all-human galaxy because Campbell insisted that any representation of aliens must clearly establish human beings as superior—a position distasteful to Asimov, who decided to avoid the issue altogether.[91] This sense of superiority and fear of the Other also contributed to Campbell's attitudes toward race, which once again influenced what was

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[89] Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 287.

[90] Brian Attebery, "Super Men," *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998): 62, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4240674. Attebery provides several other examples of Campbell urging authors to write stories about superior races of humans, including Poul Anderson, Henry Kuttner and A. E. Van Vogt.

[91] Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 276.

published in *Astounding*. Delany, for example, recounts having a story rejected by Campbell because it had a black protagonist.[92] Campbell's racist, even white supremacist, ideas come into stark relief in his editorials of the 1960s, when he allowed himself to get more political than in previous decades. Wollheim notes that these editorials were often "about how there really are superior and inferior people."[93] Asimov had been outraged, in 1940, to find that Campbell had added racist passages to his short story "Homo Sol," although this did not prevent Asimov from working with Campbell and continuing to bow to his editorial demands.[94] Even Asimov, who often defended his mentor, later described Campbell as "an

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[92] Samuel R. Delany, "Racism and Science Fiction," *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, no. 120 (1998), http://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html.

[93] Wollheim, *Universe Makers*, 78.

[94] Asimov recounts his experience with "Homo Sol" (*Astounding*, September 1940) as follows:

> in the story I made certain distinctions between the emotional reactions of Africans and Asians as compared with those of Americans and Europeans. Campbell had suggested the passage rather forcefully and I had included it reluctantly, since I wanted to sell the story.
>
> Then even after I had made a number of changes to please him, Campbell had, on his own hook, inserted several paragraphs that did not ring true in my ears. They were in his style, not in mine, and even if no one else could tell that, I could. What's more, they emphasized, with approval, Earthman's proficiency at warmaking.
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> It was August 1940, remember. ... I was in no mood to find racist and militaristic remarks in my stories, however mild and innocent they might seem.

idiosyncratic conservative … somewhere to the right of Attila the Hun in politics."[95] Others have gone further: Gary Westfahl has described Campbell as "a racist, a bigot, a sexist, and an anti-Semite,"[96] while Michael Moorcock has called him "an out-and-out fascist," under whose reign *Astounding* became "a crypto-fascist deeply philistine magazine."[97] Asimov acknowledged that his close relationship with Campbell and eagerness to be published in *Astounding* meant he "caught the Campbell flavor," but failed to realise that this flavour, which infused much pulp SF, was often fascist in its orientation, and violent and totalising in its approach to the Other.[98]

Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 275.

[95] Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 196.

[96] Gary Westfahl, "'Dictatorial, Authoritarian, Uncooperative': The Case against John W. Campbell, Jr." *Foundation*, no. 56 (1992): 50, ProQuest.

[97] "I mean," Moorcock continues, "he was a straightforward, old-fashioned American fascist, you know, pre-war fascist as it were, in that he believed that blacks should be re-enslaved." Michael Moorcock, Interview in: *John W. Campbell's Golden Age of Science Fiction: Text Supplement to the DVD*, by Eric Solstein and Gregory Moosnick (Digital Media Zone, 2002), 28. http://dmznyc.com/pdfs/JWC_Study_Supplement.pdf; see also, Moorcock's quote appearing in: Eric Solstein, "Golden Age of Science Fiction Trailer," Vimeo video, February 11, 2012, https://vimeo.com/36591614; Michael Moorcock, "Starship Storm Troopers," *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review*, no. 4 (1978), 42.

[98] Asimov, "An Interview," 35.

The *Foundation* trilogy illustrates how, when an author is working within the confines of a genre's tropes, traditions, and predispositions, a particular politics—and a particular *ethics*—can assert itself. "When pulp frameworks are employed," Santesso writes, "far-right tropes tend to appear."[99] In the US pulp SF frameworks refined by Campbell in *Astounding*, this is not terribly surprising, given the editor's own political and philosophical dispositions. The unsettling presence of fascist tropes in Asimov's trilogy reveals the ethical implications of accepting, uncritically, a genre's tropes, themes and, as I will argue later, modes of literary representation. Asimov may not have set out to write either communist or fascist propaganda, but he was writing strictly and unquestioningly within the expectations of US pulp SF and its underlying philosophy. Becoming preoccupied with the trilogy's politics, however, can distract from the underlying philosophy that gives rise to both its pseudo-Marxist determinism and its fascist strains: commitment to the project of totalisation.

The *Foundation* trilogy forcefully reasserts the West's dominant philosophical orientation toward the totalisation of the Other, the elimination of alterity, and the cognitive conquering of the unknown. This totalising imperative is central to Asimov's trilogy, especially the notion of psychohistory, and out of it arises an inflection toward oppressive, totalitarian politics, just as Levinas warned. This goes deeper than politics, right to the core of ethics—to the encounter with, and representation of, the Other. Seldon's

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[99] Santesso, "Fascism and Science Fiction," 153.

mathematics of psychohistory is a utopian expression of totalisation *par excellence*. Nothing—certainly no human individual—can stand in the way of this total mathematical system in which, to quote Seldon, "all is taken into account."[100] It is this totalising philosophy that makes Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, as Damien Broderick calls it, "the most explicit instance" of US pulp SF's tendency toward "the bleakest mechanical determinism and … the obliteration of the volitional subject."[101] This obliteration is presented in utopian terms, since the reader is invited to celebrate every success of Seldon's plan and behold the incredible power of psychohistory. Freedman observes that the ultimate triumph of the psychohistorians in *Second Foundation* is realised with "genuine utopian force," while Andrew Milner and Robert Savage call the trilogy the "classic expression" of "Asimov's technological utopianism."[102] But the dire ethical implications of a society based on principles of totalisation are apparent: the individual's alterity is erased and they become nothing more than a subservient proletarian worker; authoritarian control is handed over to "strongman" leaders and master races; imperialism is glorified.

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[100] Asimov, *Foundation*, 19.

[101] Broderick notes that it is "always a sociological nightmare presenting humankind as a statistically predictable and manipulable hive, within which individual subjectivity is an obstacle to be removed by discursive control and paranormal coercion." Damien Broderick, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995), 28.

[102] Freedman, *Critical Theory*, 70; Milner and Savage, "Pulped Dreams," 35.

The readerly mode of Asimov's writing reinforces the totalising themes at play in the *Foundation* trilogy, as well as its ethical and political orientations. I will now return to Levinas to consider his approach to literature and the aesthetic, especially his early condemnation of narrative and artistic representation for its complicity in totalisation. I will then further analyse the literary form of the *Foundation* trilogy, considering its mode of narration, linear structures and apparent closure to interpretation, as well as the approach to language evident in the trilogy's later stories. I will contend that the totalising themes and tropes of the series depend on the straightforward readerly form Asimov provides (and the readerly interpretations it encourages) in order to maintain their assumption of the knowability of the world, thereby revealing the ethical dimension of this literary form.

3.3. Reality and Its Shadow: Emmanuel Levinas and the Aesthetic

Levinas did not write extensively on art or literature, although he did write several essays focusing on specific authors and his major philosophical works are full of literary references. Part of the problem with attempting to synthesise a Levinasian approach to literature, let alone a Levinasian understanding of SF, is that his writings on art tend to be deeply ambivalent about literature and its ethical possibilities. Although he frequently quoted and commended specific writers, including Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, throughout his philosophical writings, his early, and now somewhat infamous, essay on aesthetics, "Reality and Its Shadow" (1948), was overwhelmingly a condemnation of artistic

and literary endeavours. As Seán Hand notes: "Levinas is prone to praising art when it seems to him to be ethical, and to condemning it if he regards it as a graven image."[103] The vehemence of his condemnations of art and literature have posed problems to literary theorists trying to bring Levinasian ethics into dialogue with literature. As Lawrence Buell notes, if one is to begin to articulate a Levinasian approach to literary representation, one must find a way "of rescuing Levinas from himself."[104] So I will examine what Levinas, at least in his earlier writings, finds objectionable about art and literature in general, before considering the relevance of this to our understanding of the ethical dimensions of SF. Dealing with Levinas's wariness of literary representation and readerly narratives—a wariness of the dangers of such writings' complicity in totalisation—will also allow the ethical possibilities of writerly texts to be recognised in the next chapter.

Published quite early in his career, "Reality and Its Shadow" adopts a very negative stance on art and the aesthetic from which literature, it seems, cannot escape. Art is accused of being "inhuman and monstrous" and the enjoyment of art is damned as "wicked and egoist and cowardly."[105] According to Levinas, art presents only static, lifeless images, which reduce reality to fixed, determinate representations. This understanding of art is also

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[103] Seán Hand, *Emmanuel Lévinas* (London: Routledge, 2009), 64.

[104] Buell, "What We Talk About," 7.

[105] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 141, 142.

evident in *Totality and Infinity*, where he declares that "all art is plastic."[106] Through representation, objects are said to become "non-objects" and what is revealed by art is not truth, but the "non-truth" of being.[107] Art, therefore, does not lead us to reality, only "to the hither side of it," to reality's "shadow."[108] This leads Levinas to a condemnation of art that mirrors that found in Plato's *Republic*, where poetry is criticised for its false imitation of the world, its distance from truth.

As Gerald L. Bruns notes, Levinas's hostility to art and the written word is also influenced by his "deep-seated iconoclasm," or what Hand labels "a traditional Jewish aniconism."[109] Such a religious dimension is certainly apparent in "Reality and Its Shadow," where he declares that the "proscription of images is truly the supreme command of monotheism," and that due to its plasticity, every image is already "an idol."[110] Levinas's wariness of art and images appears consistent with his broader philosophy, particularly his critique of totalisation and his focus on the Other as unrepresentable. What Levinas finds

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[106] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 140.

[107] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 133, 134.

[108] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 136.

[109] Gerald L. Bruns, "The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 228; Hand, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 67.

[110] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 141, 137.

in art is a reduction of the world, the other person, and the face, to static, lifeless images, in which the Other's alterity and dimension of height is annihilated. This concern for the representation of the Other is particularly apparent when Levinas turns his attention to writing and narrative.

Although literature, like music and theatre, appears to introduce the passage of time to art, Levinas is adamant that this "does not shatter the fixity of images."[111] Literature's narratives are seen to immobilise the fictional world and the characters within it, turning this narrative time into an eternal meanwhile, without the freedom of a future. In "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas describes the characters of a novel as beings locked up in fate, unable to escape the restrictions of the clearly delimited narrative:

> That the characters in a book are committed to the infinite repetition of the same acts and the same thoughts is not simply due to the contingent fact of the narrative, which is exterior to those characters. They can be narrated because their being *resembles* itself, doubles itself and immobilizes. … By its reflection in a narrative, being has a non-dialectical fixity, stops dialectics and time.
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> The characters of a novel are beings that are shut up, prisoners. Their history is never finished, it still goes on, but makes no headway. A novel shuts beings up in a fate despite their freedom. Life solicits the novelist when it seems to him as if it were already something out of a book. Something somehow completed

[111] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 139.

> arises in it, as though a whole set of facts were immobilized and formed a series. They are described between two well-determined moments, in the space of a time existence had traversed as through a tunnel. The events related form a *situation*—akin to a plastic ideal. That is what myth is: the plasticity of a history. What we call the artist's choice is the natural selection of facts and traits which are fixed in a rhythm, and transform time into images.[112]

It is worth noting that narrative, here, is distinctly the closed and irreversible readerly narrative described by Barthes, wherein a completed story is told as a series of facts, immobilised like images for the reader to consume passively. Levinas's concern for the fixity of narrative also appears in his 1950 essay "Persons or Figures," only here it is clear that the issue lies in narrative's totalisation of the other person: "We distrust theatre, *the petrification of our faces*, the figure that our person weds. We distrust poetry, which scan[s] and bewitches our gestures; we distrust everything which, in spite of us, throws up a deceptive illusion in our lucid lives."[113] Like fiction, theatre has characters bound up in fate, doomed to follow a particular path to a particular end, and most significantly of all, these characters' faces are *petrified*, fixed in lifelessness. Levinas's concern for the totalising nature of narrative continues in *Otherwise than Being*, where he writes that "the

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[112] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 139. Original emphasis.

[113] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 121.

unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration."[114] The face of the Other, irreducible to form, shatters any image that can be made of it. In narrative, however, faces are constantly reduced to static images and human others can become clearly described and knowable characters, doomed to follow particular narrative paths. It is precisely this immobilisation of the face into a fixed representation that Levinas finds inhuman and monstrous.[115] Narrative takes what is unrepresentable and integrates it into part of a totality, synthesising the unsynthesisable. But again, this narrative is distinctly *readerly*—it is irreversible, settled, closed; its characters are knowable; its language is ostensibly transparent.

It is worth noting, here, that the totalisation of narrative in readerly fiction parallels that which takes place in historiography, of which Levinas is also highly critical. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas's writings on history highlight his concern for the way in which narrative representation can eliminate the Other's alterity, reducing them to a fixed concept or role. He writes:

> Totalization is accomplished only in history—in the history of the historiographers, that is, among the survivors. It rests on the affirmation and the conviction that the chronological order of the history of the historians outlines the plot of being itself, analogous to nature. The time of universal history remains as the ontological

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[114] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 166.

[115] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 141.

> ground in which particular existences are lost, are computed, and in which at least their essences are recapitulated.[116]

In their attempts to plot out being and reduce history to a chronological series of facts, traditional historical narratives remain exclusionary of every Other, the irreducible alterity of which transcends all representation. Barthes noted in *Writing Degree Zero* the deep connection between the realist novel and nineteenth-century historiography, finding in both "the construction of an autarkic world which elaborates its own dimensions and limits" but ultimately provides only "a degraded image" that has been "purged of the uncertainty of existence."[117] Or as Levinas puts it: when the historian attempts to create a grand narrative that would "integrate myself and the other within an impersonal spirit," this "ignores the Other" and is therefore "cruelty and injustice."[118] Although there is undoubtedly a difference between the narration of fictional others and real people who lived and breathed, they both concern the representation of being and depiction of the Other as intelligible and totalisable, reducible to a concept or image. To use the term preferred by Will Buckingham, both fictional and historical narratives are forms of

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[116] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 55.

[117] Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 35, 37.

[118] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52.

storytelling and, for Levinas, "the telling of stories is a form of totalizing thought par excellence."[119]

It would be easy to take Levinas's earlier writings on aesthetics as a blanket condemnation of all art and literature, but this fails to acknowledge the particular *kind* of art that Levinas finds at fault, and here the distinction between Barthes's readerly and writerly proves particularly valuable. What becomes evident in a closer reading of "Reality and Its Shadow" is that not all art or literature is necessarily under attack, only a specific kind of writing or artistic representation—an uncritical representation that would set itself up as knowledge or truth. As Peter Schmiedgen notes, Levinas does not condemn art *per se*, only "the idolatry of representational realism."[120] This is evident from the definition of art offered in the opening sentence of the essay: "It is generally, dogmatically, admitted that the function of art is expression, and that *artistic expression rests on cognition*."[121] This emphasis on cognition, on logico-temporal consistency, is recognisably a feature of the readerly text. Likewise, Levinas's description of narrative, which rests on closure and the clear communication of reliable facts, recalls the operation of the readerly text and its dependence on mimetic representation and hermeneutic and proairetic codes. It must also

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[119] Will Buckingham, *Levinas, Storytelling and Anti-Storytelling* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 113.

[120] Peter Schmiedgen, "Art and Idolatry: Aesthetics and Alterity in Levinas," *Contretemps* 3 (2002): 149.

[121] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 130. Emphasis mine.

be acknowledged that Levinas's objections to such writing are inseparable from his critique of the particular kind of reading such works encourage, hence the relevance of Barthes. As will be explored in the next section, Levinas's critique of narrative holds particular resonance for US pulp SF, which was dominated by readerly forms and the assumption that writing could unambiguously communicate narrative content.

Among Levinas's major complaints against art in "Reality and Its Shadow" is that it distracts us from our ethical obligations—from the other person and the social relation—thus revealing a concern for art's effects on its viewers or readers. Levinas uses the idea of rhythm to describe how art can carry the viewer away in a kind of hypnosis, completely passive. This rhythm, according to Levinas, is "the captivation or incantation of poetry and music," which allows the self to pass into anonymity, removed from the real world of responsibility and ethical encounters.[122] As Levinas writes: "art, essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion."[123] Similarly, *Totality and Infinity* describes art as giving objects a "*façade*," making them "objects on exhibition," and in this façade is "constituted the beautiful, whose essence is indifference, cold splendor, and silence."[124] In presenting beautiful, lifeless images, or a captivating, rhythmic narrative, readerly texts leave the ego's powers of totalisation unchallenged, thus

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[122] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 133.

[123] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 142.

[124] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 192–193. Original emphasis.

allowing a retreat from responsibility. As we will see, Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy embraces the readerly mode because any other form—say, a writerly form that broke this indifferent façade and acknowledged responsibility to and for the unknowable Other—would reduce to rubble the foundations of psychohistory, the hero of the series.

The passivity and retreat-to-self facilitated by such art causes Levinas to declare that "there is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment."[125] Resonating with what Barthes describes as the pleasure of contentment, such artistic enjoyment is the passive, uncritical, unproductive consumption of texts. To enjoy or consume a novel in such a way, Levinas writes, "is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace—such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful."[126] The artistic enjoyment condemned by Levinas is thus far removed from *jouissance*, the rapturous and disruptive pleasure Barthes associates with the writerly reading of writerly texts. The pleasure of *jouissance*, which draws the reader into a critical approach to the text, is by no means a renunciation of philosophy or action, but rather makes silent admiration impossible. And here we can recognise the ethical value of the text of *jouissance* and the writerly—the reason Barthes values these kinds of texts and the kinds of reading they

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[125] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 142.

[126] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 141.

encourage: they break with the passive consumption of totalising readerly narratives, drawing the reader into an encounter with a disruptive, non-totalisable literary space.

One of the major problems with Levinas's early writings on the aesthetic is that they overstate their condemnation of literature, often refusing to consider the implications of literature that resists totalisation and closure. According to Levinas, art strives to be "more real than reality" and thus "sets itself up as knowledge of the absolute."[127] "The phenomenology of images," he writes, "insists on their *transparency*."[128] But what of art, of writing, that challenges this transparency, focussing instead on obfuscation, bringing to a crisis the reader's comfortable relationship with the written word? What of literature that does not claim to provide access to some kind of knowledge of the absolute? What of the kind of writing that can be described as open or writerly, which challenges transparency and resists cognition? Levinas tacitly acknowledges the existence of such literature in the final paragraph of "Reality and Its Shadow":

> Modern literature, disparaged for its intellectualism (which, none the less goes back to Shakespeare, the Moliere of *Don Juan*, Goethe, Dostoyevsky) certainly manifests a more and more clear awareness of this fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry. In this intellectualism the artist refuses to be only an artist, not

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[127] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 141.

[128] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 134. Emphasis mine.

> because he wants to defend a thesis or cause, but because he needs to interpret his myths himself.[129]

This reference to modernist literature, with its self-awareness and the challenges it presents to mimetic representation, highlights the precise nature of the conception of art under which Levinas is operating. It is also significant that Levinas connects modernist literature to earlier works, including Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, thereby highlighting his interest in the formal aspects of this literature, as opposed to any specific cultural milieu. According to Levinas, such literature incorporates its own "philosophical criticism" through an awareness of the inability of writing to represent the unrepresentable Other—a metafictional self-consciousness of its nature as art.[130]

The overwhelming negativity of much of Levinas's early writings on literature leads Sandor Goodhart to note the temptation "to dismiss his perspective as idiosyncratic, a curious blind spot in an otherwise brilliant array of critical insights."[131] Yet this negativity is not entirely consistent and there are many occasions in Levinas's work where he writes positively about literature. One way this emerges is through his use of literature as a source for ethical examples or ideas of philosophical significance. But Levinas also tends to write

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[129] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 143.

[130] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 141.

[131] Sandor Goodhart, "Review of *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* by Jill Robbins," *Modern Fiction Studies* 45, no. 4 (1999): 1098, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26285455.

more positively about encounters with more open, writerly texts. Through engaging with authors like Blanchot and Celan in his later writings, Levinas begins to explore the potential for literature to provide access to an ethical space and facilitate a kind of encounter with transcendence. I will turn to this question of the ethical possibilities of literature in the next chapter. In what remains of this chapter, however, I will return to the example of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy and the complicity of US pulp SF with totalisation through its modes of literary representation.

3.4. Totalising Forms and Communication in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* Trilogy

Levinas is highly critical of the totalising tendencies behind artistic works that rest on cognition and logico-temporal consistency, which is not only a feature of realist narratives and Barthes's readerly text, but also central to certain SF traditions, including that of the US pulps. Such cognition is, of course, central to Suvin's definition of the SF genre as a literature of cognitive estrangement. As noted by Russ, it is also necessary if SF is to achieve its didactic aims, which were fundamental to the concept to SF adopted by Gernsback and other early US SF pulp magazine editors. The other expectation placed on pulp SF was that it would provide entertainment to its readers—what Stockwell identified as genre SF's beauty of structure and strong narrative drive. This results in a pleasure of contentment that Levinas would find complicit in escapism, where the narrative's rhythm carries the reader away, passive, from real-world concerns and ethical responsibility. Ultimately, the

readerly form of pulp SF enacts a totalisation of the Other that reinforces its dominant scientific positivism.

The Asimov case study at hand demonstrates the extent to which totalising themes tend to be supported by readerly narrative forms, particularly in the US pulp SF tradition. Narrative comprehensibility is reinforced by the distant, seemingly omniscient and ostensibly objective third-person narrator used in each story, the consistent use of one-dimensional characters (overwhelmingly men), the strict adherence to linear narrative structures, and the maintenance of a clear and no-nonsense written style. Much of this was required by Campbell, who not only controlled the content of stories he published, but also influenced their form. Asimov's first submission to *Astounding* was rejected partly because Campbell "didn't like the first-person narration," a narrative technique Asimov continued to avoid throughout his SF writing career.[132] The reliance on third-person, past-tense narration in the *Foundation* stories is entirely in keeping with pulp SF conventions—what Stockwell calls "pulpstyle"—as is Asimov's consistent focalisation through straight white male protagonists.[133]

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[132] Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 197.

[133] Stockwell, *Poetics of Science Fiction*, 83. Stockwell rightly connects this "pulpstyle" with the nature of pulp production: authors were paid by the word and had to churn out short fiction at an incredible rate and publishing straightforward narratives that were quick and easy for readers to consume paid off economically.

In Asimov's hands, this pulp style is a bare-bones but functional readerly form that seeks only to communicate information in a distanced and dispassionate mode akin to scientific writing. It is described by Gunn, a great admirer of Asimov, as "rarely more than adequate," and by Elkins, who is somewhat more critical, as "a watered-down idiom of … the banal, pseudo-factual style of the mass-circulation magazines."[134] There is no literary experimentation here, no glimpse of modernist technique or Barthes's writerly—this was never Asimov's goal: "I don't want to write poetically;" he explained, "I only want to write clearly."[135] In this, Asimov resolutely adheres to the conventions of US pulp SF which, as explored in the previous chapter, typically opt for a readerly form to communicate scientific ideas and deliver the closed and coherent narratives its readers expect.

This kind of narrative closure is central to pulp SF in general, and to Asimov's writing in particular. Reflecting on his early *Foundation* stories, Asimov boasted: "I generally manage to tie up all the loose ends into one neat little bow-knot at the end of my stories, no matter how complicated the plot might be."[136] This tendency toward

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[134] Gunn, *Isaac Asimov*, ix; Elkins, "Isaac Asimov's 'Foundation' Novels," 26. While discussing Asimov's significance to the history of sf, Robert likewise concedes that "the dull, flat prose style [and] the under-developed characters" of Asimov's fiction can distract from the "great imaginative power" of his work. Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 292.

[135] Asimov, *In Memory Yet Green*, 313.

[136] Asimov, "Story behind the Foundation."

hermeneutic closure is evident throughout the *Foundation* stories, each developing a problem and then solving it (usually by invoking psychohistory), carefully explaining this solution to the reader in a comprehensive summation akin to the classic detective story's parlour room scene. The very end of the trilogy provides a prime example, with a chapter entitled "The Answer That Was True" presenting an extended (and somewhat contrived) conversation between the leader of the Second Foundation and a student. Here, the goings-on of earlier events and the solutions to the enigmas posed are clearly laid out for the reader, presented as a "translation of the mathematics" of psychohistory, which had guided the narrative's events.[137] The readers are ultimately reassured that Seldon's mathematical formulae were victorious once again, successfully incorporating the various individual characters we had met over the course of the story into a calculable totality.

Levinas's concern over the determinism of narrative, wherein characters are beings lacking freedom and guided by fate, thus has particular resonance for Asimov's *Foundation* stories. Readers are repeatedly assured that in these stories, everything happens "by psycho-historical necessity."[138] Underlying this inflexibility of characters' lives is the irreversible, sequential readerly narrative that presents almost every character in the series as a one-dimensional character type, with clear motivations and certain outcomes. This fixity is the

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[137] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 183.

[138] Asimov, *Foundation and Empire*, 61.

totalising dimension of narrative that does violence to the Others it represents—it is precisely this immobilisation of the face in representation that Levinas finds monstrous.

As noted above, Asimov began the *Foundation* stories as a speculative, futuristic re-telling of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and the trilogy has much in common with the narrative form of this kind of historiography, frequently a target of Levinas's ire. Indeed, the *Foundation* trilogy, along with some of Heinlein's early work in *Astounding*, was instrumental in establishing the "future history" trope in US genre SF. After identifying this trope as one of the seven beauties of SF, Csicsery-Ronay writes:

> Futuristic history uses the proven devices of historical realism to create the illusion that the setting is in a real concrete time, whose texture of experience is familiar enough for readers to imagine their own reactions to the novum's disruptions. … As in realistic fiction, concretely represented intimate relationships, the familiar domestic territory of bourgeois realism, are constrained by the public sphere of historical forces.[139]

Csicsery-Ronay also notes that, in creating this illusion of historicity, authors writing future histories are engaging in "an intensely *epic* activity," seeking to fulfil readers' expectations for "vividly detailed imaginary discourses, objects, and institutions—what Hegel called the *totality of objects* of the epic worldview."[140] As Levinas asserts, however, such an approach

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[139] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 83.

[140] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 82. Original emphasis.

to history risks reducing every Other to a fixed role in a chronological unfolding of events, and the characters of the *Foundation* trilogy are rarely more than the role they play in a fixed plot. Csicsery-Ronay notes that "Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy played an especially important role in establishing the norms for herding great historical spacetimes into a unitary frame," but finds that the series ultimately distorts "the nuanced and complex understanding of history that historians strive for."[141]

If such narrative history is for Levinas totalisation accomplished, this is especially true in the future histories of SF, which reduce both the other person and their unknowable future to something familiar and comprehensible, reducing the Other into the same. Ultimately, Huntington notes, such works *domesticate* the future:

> If SF gives the impression of facing the unknown future with daring and foresight, it is seldom because it really imagines a new future in any radical way, or because it forecasts change with any certainty or precision, but because, by relying on traditional literary conventions and forms, and by repeating historical and psychological patterns from the past, it manages to domesticate the future, to render it habitable and, in spite of a somewhat strange surface, basically familiar.[142]

This approach to the unknown remains in keeping with the dominant mode of US pulp SF, as well as its direct ancestors (the scientific romance) and descendants (hard SF). As

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[141] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 84, 221.

[142] Huntington, "Science Fiction and the Future," 352.

Parrinder notes, Suvin's definition of SF as a literature of cognitive estrangement is often critiqued on the basis that "most SF is distinguished not by its estrangement but by its 'domestication' of supposedly strange and unfamiliar worlds."[143] Yet this approach is also at the core of Suvin's understanding of SF, with Parrinder observing that "all knowledge or cognition works to domesticate the strange and to make it seem familiar."[144] The distance between the self and the other must be overcome—this attitude is central to both Suvin's definition of SF and the US pulp SF tradition. In the world of objects, this approach might be relatively unproblematic—indeed, it is fundamental to most scientific pursuits, including those that seek to address practical ethical issues such as climate change. But when extended to encompass the irreducible Other (the other person or the alien other), this reduction of the other to the same is an act of violence against the Other and their irreducible alterity. By seeking to eradicate the infinite distance between the self and the Other, such an approach disregards the ethical dimension of the face-to-face encounter, which demands a relationality with the Other that maintains their alterity and absolute singularity.

A final example from Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy demonstrates how this drive to overcome the other person's alterity and distance permeated US pulp SF. The approach to language and communication demonstrated by the psychohistorians of the Second

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[143] Parrinder, "Revisiting Suvin's Poetics," 39.

[144] Parrinder, "Revisiting Suvin's Poetics," 40.

Foundation reveals a hostility towards the ambiguity of language and unknowability of the other person. When the reader is first introduced to the Executive Council of the Second Foundation in "Search by the Mule," they are described as a group of "psychologists" (or, rather, "scientists with a psychological orientation") with the long-winded proviso that "the 'psychology' of scientists brought up among the axioms deduced from the observational habits of physical science has only the vaguest relationship to PSYCHOLOGY."[145] The narrator then explains the Council's unique means of communicating with one another:

> the minds assembled understood so thoroughly the workings of each other, not only by general theory but by the specific application over a long period of these theories to particular individuals. Speech as known to us was unnecessary. A fragment of a sentence amounted almost to long winded redundancy. A gesture, a grunt, the curve of a facial line—even a significantly timed pause yielded informational juice.[146]

The narrator represents this word-free mode of communication as if it were standard dialogue, since an "exact reproduction" of the Council's interactions would "sacrifice

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[145] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 22. "Search by the Mule" is the first of two novellas in *Second Foundation*, originally published as "Now You See It…" (*Astounding Science-Fiction*, January 1948). The longer second novella, "Search by the Foundation," was serialised as "…And Now You Don't" (*Astounding Science-Fiction*, November 1949, December 1949, January 1950).

[146] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 22.

completely … the minimum comprehensibility we have a right to expect" from the narrative.[147] The Council's knowledge of psychology, here a hard science, underpins a mode of communication that bypasses speech entirely, with words rendered "unnecessary" by the "mathematicization" of "mental science" that also underpinned psychohistory.[148] With the ambiguity of words overcome, those of the Second Foundation are able to know each other's minds completely, as the narrator notes when introducing the leader of the Council and his student in "Search by the Foundation":

> Every reaction to a stimulus, however slight, was completely indicative of all the trifling changes, of all the flickering currents that went on in another's mind. The First Speaker could not sense the emotional content of the Student's instinctively, as the Mule would have been able to do—since the Mule was a mutant with powers … —rather he deduced them, as the result of intensive training.[149]

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[147] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 22.

[148] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 84.

[149] Asimov, *Second Foundation*, 84. Later in "Search by the Foundation," it is suggested that those of the Second Foundation possess actual telepathic and mind-control abilities due to "a special organ of the cerebrum" (173), which allows them to brainwash certain members of the First Foundation. It is unclear why Asimov thought it was necessary to introduce such a biological foundation to the psychohistorians' powers of psychology, but it is entirely in keeping with Campbell's fascination with psionic powers and human enhancement. The May 1950 issue of *Astounding Science-Fiction*,

This ability to know the other person's mind fully, to read with absolute certainty their every thought, is described as an awe-inspiring scientific breakthrough. Indeed, the idea that uncertainty of words and the unknowability of the Other could be overcome through scientific progress is presented as a thoroughly utopian idea. Understood through a Levinasian lens, however, any such development would involve the destruction of the face-to-face encounter in all its image-shattering singularity. To anticipate terminology unpacked in the next chapter, it would bypass the ethical realm of the Saying to become pure, concretised Said. It would be the disintegration of ethics itself.

The kind of narrative Levinas critiques is a straightforward, readerly narrative form—irreversible, settled, closed. Its characters are knowable, devoid of any trace of the alterity of the Other. Its language aims to be transparent, resisting the ambiguity of words. No other form would have worked in Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, at least not without shaking the philosophical foundations that underpin the narrative, its heroic novum (psychohistory), and the genre conventions to which it conforms. As deployed in the

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for example, featured an article by L. Ron Hubbard titled "Dianetics: A Science of the Mind," which was highlighted on the issue's cover and accompanied by an editorial in which Campbell extolled the virtues of Dianetics, which he would continue to advertise in future issues. Many, including Asimov, identified Campbell's fascination with Dianetics and other pseudo-sciences as a major contributor to the waning influence of *Astounding* in the 1950s. See: Isaac Asimov, *I, Asimov* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 74.

Foundation trilogy and throughout US pulp SF, this readerly form reflects what David Carroll calls "literary fascism," which he defines not as "the *application* of fascist ideology to literature," but as the exploitation of the "totalizing tendencies implicit in literature itself" through "a form of fictionalizing or aestheticizing not just of literature but of politics as well, and the transformation of the disparate elements of each into organic, totalized *works of art*."[150] Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy reveals the degree to which conformity to the generic expectations of a literary tradition can lead an otherwise politically progressive author to create a work that displays literary themes, tropes and forms that are complicit in fascist politics and the totalising philosophies that give rise to them.

Asimov embraced the dominant stylistic and ideological modes of US pulp SF, particularly those of Campbell's *Astounding*, and in the *Foundation* trilogy this results in a particular politics—and a particular *ethics*—asserting itself. The totalising imperative of Western philosophy is central to Asimov's trilogy and out of it arises an inflection toward oppressive, totalitarian politics and modes of representation that reduce every Other to a mere point of data in a mathematical equation. This has left the series open to accusations of vulgar Marxism on the one hand and outright fascism on the other, revealing the ethical implications of accepting uncritically a genre's tropes, themes, and literary modes.

The totalising themes and forms that dominated US pulp SF continued well after the pulp era, finding their strongest expression in the hard SF tradition. After observing

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[150] Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, 7.

that much "golden age" SF of the 1940s and 1950s was "xenophobic, elitist, racist, and psychologically naive," Hartwell notes that "strains of it persist" in more recent hard SF.[151] This hard SF tradition, which developed during the 1970s and 1980s, was a reaction against New Wave SF and, beyond the genre, a response to changing political attitudes during the presidency of Ronald Regan. At this time, Cramer argues, "hard sf evolved into right-wing power fantasies about military hardware, tales of men killing things with big machines, fantasies that had very little to do with scientific thought or theory."[152] The hard SF tradition also continued the scientific positivism that had infused pulp SF, approaching the universe, and the singular others that inhabit it, as things ultimately knowable through empirical scientific enquiry.[153] It is worth noting, however, that the hard SF field today is much more nuanced, complex, and politically and philosophically diverse than it was in the mid-to-late twentieth century, yet the violent and militaristic power fantasies that were a staple of the Campbell era continue as the dominant characteristic of the "military SF" subgenre.

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[151] Hartwell, "Hard Science Fiction," 38.

[152] Kathryn Cramer, "On Science and Science Fiction," in *The Ascent of Wonder: The Evolution of Hard SF*, ed. David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer (New York: Tor, 1994), 26.

[153] As Gunn notes, hard SF aims to fulfil "the desire of the reader to understand the universe, and himself and the human species in the relationship to that universe." Gunn, "Readers of Hard Science Fiction," 87.

Much of the SF produced in the New Wave tradition, however, rejected the prevailing scientific positivism, totalising themes and readerly forms of pulp SF and its emerging hard SF successor. Chapter five of this thesis will explore some of the formal innovations of the New Wave and its aftermath in the work of Gene Wolfe, an American SF author who produced one of the most complex and challenging SF oeuvres of the late twentieth century. As noted earlier, however, the US pulp SF tradition was only one of many SF traditions that co-existed in the early twentieth century, not all of which shared the totalising attitudes of their niche American counterpart. The next chapter will bring Levinas's writings on the idea of infinity and the unenglobable literary space into dialogue with a major work of Russian SF, Zamyatin's *We*, a dystopian novel that reveals the dangers of totalising approaches to the other and the disruption of totalising worldviews through the face-to-face encounter with the Other.

4. The Ethics of Science Fiction:

Infinity and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*

> There are books of the same chemical composition as dynamite. The only difference is that a piece of dynamite explodes once, while a book explodes a thousand times.[1]
>
> – Yevgeny Zamyatin

In chapter two, I asked why Roland Barthes found *value* in the writerly text and the text of *jouissance*. The previous chapter began exploring the ethical dimension of this valuation and its implications for US pulp SF traditions by way of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity, focusing on the ethical consequences of literature that relies on totalising philosophies and readerly forms. This chapter is more positive in its approach, as I focus on exploring the ethical potential of literature in general, and SF specifically, arguing that there is a distinctly ethical value in writerly SF for its non-totalising approach to language

[1] Yevgeny Zamyatin, "A Piece for an Anthology on Books," in *A Soviet Heretic*, ed. and trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 131.

and the Other. To make this argument, I interrogate Levinas's positive writings on literature, contending that there are two, not entirely separate, reasons that he finds to praise specific texts: first, that they present ethical themes or examples; and second, that their literary form strives to make the reader aware of the infinite interpretive space of literature and thereby stage an encounter analogous to the face-to-face encounter with the other person. Both of these axes of ethical significance can be found in SF traditions beyond the US pulps, as demonstrated in the case study of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (*Мы*) that follows.

In his earlier writings on the aesthetic, Levinas's focus on popular readerly narratives implies a narrow view of literature that would exclude the possibility of it opening up an ethical space. Discussing "Reality and Its Shadow," Richard A. Cohen writes: "Levinas finds in art not an open, dynamic, fluid world but a closed, static, frozen one instead."[2] Although this is largely true in Levinas's early writings, quite a different line of thinking emerges in his later work, where the more writerly texts of Blanchot, Celan and Agnon come to the fore and Levinas begins engaging more extensively on the interpretive possibilities of literature, including the Jewish scriptures. From these later writings, we can gain an understanding of the ethical significance of what Levinas calls the "unenglobable

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[2] Richard A. Cohen, "Some Reflections on Levinas on Shakespeare," in *Levinasian Meditations: Ethics, Philosophy, and Religion* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 153.

literary space."[3] In much the same way that the self's habitual economy, in its freedom to totalise and master, is brought into question by the face of the Other, it can also be disrupted by the infinite space opened up by a particular mode of writing. Levinas's overcautiousness about art and literature makes it necessary to inform any discussion of the ethical potential of literature with the more fully developed literary theories of poststructuralism, which have often found common philosophical ground with Levinas and his challenge to dominant modes of totalising thought. This chapter will therefore engage with Derrida and Blanchot, both of whom maintained intertextual dialogues with Levinas and influenced his thinking around ethics, language, and literature. Drawing on Barthes will also highlight the writerly nature of the literature in which Levinas finds ethical significance, even transcendence.

Throughout this chapter, the ethical potential of SF is demonstrated through a Levinasian reading of Zamyatin's *We*, which stands in stark contrast to Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, not only in its depth and literary form, but also in its philosophical and ethical orientation—both in terms of its themes and its mode of representation. Where Asimov's trilogy envisages a utopian potential for the mathematically rigorous totalisation of all things, Zamyatin's *We* offers a dire assessment of a society governed by reductive mathematical formulae and the erasure of otherness. Written in Russia between 1919 and 1921, *We* did not see publication in the Soviet Union until 1988, well after the author's

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[3] Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone, 1996), 151.

death in Paris in 1937. The novel was first published in English translation in 1924, with a more widely available French translation appearing in 1929;[4] a full Russian-language version did not appear in print until 1952.[5] It now stands alongside Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as one of the most influential dystopian novels of the twentieth century. Although Huxley's and Orwell's novels each contain themes present in *We*—the question of happiness versus freedom, for example, and wariness of authoritarian politics—Zamyatin's text offers a more concerted attack on scientific positivism and the totalising impulse. Indeed, Daniel Walker identifies *We* as one of the earliest SF novels to clearly oppose scientific positivism, presenting "a dramatization of what happens when an entire population becomes ruled by scientism, when a state practises scientism as its religion, creed, and political philosophy."[6] The

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[4] Orwell lamented the difficulty he had locating a copy of Gregory Zilboorg's 1924 English translation of *We*, published in New York, when reviewing the French translation of the novel. George Orwell, "Review of 'WE' by E. I. Zamyatin," [*Tribune*, January 4, 1946], last modified September 24, 2015, http://orwell.ru/library/reviews/zamyatin/english/e_zamy.

[5] Even then, this Russian edition was printed in New York by Chekhov Publishing House. J. A. E. Curtis, *The Englishman from Lebedian': A Life of Evgeny Zamiatin (1884–1937)* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 4.

[6] Daniel Walker, "Going after Scientism through Science Fiction," *Extrapolation* 48, no. 1 (2006): 159, https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2007.48.1.13.

rationalism that, according to Gunn, provided *Foundation* with its sense of wonder, here takes on negative connotations, with wonder instead being found in the *irrational*. I will contend that Levinas's ethics of alterity, and his writings on the idea of infinity in particular, reveal the ethical framework that underlies Zamyatin's novel. The reading of Zamyatin that follows is not as in-depth as the preceding case study on Asimov, since the following chapter on Gene Wolfe further explores the ethical potential of writerly SF, focusing primarily on how disruptive literary forms can stage the reader's encounter with an unenglobable literary space that draws the self's totalising tendencies into question.

I begin this chapter with a brief consideration of the value Levinas finds in literature that addresses ethical themes and presents examples of ethical encounters, focusing on the numerous references to Shakespeare and Dostoevsky found in his philosophical writings. From here, I turn to Zamyatin's *We* and consider the ethical themes addressed in the text, including the representation of the idea of infinity and the unknowability of the Other. I then move into an in-depth consideration of Levinas's changing conception of language and the ethical possibilities of writing, finding in his later writings a recognition of the ethical dimension of writerly texts that draw the reader into an encounter with an infinite interpretive space, staging the reader's encounter with an irreducible otherness. Finally, I will return to Zamyatin to consider how the dense and challenging writerly form of *We* underpins its philosophical framework and openness to interpretation, thus demonstrating the potential of SF to embrace more ethical modes of representation.

4.1. Ethical Themes

Throughout his oeuvre, Levinas regularly draws on literary texts to clarify or demonstrate philosophical ideas. Despite broadly negative statements on art and literature in his early writings, Levinas still tends to praise authors in whose narratives he finds the representation of events, characters or themes of philosophical or ethical significance. After numerous references to Shakespeare in the 1946 and 1947 lectures collected in *Time and the Other* (1947), for example, Levinas declares: "it sometimes seems to me that the whole of philosophy is only a meditation of Shakespeare."[7] As Cohen notes, this statement "carries enormous philosophical weight" and "gives incalculable philosophical prestige to Shakespeare and literature."[8] Indeed, references to Shakespeare abound in Levinas's writings. In *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents* (1947), for example, Levinas draws on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* to support his own philosophical observations on the nature of suicide, death and what he calls the *there is* (*il y a*)—an existence without existents, which one can feel in the night when everything else slips away.[9] Discussing the *there is* in *Existence and Existents*, where it is described as the

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[7] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 72.

[8] Cohen, "Some Reflections," 152.

[9] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 50.

"presence that arises behind nothingness," Levinas draws particular attention to the supernatural elements of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, with some interesting implications for fantastic literature:

> Spectors, ghosts, sorceresses are not only a tribute Shakespeare pays to his time, or vestiges of the original material he composed with; they allow him to move constantly toward this limit between being and nothingness where being insinuates itself in nothingness, like bubbles of the earth ('the Earth hath bubbles'). Hamlet recoils before the 'not to be' because he has a forboding of the return of being ('to dye, to sleepe, perchance to Dreame'). In Macbeth, the apparition of Banquo's ghost is also a decisive experience of the 'no exit' from existence, its phantom return through the fissures through which one has driven it.[10]

Levinas celebrates Shakespeare's use of ghosts and apparitions for allowing exploration of the space between being and nothingness, consideration of existence without existents, contemplation of the *there is*. By extension, one could find similar philosophical resonances in much speculative fiction, including various fantasy and SF traditions that often explore the implications of separating being and materiality. It must be noted, however, that the philosophical significance Levinas attributes to Shakespeare in *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents* is not specifically *ethical*, at least not in the sense Levinas uses the

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[10] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 57, 61.

term, since these references have little to do with responsibility or the ethical relation with the Other.

Levinas attributes a more distinctly ethical significance to Dostoevsky, whom he frequently quotes in his writings and interviews. Levinas's favoured passage is from Markel's final confession in *The Brothers Karamazov* (as later conveyed by his brother Zosima), which reads: "We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others."[11] For Levinas, this quotation reflects the radically asymmetrical and limitless responsibility he strives to articulate throughout his writings on ethics, becoming what Alain Toumayan calls "his mantra or talismanic quotation."[12] Levinas quotes this scene in *Time and the Other* when he introduces notions of responsibility that will come to dominate his later work: "It is the ego that speaks in the first person, like the one Dostoyevsky has say 'I am the most guilty of all,' in the obligation of each for each, as the most obligated—the unique one. Such is the one whose obligation with regard to the Other is also infinite."[13] Later, Levinas has recourse to quote this again when exploring the self's substitution for the Other in *Otherwise than Being* (1974) and "God and Philosophy"

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[11] Qtd. in Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98. Cf. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1991), 289.

[12] Alain Toumayan, "'I More Than the Others': Dostoevsky and Levinas," *Yale French Studies*, no. 104 (2004): 55.

[13] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 108.

(1975), and when discussing responsibility more broadly in the conversations with Philippe Nemo in *Ethics and Infinity* (1982).[14] According to Robbins, there is a great affinity between Levinas and Dostoevsky, whom Levinas identifies as "a writer whose work has a paramount ethical significance."[15] Levinas even names Dostoevsky as a pivotal inspiration for his philosophical work, claiming that Dostoevsky and other Russian novelists were his "preparation for philosophy."[16] Although Robbins is correct in her assertion that such statements seem to subordinate literature to philosophy, they nevertheless indicate the important place Levinas gives literature in his thinking.[17]

There are numerous other examples within Levinas's oeuvre of literary references being deployed to illustrate a particular philosophical or ethical idea. In "The Other in Proust" (1947), Levinas claims that the relationship between Marcel and Albertine in *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913–1927) demonstrates "the way the

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[14] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 146; Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 168; Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98, 101.

[15] Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147.

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 89.

[17] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, xix.

inner life looms forth from an insatiable curiosity about the alterity of the Other."[18] His discussions of Blanchot's fictional writings, to which I will return later in this chapter, often focus on scenes of philosophical or ethical significance. In a footnote to the discussion of Shakespeare quoted above, Levinas writes that "*Thomas l'Obscure*, by Maurice Blanchot, opens with a description of the *there is*," pointing readers to a vivid and surreal scene resonant with his description of existence without existents.[19] In one of his later essays on Blanchot, Levinas dissects "The Madness of the Day" and provides commentary on various scenes, including one in which a man steps out of the way to allow a baby carriage through the door ahead of him, finding that in this event "something abnormal ensues: one person withdraws before the other, one *is* for the other," yet concluding that the character never truly escapes from self-centredness.[20] With such positive uses of literature throughout his oeuvre, it is perhaps surprising that Levinas's first major essay on the aesthetic is so overwhelmingly negative. Yet Shakespeare and Dostoevsky are among the authors that Levinas, in "Reality and Its Shadow," associates with modernist modes of writing—writerly modes that demonstrate an awareness of the insufficiency of literary representation.

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[18] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 163.

[19] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 63.

[20] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 166.

4.2. The Idea of Infinity in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*

Across the broad field of SF, there is no shortage of texts that explore philosophical concepts, including ethics and alterity, and could provide narrative examples and thematic treatments akin to what Levinas values in more canonical literature. SF tropes of artificial intelligence and digitised consciousness, for example, examine the separation between being and materiality that Levinas associates with the *there is* and finds in Shakespeare's supernatural elements. The work of Philip K. Dick, in particular, is replete with interrogations on the nature of being and its implications for ethics. In studies of Dick and ethics, Butler, Pinsky and Easterbrook all find themes that resonate strongly with Levinas's writings on responsibility and the Other, especially in Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), with Easterbrook asserting that Dick "stands to Heinlein as Levinas stands to Plato."[21] Some of the strongest examples of ethics and alterity addressed in SF appear from outside the popular genre's American tradition, however, and here Zamyatin's *We* provides

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[21] Easterbrook, "Ethics and Alterity," 388. Easterbrook also reads Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) through this ethical lens, concluding that "for Dick, as for Kant and Levinas, other people are always already themselves ends" (389). Of additional interest to Pinsky and Butler is the relevance of Levinas's writings on ethics and theology to Dick's later work, especially *VALIS* (1981). See: Michael Pinsky, *Future Present: Ethics and/as Science Fiction* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003); Andrew M. Butler, *Ontology and Ethics in the Writings of Philip K. Dick* (PhD diss., University of Hull, 1995).

an illuminating example from the Russian SF tradition. This influential dystopian novel contains powerful expression of Levinas's ethical concepts, connecting the idea of infinity to the face-to-face encounter with the other person, exploring how these disrupt totalising philosophies and draw the ego into question while establishing ethics and responsibility for the Other.

We is set in the One State (*Единого Государства*), a totalitarian metropolis that formed after a devastating Two-Hundred Year War. The One State is separated from the outside world, including all plants and animals, by the Green Wall (*Зеленой Стены*), a massive glass wall encompassing the city. Everything about life in the One State is strictly regulated and reduced to comprehensible formulae. Workers are referred to as "ciphers" ("нумера," or "numbers"), having alphanumeric designators instead of proper names.[22] The Table of Hours (*Часовая Скрижаль*) governs each cipher's movements and activities, with every minute of the day accounted for, from eating, working, and resting, to their mandatory physical regimen at the Taylor Exercise Hall (*зал Тэйлоровских экзерсисов*)—only two Personal Hours (*Личные Часы*) each day remain. Even love, we are told, has been "conquered, i.e., organized and mathematicized" ("побеждена, то есть организована, математизирована") as ciphers can acquire tickets for sexual encounters with any other

[22] Natasha Randall's translation renders *нумера* as *ciphers*, although the more common and arguably more fitting translation is *numbers*. For consistency with other quotes from Randall's translation, *ciphers* will be used throughout this chapter.

cipher they choose.[23] Everything in the One State is designed to erase individuality. Even personal accommodations are not only uniform, but made entirely of glass, ensuring full transparency into others' lives and aiming at the eradication of interiority.

No deviation or defiance is tolerated. Under the direction of the Benefactor (*Благодетель*) and the watchful eye of the Guardians (*Хранителей*), any "offending cog" ("погнувшийся болт") that would disrupt the finely tuned One State machine is dealt with.[24] Deviants and "unnumbered" ("ненумерованного") persons are taken to the Operation Room (*Операционном*), a facility where doctors use torture devices to extract information about accomplices.[25] The most infamous of these devices is the Gas Bell Jar (*Газовый Колокол*), under which the offender is placed as either gas is pumped in or air is pumped out. When the offender has no more information to give, they are taken to the Cube (*Куба*), a platform at the centre of a massive arena, where they are electrocuted at the Machine (*Машине*) by the Benefactor as loyal ciphers watch the execution in awe. This ritual is likened, in the text, to a church service, being a "solemn liturgy to the One State"

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[23] Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Natasha Randall (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 21; Евгений Замятин, *Мы*, Библиотека Максима Мошкова, 2013, http://az.lib.ru/z/zamjatin_e_i/text_0050.shtml, chap. 6. For the primary text of *We*, quotes in English are followed in parentheses by their Russian originals.

[24] Zamyatin, *We*, 14; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 3.

[25] Zamyatin, *We*, 71; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 15.

("торжественная литургия Единому Государству").[26] Here, *We*'s legacy is apparent: the authoritarian figure of the Benefactor provides the model for Orwell's Big Brother, while the Bureau of Guardians anticipates his Ministry of Love.

We follows D-503, a senior mathematician and engineer for the One State, who sees his rigid, mechanised society as a utopia of efficiency and rationality. D-503 is the designer of the Integral (*Интеграла*), a spaceship intended to bring "mathematically infallible happiness" ("математически безошибочное счастье"), or One State ideology, to the universe.[27] The novel begins with D-503 in loyal service to the One State, subscribing wholeheartedly to its ideals and looking forward to the day that Personal Hours are eradicated from the Table of Hours. He finds value in his work as a mathematician specifically because of its apparently totalising objectives, declaring that

> the worthiest human efforts are those intellectual pursuits that specifically seek the uninterrupted delimiting of infinity, the reduction of infinity into convenient, easily digestible portions—into differentials. The divine beauty of my medium—mathematics—is exactly that.
>
> (работа высшего, что есть в человеке,—рассудка—сводится именно к непрерывному ограничению бесконечности, к раздроблению бесконечности

[26] Zamyatin, *We*, 41; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 9.

[27] Zamyatin, *We*, 3; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 1.

> на удобные, легко переваримые порции—дифференциалы. В этом именно божественная красота моей стихии—математики.)[28]

This attempted integration of the infinite into a finite totality—something Levinas recognises as a great violence—provides the philosophical foundation of D-503's dystopian society. As Natasha Randall notes, "mathematics travels through *We* almost as an allegorical supertext."[29] Unlike Asimov's trilogy, which praises psychohistory for its mathematically rigorous totalisation, Zamyatin's novel offers a critique of the impulse toward finality and certainty that mathematics, as understood by D-503 and the One State, is taken to represent. The disruption to D-503's totalising approach comes through his encounters with others, which ultimately lead him to betray the One State and associate with a resistance movement, the MEPHI (*МЕФИ*).

The most consequential of these encounters is with I-330, a woman D-503 meets on a regulated walk with his occasional lover, O-90. Upon meeting I-330, D-503 is disturbed by his inability to quantify (and totalise) her in the way he would anything or anyone else: "there was a kind of strange and irritating X to her, and I couldn't pin it down, couldn't give it numerical expression" ("какой-то странный раздражающий икс, и я никак не могу

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[28] Zamyatin, *We*, 58; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 12.

[29] Natasha Randall, "Introduction: Them," in *We*, by Yevgeny Zamyatin, trans. Natasha Randall (New York: Modern Library, 2006), xvi–xvii.

его поймать, дать ему цифровое выражение").[30] True to the mathematical language that infuses *We*, I-330 is, to D-503, an "X," an *unknown*, and his subsequent encounters with her leave him distressed at the *irrationality*, the "$\sqrt{-1}$," that has entered his life.[31] As D-503's desire for I-330 grows, he becomes more and more involved in her world, being led first to the Ancient House (*Древний Дом*), a relic of ages past with opaque walls and pre-war furnishings, where he looks into I-330's eyes and is "gripped by the wild whirlwind of ancient life" ("себя захваченным в дикий вихрь древней жизни").[32] What sends D-503's ordered world into wild chaos, here, is I-330's inaccessible interiority: he describes her eyes lowering "like blinds" ("как шторы") and laments, "behind those blinds, inside her, something was going on—I don't know what—and it exasperated me" ("Там, за шторами, в ней происходило что-то такое—не знаю что, что выводило меня из терпения").[33] Eventually I-330 leads him beyond the Green Wall to a MEPHI settlement, where he experiences contact with nature and meets people living free from the One State—things he never thought possible. He later describes the experience as being like "a bomb had

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[30] Zamyatin, *We*, 8; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 12.

[31] As Randall notes, Zamyatin quite pointedly describes the square root of negative one as *irrational* (*иррациональных*), rather than imaginary (*мнимое*), to set it at odds with the One State's emphasis on rationality. Randall, "Introduction," xvii.

[32] Zamyatin, *We*, 26; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 6.

[33] Zamyatin, *We*, 25–26; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 6.

exploded in my head" ("В голове как будто взорвали бомбу").[34] These encounters force the breakdown of D-503's faith in the knowability of things and the validity of extending his scientific mode of thinking to the other person.

It is also through conversations with I-330 that D-503 finds his dependence on uniformity and finality drawn into question. D-503 is horrified when he learns that the MEPHI is planning a revolution by hijacking the Integral. Having been taught the revolution that created the One State was final—the last revolution—D-503 finds the idea of another incomprehensible. "This is ridiculous!" ("Это нелепо!") he laments, "Ridiculous—because revolutions aren't possible. Because our … revolution was the last. And there cannot be any more … Everyone knows that" ("Нелепо—потому что революции не может быть. Потому что наша … революция была последней. И больше никаких революций не может быть. Это известно всякому"). I-330, however, appeals to his mathematical reasoning: "What is the final number?" ("назови мне последнее число") she asks, to which he must concede, "the number of numbers is infinite" ("число чисел—бесконечно"). Likewise, I-330 explains, "there isn't a final [revolution]. Revolutions are infinite. Final things are for children because infinity scares children and it is important that children sleep peacefully at night" ("Последней—нет, революции—бесконечны. Последняя—это для детей: детей бесконечность пугает, а

[34] Zamyatin, *We*, 135; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 27.

необходимо—чтобы дети спокойно спали по ночам").[35] When D-503 objects, arguing that the One State will bring uniformity throughout the universe, I-330 emphasises the importance of *difference*: "Uniform, all over! … To you, a mathematician, isn't it clear that it's the differences—the differences—between temperatures, it's in thermal contrast that life lies" ("равномерно, повсюду! … Тебе, математику,—разве не ясно, что только разности—разности—температур, только тепловые контрасты—только в них жизнь").[36] As well as illustrating the importance of difference in bringing progressive social change, this also serves as a metaphor for the infinite difference between individuals, something foundational to Levinas's ethical encounter, but actively thwarted in the One State's search for uniformity.

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[35] Zamyatin, *We*, 153. This conversation between D-503 and I-330 would appear to establish I-330, at least here, as something of a mouthpiece for Zamyatin himself. Her line of argument concerning the infinity of revolutions is repeated almost verbatim in one of Zamyatin's essays from 1923, were he writes: "Revolution is everywhere, in everything. It is infinite. There is no final revolution, no final number. The social revolution is only one of an infinite number of numbers: the law of revolution is not a social law, but an immeasurably greater one. It is a cosmic, universal law." Yevgeny Zamyatin, "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters," in *A Soviet Heretic*, ed. and trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 107.

[36] Zamyatin, *We*, 154; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 30.

Soon after meeting I-330, D-503 finds himself facing similarly disruptive encounters with those closest to him, including O-90 and his friend R-13. "Sweet O… Dear R…" ("Милая О… Милый R…"), D-503 laments, "there is something about them that is … not totally clear to me" ("в нем есть тоже что-то, не совсем мне ясное").[37] During a conversation in which R-13 begins to voice dissatisfaction with the One State, D-503 imagines his head as an impenetrable, opaque suitcase: "I watched his tightly locked little suitcase and thought: what is he now mulling over in that little suitcase of his?" ("Я смотрел на его крепко запертый чемоданчик и думал: что он сейчас там перебирает—у себя в чемоданчике?")[38] D-503, however, avoids engaging with R-13 any further, opting to preserve his image of him as a loyal member of the Institute of State Poets and Writers (*Институт Государственных Поэтов и Писателей*). D-503 then takes solace that he will later be visited by O-90: "Tomorrow, sweet O will come to me and everything will be as simple, correct, and delimited as a circle" ("Завтра придет ко мне милая О, все будет просто, правильно и ограничено, как круг").[39] But this kind of thinking cannot withstand the face-to-face encounter. When he finally sees O-90 again, D-503 is taken aback by what he perceives as her irrationality—her love of him, jealousy of I-330, and desire to bear an unsanctioned child. His assumptions about O-90 and R-13, the mental

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[37] Zamyatin, *We*, 40; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 8.

[38] Zamyatin, *We*, 39; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 8.

[39] Zamyatin, *We*, 58; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 12.

images he held of them, turn out to be wholly inadequate, thus revealing the limits of his totalising powers.

"The ethical relationship," states Levinas, "puts the I in question."[40] Although Levinas's writings on ethics and the face appear limited to encounters with humans, a clear example of this calling into question in *We* comes in D-503's face-to-face encounter with an animal. In the One State, all animals have been exiled to the "wild, green ocean" ("диким зеленым океаном") beyond the Green Wall. Still thinking as a loyal cipher of the One State, D-503 claims that "mankind ceased to be savage when we built the Green Wall, when we isolated our perfect, machined world, by means of the Wall, from the irrational, chaotic world of the trees, birds, animals" ("Человек перестал быть диким человеком только тогда, когда мы построили Зеленую Стену, когда мы этой Стеной изолировали свой машинный, совершенный мир—от неразумного, безобразного мира деревьев, птиц, животных").[41] Later, as he walks alongside the Green Wall, trying to clear his mind of X's and $\sqrt{-1}$'s, he finds himself face-to-face with one of these wild animals:

> Through the glass—foggy and dim—I saw the stupid muzzle of some kind of beast, his yellow eyes, obstinately repeating one and the same incomprehensible thought at me. We looked at each other for a long time, eye to eye, through the mineshaft from the surface world to that other world, beyond the surface. But a thought

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[40] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

[41] Zamyatin, *We*, 83; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 17.

> swarmed in me: what if he, this yellow-eyed being—in his ridiculous, dirty bundle of trees, in his uncalculated life—is happier than us?
>
> (Сквозь стекло на меня—туманно, тускло—тупая морда какого-то зверя, желтые глаза, упорно повторяющие одну и ту же непонятную мне мысль. Мы долго смотрели друг другу в глаза—в эти шахты из поверхностного мира в другой, заповерхностный. И во мне копошится: "А вдруг он, желтоглазый,—в своей нелепой, грязной куче листьев, в своей невычисленной жизни—счастливее нас?")[42]

This encounter has D-503 immediately concerned with the animal's inaccessible interiority, as with I-330, O-90 and R-13, even making him question the value of his own life. For Levinas, this drawing-into-question of the self is at the core of the face-to-face encounter, founding our responsibility to and for the Other. Although D-503 attempts to quash this line of thinking, it eats at him, eventually leading him to re-evaluate his understanding of the relationship between freedom and happiness.

These encounters all lead D-503 to a more ethical orientation toward the Other. According to Levinas, the face of the Other, in calling the ego into question, "summons me to my obligations and judges me."[43] It is this summons to responsibility that establishes the other person as neighbour and makes the face-to-face encounter distinctly *ethical*. Over the

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[42] Zamyatin, *We*, 83; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 17.

[43] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215.

course of the novel, D-503 gradually aligns himself with MEPHI, a resistance movement seeking a return to nature and the liberation of ciphers from their restrictive, mechanised lives. An example of D-503's sense of responsibility for the Other comes toward the end of the novel in his final encounter with O-90. Having previously avoided situations that could force him to empathise with others, here D-503 slows down and attempts to show compassion for the desperate O-90, despite his prevailing confusion, offering to help her find a way to escape the One State so that she and her child can live together in safety.

Such an ethical reorientation means breaking with totalising modes of thinking and embracing the irreducible alterity of other people and, therefore, the idea of infinity. At the end of the novel, when riots have broken out across the city, D-503 encounters an exasperated fellow mathematician desperate to find comfort in the finite amongst the tumult of revolution:

> Be calm. … Everything will return, inevitably return. The only important thing is that everyone finds out about my discovery. I am telling you this first: I have calculated that there is no infinity! … Yes, yes I am telling you: there is no infinity. If the world is infinite—then the average density of matter in it must be exactly zero. And since it is not zero—this we know—then, consequently, the universe is finite, it is of a spherical form and the average density = the inverse of the universal radius squared, multiplied by … Wait, I just have to calculate the numerical coefficient, and then … You understand: *everything is finite, everything is simple,*

> *everything is calculable. Then we will conquer, in the philosophical sense*—do you understand?
>
> (успокойтесь … Все это вернется, неминуемо вернется. Важно только, чтобы все узнали о моем открытии. Я говорю об этом вам первому: я вычислил, что бесконечности нет! … Да, да, говорю вам: бесконечности нет. Если мир бесконечен, то средняя плотность материи в нем должна быть равна нулю. А так как она не нуль—это мы знаем,—то, следовательно, Вселенная—конечна, она сферической формы, и квадрат вселенского радиуса [квадрате] равен средней плотности, умноженной на… Вот мне только и надо—подсчитать числовой коэффициент, и тогда… Вы понимаете: *все конечно, все просто, все—вычислимо; и тогда мы победим философски,*—понимаете?)[44]

Faced with the unthinkable, a revolution against the One State, this man seeks comfort in the idea that everything is finite and, therefore, ultimately knowable, conquerable, totalisable. This prevents him from encountering the others around him in an ethical way, facing their infinite alterity and his own responsibility. Were he to permit himself such encounters, this character might be able to engage with what is happening around him, to empathise with the suffering of his fellow citizens and understand their plight. Such totalising modes of thinking no longer satisfy D-503, who asks the other mathematician: "Where does your finite universe end? What is there—and what comes next?" ("а там, где

[44] Zamyatin, *We*, 201; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 40. Emphasis mine.

кончается ваша конечная Вселенная? Что там—дальше?")[45] If finality is for children, D-503 has grown up.

Written from within the increasingly mechanised social structures of post-revolutionary Russia, albeit before Stalin's rise to power, *We* has an unmistakable political edge. Zamyatin, unlike Asimov, was all too aware of the oppressive and authoritarian tendencies of a society governed by totalising approaches to the Other. Zamyatin was himself a socialist—he had been an active Bolshevik during his student days and celebrated the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917—but after the 1917 October Revolution he became deeply critical of the Bolsheviks and what he saw as the brutal authoritarianism of their leadership.[46] As Randall notes, *We* responds quite directly to its context of War Communism, rapid industrialisation, and post-revolutionary utopianism. For example, Russia's Proletarian Culture movement (*Пролетку́льт*, or Proletkult), established in 1917 "to engender a new proletarian cultural universal" with the utopian vision of "human mechanization," is an obvious source of the One State's approach to art and the individual.[47] The state poets of *We*, having "tamed and saddled the once-wild natural force of poetry" ("приручена и оседлана когда-то дикая стихия поэзии") to write bland praise of the One State and its philosophy, satirise the proletarian poets of the Proletkult, many of

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[45] Zamyatin, *We*, 201; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 40.

[46] Curtis, *Englishman from Lebedian'*, 13.

[47] Randall, "Introduction," xiii.

whom wrote their own poems titled "We" to reinforce the collectivist ideals of post-revolutionary Russia.[48] As Le Guin wrote, Zamyatin's novel stands as "a brilliant testimony against the growing rigidity and authoritarianism of his nation."[49]

But *We* is not simply an attack on contemporary Russia and reading it as an anti-socialist allegory is overly reductive. The totalising systems critiqued in *We* extend far beyond Zamyatin's Russian context and in many cases are emblematic of Western modernity. A clear progenitor of the One State's mechanisation, and a target of the novel's satire, is Taylorism, the system of scientific management developed in the US in the late-nineteenth century by Frederick Winslow Taylor, whom D-503 calls a "prophet" ("пророка") and "the most brilliant of the Ancients" ("гениальнейшим из древних").[50] Taylorism is explicitly infused into One State ideology, with ciphers scheduling time at the Taylor Exercise Hall. The One State's glass structures reflect London's Crystal Palace, an

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[48] Zamyatin, *We*, 60; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 12; Kathleen Lewis and Harry Weber, "Zamyatin's *We*, the Proletarian Poets and Bogdanov's *Red Star*," in *Zamyatin's* We*: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gary Kern (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988), 187.

[49] Ursula K. Le Guin, "Introduction: The Stalin in the Soul," [1973], in *We*, by Yevgeny Zamyatin, trans. Clarence Brown (London: Folio Society, 2018), xi.

[50] Zamyatin, *We*, 31; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 7. D-503 also refers to ciphers' glass apartments as "cages of rhythmical Taylorized happiness" ("клетки ритмичного тэйлоризованного счастья") (40; chap. 8).

iron and glass megastructure created to host the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851. As Peter G. Stillman notes, by Zamyatin's time the Crystal Palace had come to symbolise "Western rationalism's clarity, transparency, and ability to use modern technology to conquer nature and satisfy human needs."[51] The One State, whose location is never disclosed in *We*, thus reflects the trajectories of all modern cities, whether communist or capitalist, toward the destruction of individuality, mechanisation of society, and authoritarianisation of politics. In Levinasian terms, *We* is a cautionary tale about the ethical implications of a society governed by totalisation and the cognitive conquering of the Other. Furthermore, just as the totalising philosophy underlying Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy is reflected in the text's readerly form, the ethical orientation of *We* is reflected in its writerly form, which opens a vast space for interpretation and invites the reader to participate as co-creator of the text's meaning. It is the ethical dimension of this writerly form that concerns the remainder of this chapter.

4.3. Ethical Language: The Saying and the Said

Through engagement with Derrida and Blanchot in his later writings, Levinas gradually alters his approach to written language, allowing new ways of thinking about the ethical possibilities of literature to emerge. Even Levinas's central notions of transcendence and

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[51] Peter G. Stillman, "Rationalism, Revolution, and Utopia in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*," in *Critical Insights: Dystopia*, ed. M. Keith Booker (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2013), 161.

the idea of infinity subtly shift to create space for the literary encounter. The ideas and approaches that develop in these later works, which in turn influenced ethical criticism in the poststructuralist vein, are as relevant for studies of poetry and "high" literature as they are for literary forms and traditions beyond this mainstream canon, including SF. Bringing our understanding of the literary forms that dominate different SF traditions into dialogue with Levinas's more nuanced approach to language, including his pivotal concepts of the Saying and the Said, allows us to recognise the ethical potential of SF and how this has been realised in certain texts. The implications of this for the SF field more broadly, and for understanding the works of Zamyatin and Wolfe in particular, will be the focus of the closing section of this chapter and the entirety of the next. We begin here, however, with an examination of the profound developments that take place in Levinas's understanding of the ethical dimensions of language.

Levinas's extreme aversion to representation forms the basis of Derrida's criticism of *Totality and Infinity* in his 1964 essay "Violence and Metaphysics." Derrida describes Levinas's major work as comprised of "concrete analyses" organised "within a powerful architecture," critiquing Levinas's dependence on the very philosophical language he condemns.[52] He also accuses Levinas of phonocentrism, whereby "only living speech is expression and not a servile sign."[53] This accusation has since been echoed by other

[52] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 92.

[53] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 101.

scholars, with Robbins detecting in Levinas a "privileging of oral discourse," and Robert Eaglestone noting that for Levinas, "language is only language if the interlocutor is actually present."[54] Derrida takes Levinas to task for railing against the representational dimension of writing (as idolatrous aestheticism) while simultaneously relying on representational language to describe the (indescribable) ethical encounter with the other person. "There is no way to conceptualize the [face-to-face] encounter," Derrida writes, "it is made possible by the other, the unforeseeable 'resistant to all categories.'"[55] He provocatively suggests that Levinas, in his description of ethics, has become guilty of the very totalisation he condemns.

Otherwise than Being can be recognised, in part, as Levinas's response to these criticisms, since it endeavours to leave behind the "narrative, epic, way of speaking" Derrida had suggested characterised his earlier work.[56] Here, Levinas attempts to escape the totalising language of philosophy by embracing a remarkably dense and difficult mode of writing that actively resists representation and the (comparative) straightforwardness of his earlier writings. As Buckingham writes: "*Otherwise than Being* could be seen as a kind of anti-storytelling, a book that attempts to resist the temptation to tell any tale whatsoever,

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[54] Robbins, "*Visage, Figure*," 140; Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 123.

[55] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 95.

[56] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 13.

that does its best to kick over the traces of the storytelling in *Totality and Infinity* until they are entirely effaced."[57] In its avoidance of the ontological language of mimetic representation characteristic of the readerly text, *Otherwise than Being* embraces the complex and questioning forms of the writerly, to the point of becoming self-interrupting, paradoxical, self-reflexive, even deconstructive. Hand thus comments on the "difficulty of reading" *Otherwise than Being*, which he calls a "traumatic and prophetic" text.[58] This resistance to closure and concretisation is evident in Levinas's notions of the Saying and the Said, which reflect the division between ethics and ontology and become central to his later philosophy. An understanding of these concepts is necessary to make sense of both Levinas's apprehension of literature and how literature can provide access to the ethical.

True to his goal of creating a less concretising text, Levinas remains elusive in his articulation of the Saying in *Otherwise than Being*, seemingly unable to settle on a definition. Eaglestone thus describes the Saying as "a *metaphor*" for the "unsayable," noting that it "cannot be named clearly by language or in philosophy."[59] Early in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas describes the Saying as "the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification."[60] Thus, from

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[57] Buckingham, *Levinas*, 8.

[58] Hand, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 58.

[59] Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, 141, 144. Original emphasis.

[60] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5.

the outset, the Saying is associated with the ethical, with proximity and substitution for the Other. Here, the Saying's association with "the very signifyingness of signification" is of particular interest, since it connects the Saying with a space in which meaning is created, resonating with what Barthes describes as "*signifiance*."[61] Although it takes place in language, in the encounter with the Other, the Saying is *not* language *as such*, for it precedes any language as a system of signs. Various articulations of the Saying are offered in Levinas's writings, but a brief and enigmatic account in his foreword to *Proper Names* (1976) is of interest: "It is the *Saying* that always opens up a passage from the Same to the Other, where there is as yet nothing in common. A non-indifference of one toward the other! … What I call the non-in-difference of the Saying is, below the double negation, still difference, behind which no commonality arises in the form of an entity."[62] The Saying can then be characterised as the space of the ethical relationship, as the space of the primordial

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[61] Barthes defines the term thus: "'Signifiance' is a process, in the course of which the 'subject' of the text ... struggles with meaning and is deconstructed ('is lost'). 'Signifiance' [is] ... that radical work (which leaves nothing intact) through which the subject explores how language works him and undoes him as soon as he stops observing it and enters it. 'Signifiance' is 'the without-end-ness of the possible operations in a given field of language'." Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text," in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 38.

[62] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 6. Original emphasis.

ethical language of the face-to-face encounter. It is this space, with its irreducible distance and infinite difference, that founds ethics and responsibility to and for the Other. The Saying is thus unthematisable, unrepresentable, uncontainable—the very coming of the idea of Infinity.

But every Saying entails a Said, which is the Saying rendered inert, thematisable, brought into the totalisable realm of ontology. The Saying, Levinas writes, is "immobilized and fixed *in the said*."[63] In *Proper Names*, the Said is described as "a rationality tied *exclusively* to the being that is sustained by words, … conveying fields of knowledge and truths in the form of unchanging identities, merging with the self-sufficient Identity of a being or system—complete, perfect, denying or absorbing the differences that appear to betray or limit it."[64] The Said finds its basis in intelligibility and is thus the domain of knowledge and the concept, of totalisation. As Eaglestone explains: "The said is the saying incarnated into a concrete world of meanings and history. As such, it has an inescapable hold over the saying, immobilizing it."[65] For Levinas, the Said, as the "birthplace of ontology," provides no access to the ethical.[66] Instead, it is infinity made finite,

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[63] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 23. Original emphasis.

[64] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 4–5. Original emphasis.

[65] Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, 145.

[66] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 42.

transcendence rendered inert, on the verge of becoming only a concept or theme and integrated into a totality.

The Saying, of course, is of greater interest to Levinas than the Said, due to its distinctly ethical nature. Discussing these concepts in his 1981 interview with Nemo, Levinas explains: "for me, the *said* (*le dit*) does not count as much as the *saying* (*le dire*) itself. The latter is important to me less through its informational contents than by the fact that it is addressed to an interlocutor."[67] Levinas posits the Saying as the response to an ethical demand: a call to respond to the irreducible alterity of the Other. As he explains:

> the *saying* is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it. The saying is a way of greeting the Other, but to greet the Other is already to answer for him. It is difficult to be silent in someone's presence; this difficulty has its ultimate foundation in this signification proper to the saying, whatever is the said. It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him.[68]

The Saying arises when the ego is called into question by the Other, and this question demands a response. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas calls this response *language*, wherein

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[67] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 43. Original emphasis.

[68] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 88. Original emphasis.

the individual offers part of their own world in an act of generosity—an act of Saying.[69] Here Levinas's phonocentrism is evident, with emphasis being placed on the face-to-face encounter in which the Saying is said to originate. And the Saying is indeed essential to this encounter, as Kuisma Korhonen writes: "the face is heard in the event of Saying (the vocative act of addressing the Other)."[70] Herein also lies the danger of the Said, which in fixing the Saying in the totalisable realm of ontology risks effacing the alterity of the Other.

Recalling the analysis of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy in the previous chapter, the Said is the level of communication apparently achieved by the psychohistorians of the Second Foundation, who have eliminated the need for speech (which remains in the realm of the Saying) by communicating concrete thoughts directly through every expression. All communication is unambiguous, read with absolute certainty through the interlocutor's every expression, nothing can be hidden from the other—no interiority remains. In a Levinasian sense, those communicating in this way in Asimov's Second Foundation would no longer even *be* interlocutors, they would be faceless, as their alterity is stripped away and they are rendered fully comprehensible. In short, Asimov imagines an ideal world in which the other person is, simply, no longer Other.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Levinas tends to associate art and literature with the Said. Narrative comes under particular scrutiny in *Otherwise than Being* where "narration"

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[69] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

[70] Korhonen, "Towards a Post-Levinasian," 462.

is equated to "the said."[71] The ethical concern here is that narration destroys the alterity of the other it seeks to represent: "The unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration. The relationship with him is indescribable in the literal sense of the term, unconvertible into a history, irreducible to the simultaneousness of writing, the eternal present of a writing that records or presents results."[72] Narrative, for Levinas, offers the Other up to the Said and the ego's totalising tendencies. As Colin Davis notes, Levinas rejects "emplotment … because of its complicity with thematization and meaning; it is the violence of the Said on Saying which will inevitably occur but can be resisted through the text's vigilant subversion."[73] The indescribable—the human other, history, the world—is reduced to an element in a narrative that offers up a straightforward meaning through supposedly transparent writing. As with his earlier writings, Levinas's proper target can be recognised as the readerly text, which seeks to maintain a mimetic illusion which reinforces the powers of narrative to render the world intelligible. *Otherwise than Being* would seem to retain the negativity that dominated Levinas's earlier writings: "Art is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to absolute exposition, even to shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined. The said is

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[71] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 83.

[72] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 166.

[73] Colin Davis, *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004), 98.

reduced to the Beautiful, which supports Western ontology."[74] Art is again cast as the covering-up of alterity, as the reduction of the Said to the aesthetic category of the Beautiful, an idolatry complicit in totalisation. Yet this reduction is surely not completed by art itself, but by the viewing or reading subject, who carries out the totalising exercise necessary to reduce the Said of art to a comprehensible theme.

A major tension in Levinas's descriptions of literature arises from his insistence that the Said can never entirely extinguish the Saying, which leaves its trace and can always resurface. According to Levinas, the Saying and the Said are interdependent, with every Saying necessarily resulting in a Said, and every Said able to be traced back to its pre-originary Saying. "The saying that is absorbed in the said," he writes, "is not exhausted in this manifestation."[75] The Saying "imprints its trace" on the Said—a trace that is evident in the interruptions of the Said, the elements that keep the Said from becoming an unambiguous and perfectly coherent whole, the elements that are lost in totalisation.[76] Barthes would call these interruptions the text's *difference*—that which allows for writerly readings of readerly texts. Korhonen notes that, whereas the Said "is visible to the analytic gaze," the Saying "can be perceived only through those ruptures—or traces of those

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[74] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 40.

[75] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 46.

[76] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 46.

ruptures—that it has left to the order of the Said."[77] The purpose of philosophy, according to Levinas, is to uncover the Saying in the Said by making people aware of these ruptures.

The interdependence of the Saying and the Said becomes central to Eaglestone's development of a Levinasian ethical criticism. According to Levinas's understanding of language and discourse, Eaglestone explains, "the saying can never be totally engulfed in the said. The saying appears through its manifestation as a disruption of the said. The saying both stimulates the said—is made manifest in the said—and ruptures it."[78] As Eaglestone notes, this ultimately leads to a contradiction emerging in Levinas's writings, where his acknowledgement of the Saying and the Said's coexistence in written discourse sits uncomfortably with his condemnation of art and literature. Eaglestone concludes:

> Levinas's own writing in *Otherwise than Being*, despite his position on aesthetics, suggests that literary art must also be composed of the interaction of the saying and the said, and is not merely the resounding of the said. Three factors suggest this: first, Levinas's understanding of language in general; second, the use of, and appeal to, literature in *Otherwise than Being*; third, the text's own potential 'literary' status. As a consequence, it seems clear that literature does incorporate the saying.[79]

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[77] Korhonen, "Towards a Post-Levinasian," 462.

[78] Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, 147.

[79] Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, 157.

As Eaglestone notes, Levinas demonstrates in *Otherwise than Being* just how literature can provide access to the Saying through a particular kind of writing—a writing that refuses to become a closed, consistent and unruptured Said. As we will see in the following chapter on Wolfe, if the purpose of philosophy is to rehabilitate the Saying from the Said, the purpose of a philosophical literary criticism is to pull at a text's ruptures to reveal the wealth of meaning available to the reader—to read deconstructively, or in a writerly mode.

4.4. The Literature that Unsays Itself

4.4.1. Poetry and Writerly Interruption

This kind of writing that breaks apart the Said and invites the reader to encounter the Saying is, I argue, what Barthes identifies as writerly. Through disruptive techniques such as self-reflexivity, intertextuality, ambiguous language, and fragmentary writing, writerly texts can direct the reader back to the Saying by managing *to unsay their own Said*. Korhonen calls this mode of writing "*de-narration*," since it resists the temptation of narrative consistency and closure, striving instead to unsay the narrative Said such that "the original Saying as 'nudity of the face' before all linguistic acts can be welcome."[80] This unsaying of the Said in literature thus requires an acute awareness of the ontological

[80] Korhonen, "Towards a Post-Levinasian," 466. Original emphasis.

dimension of language and its vulnerability to totalisation. As David P. Haney and Donald R. Wehrs note in their introduction to *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2009):

> To the extent that literature is alert to the complicity between ontology and language, to the extent that it seeks to awaken ethical sensibility against the grain of, or behind the back of, totalizing conceptualities, it seeks, as does Levinas especially in *Otherwise Than Being*, a means of communication commensurate with the ethical signification it would communicate.[81]

As Haney and Wehrs suggest, the self-aware writerly mode of *Otherwise than Being* complements the ethical meanings the text seeks to convey. The text's form and content both seek to provide access to ethics and connect the reader with a distinctly ethical way of thinking. *Otherwise than Being* achieves this by ceaselessly interrupting its own complex writing, constantly posing either open or rhetorical questions and spinning a web of unstable definitions and changing explanations. Paradoxical verbal constructions come to dominate the text, with readers offered a definition of subjectivity as "a passivity more passive than all passivity," and, later, of the Saying as the "passivity of passivity" and even

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[81] David P. Haney and Donald R. Wehrs, "Introduction: Levinas, Twenty-First Century Ethical Criticism, and Their Nineteenth-Century Contexts," in *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism Through Realism*, ed. David P. Haney and Donald R Wehrs (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 29.

"saying saying saying itself."[82] As Eaglestone observes, the style of *Otherwise than Being* "foregrounds language in order to disrupt the said," thereby opening the text "towards the saying."[83] The writerliness of *Otherwise than Being* thus draws the reader back to the ethical realm of the Saying.

Levinas briefly and obliquely acknowledges the ethical potential of literature in *Otherwise than Being* when he discusses "poetic" language, which is described quite differently from art and narrative. According to Levinas, the possibility of language directing to meanings beyond the thematisation of the Said and exceeding "the limits of what is thought" is "laid bare in the poetic said, and the interpretation it calls for ad infinitum."[84] As Gabriel Riera notes: "The poetic *said* … accomplishes a dismantling of the normative and violent dimension of coherence."[85] This kind of writing, this *poetic Said*, resists offering itself up to totalisation as ontological language. In his discussion of the interaction between the Said and the Saying in written discourse, Levinas uses the kinds of text-as-textile tropes—"language weaves," he writes—commonly used by poststructuralists

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[82] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 14, 143.

[83] Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, 161.

[84] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 169–170.

[85] Gabriel Riera, "'The *Possibility* of the Poetic Said' in *Otherwise than Being* (Allusion, or Blanchot in Lévinas)," *Diacritics* 34, no. 2 (2004): 31. Original emphasis.

such as Barthes, who likened the text to a "tissue of quotations."[86] In Levinas's description of writing, the text's narrative coherence is a thread, which is interrupted throughout by knots that challenge its consistency: "The interruptions of the discourse found again and recounted in the immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again, the trace of a diachrony that does not enter into the present, that refuses simultaneity."[87] These knots, or interruptions, in the poetic Said allow access to a *poetic Saying*, an infinite and non-totalisable space of ethical significance. "Self-interruption," Robbins notes, "is the trope for a form of ethical discourse in which the interruption is not reabsorbed into thematization and totality, namely, an ethical discourse that *performs* its own putting into question."[88] Such rupturing of the Said provides access to the ethical realm of the Saying, which pre-exists the closed, final meanings offered up by the narrative, thus staging the reader's encounter with a dimension of transcendence.

Levinas himself gradually becomes more open to the possibility of literature providing access to the ethical. His own later engagements with literature, particularly his writings on Blanchot, Celan, Agnon and the Jewish scriptures, challenge his portrayal of art as pure Said. In these writings Levinas finds literature that, as Hart puts it, "unsays itself

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[86] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 169; Barthes, "Death of the Author," 146

[87] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 170.

[88] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 145.

and consequently does not slide unchecked into the said."[89] Even this was briefly anticipated in his earlier essays. In "The Other in Proust," for example, Levinas associates *In Search of Lost Time* with poetry and finds it permeated with deep ambiguity: "Despite the precision of line and the depth of character type, the contours of events, persons and things remain absolutely indeterminate."[90] Proust thus creates "a world that is never definitive and where one course of action does not preclude other possibilities," a world in which "everything is giddily possible."[91] We see here the beginning of an ethical value being attributed to a particular mode of writing—a writerly mode that operates through openness, ambiguity and indeterminacy.[92] The remainder of this discussion of Levinas will explore these more positive writings on literature, focusing on the examples of Blanchot and the Jewish Scriptures, so we can move toward a robust understanding of the ethical potential of literature in general and SF specifically.

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[89] Hart, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 127.

[90] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 162.

[91] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 162.

[92] Yet Levinas's praise of Proust remains hesitant, when he concludes: "Proust's most profound lesson, *if poetry can contain lessons*, consists in situating reality in a relation with something which for ever remains other." Furthermore, as Davis notes, Levinas's qualified acknowledgement of the ethical possibilities of Proust is only possible because he describes Proust "as *poetry*, not narrative fiction." Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 165 (emphasis mine); Davis, *After Poststructuralism*, 92.

4.4.2. Levinas and Blanchot: The Unenglobable Literary Space

To understand what drives Levinas to rethink his stance on literature, we must consider the intertextual dialogue he maintained with Blanchot, whose literary and critical writings greatly influenced Levinas's later work, as demonstrated in his 1976 volume *On Maurice Blanchot*. Blanchot, for his part, engages directly with Levinas's philosophy in several critical works, with both authors sharing deep concern for the dangers of totalising thought and the self's limitless responsibility to and for the other person. Their intertextual relationship is so significant, and Blanchot's critique and extension of Levinas so influential, that William Large would declare: "You cannot read Levinas without Blanchot."[93] Indeed, Blanchot actively challenges Levinas on his approach to literature, calling his dismissal of writing into question and introducing a new way of thinking about literature's relation to transcendence and ethics.

Like Levinas, Blanchot posits that the literary text "belongs to the realm of shadows," not illuminating reality, but existing on the hither side of reality.[94] In his 1956 review of Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* (1955), Levinas praises Blanchot for breaking with Heidegger's ontological conception of the artwork and associating literature not with

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[93] William Large, *Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2005), xv.

[94] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 25.

the illuminating light of day, but with the darkness of night. Contrary to Heidegger, Blanchot posits that the literary work does not provide access to truth:

> As soon as the truth one thinks one draws from it comes to light, becomes the life and the action of daytime's clarity, the work closes in on itself as if it were a foreigner to this truth and without significance. For the work seems a stranger not only with respect to truths already known and certain; it is not only the scandal of the monstrous and of the nontrue; it always refutes the true, whatever it may be. Even if truth be drawn from the work, the work overturns it, takes it back into itself to bury and hide it.[95]

This dissociation of literature and truth causes Levinas to exclaim: "In Blanchot, *the work uncovers, in an uncovering that is not truth*, a darkness. In an uncovering that is not truth!"[96] But where Levinas, in "Reality and Its Shadow," interpreted this association of literature with night and non-truth as negative and egotistical, Blanchot gives it a positive inflection, finding that it attests to the transcendence of the literary space and thereby challenges totalising thought. The space of literature, for Blanchot, is precisely this non-totalisable realm of the "night," or what he also calls the "outside."[97] In his review of *The Space of Literature*, Levinas identifies this space as "absolute exteriority: the exteriority of absolute

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[95] Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 228–229.

[96] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 136. Original emphasis.

[97] Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 31, 40.

exile."[98] The exteriority of literature signifies an infinite distance, not only from the world, from truth, but also from itself. The work always remains irreducibly distant from any apparent truth that can be extracted from it, eternally separated from anything that can be grasped or concretised, from any meaning that can be created by the reader.

The night, or the outside, to which writing belongs holds much in common with Levinas's notion of the *there is*. This concept is of particular interest to Blanchot, and Levinas suggested that the *there is* is "the real subject of [Blanchot's] novels and stories."[99] Blanchot, however, expands on the notion of the *there is* by connecting it to the space of literature. As Leslie Hill notes, "what the *il y a* [*there is*] seeks to name, in its total generality, is the pre-conceptual singularity of being. The condition is a peculiar one, but crucially, for Blanchot, it is a condition that the *il y a* shares with literature."[100] Through this concept of the *there is*, which Blanchot will later develop into the idea of the neuter, literature is connected to a pre-conceptual space of infinite alterity. As we shall see, this comes to have a significant influence on Levinas's understanding of writing and literature.

Blanchot, responding to *Totality and Infinity*, takes aim at Levinas's phonocentrism in *The Infinite Conversation* (1969), asking whether "oral discourse" truly is the "plentitude

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[98] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 133.

[99] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 50.

[100] Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 112.

of discourse."[101] Contrary to Levinas, Blanchot posits that the absolute exteriority and infinite alterity established through speech in the face-to-face encounter is not altogether different from the absolute exteriority and infinite alterity of the literary space available in the encounter with literature. Where Levinas associates transcendence and alterity with the human other, Blanchot associates them more properly with speech and the social relation, using them to describe the infinite distance between the self and the other person that is exposed in speech. Blanchot then finds this transcendence, this irreducible distance, between the self and the written word, which he calls "ambiguity itself."[102] In neither case can the two terms, separated by the strangeness of language, be brought together and unified in a totality.[103] According to Blanchot, to insist that absolute exteriority can come only from the other person is already to posit some common ground, some unifying

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[101] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 56.

[102] Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 44.

[103] For more on Blanchot's significant development of Levinas's notions of language and alterity, see: Large, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 107–110. "What is important," writes Large, "is not the difference between speech and writing, but the discontinuity which disrupts them both, and which the unity of thought is constantly concealing or avoiding" (110).

element, between the self and the Other.[104] Rather, Blanchot identifies this "radical exteriority with respect to the Self" as rooted in "the property of all language—spoken, but also, and perhaps to a higher degree, written language—always to lend assistance to itself, never saying only what it says but always more and always less."[105] For Blanchot, the ethical dimension of spoken language clearly extends to written language, even though Levinas rules out any such possibility, at least initially.

Levinas's early rejection of written discourse is based on his association of writing with representation and totalisation. Thus, as Large notes, Levinas's condemnation of writing is inseparable from his critique of discourses of "history, economics and politics," since each "represents an anonymous objective discourse which negates the singularity of the Other."[106] Readerly fiction is certainly situated alongside most historical, economic and

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[104] As Bruns explains: "alterity for Levinas is always another human being, whereas Blanchot's argument against Levinas is this: to say that only what is human can be other is already to feature the other within a totality or upon a common ground; it is to assemble with the other a possible (workable) community. Blanchot prefers indeterminate or at least highly abstract terms for alterity, namely the 'outside', the 'neutral', the 'unknown' (*l'inconnu*) … Thus for Blanchot poetry is in excess of ethical alterity; it is a relation of foreignness or strangeness with what is absolutely singular and irreducible." Bruns, "Concepts," 227.

[105] Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 57.

[106] Large, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 132.

political discourse in its pretence of objectivity and negation of the Other's alterity. Yet in these early writings Levinas fails to consider fully the implications of the kinds of writerly discourse that could provide access to the transcendent space Blanchot identifies. It is only later that Levinas engages with such writing and considers its ethical possibilities. In his 1956 review of *The Space of Literature*, Levinas acknowledges the potential for literature to provide access to an infinite space, since it "casts us upon a shore where no thought can land—it lets out onto the unthinkable" and is thus "the unique adventure of a transcendence beyond all the horizons of the world."[107] Discussing Blanchot's work in a later interview with André Dalmas, Levinas identifies literature as the event of "dispersion" and the "break with order," holding it in contrast to philosophy's "englobing discourse."[108] Writing is here identified not with totalisation, closure or the pretence of transparent representation, but with "opening up the *unenglobable literary space*."[109] What attracts Levinas to Blanchot's creative work is the way it stages an encounter with this unenglobable literary space through its self-interruption and resistance to narrative closure.

Levinas's high valuation of Blanchot is demonstrated in his 1975 essay on Blanchot's "The Madness of the Day," a 1973 short story with a complex and self-conscious literary form that addresses themes of death, writing and the relation with the other person.

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[107] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 134.

[108] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 151.

[109] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 151. Emphasis mine.

The first-person narrator of "The Madness of the Day" recounts, through disjointed and often frantic prose bursting with surreal imagery and metaphor, a series of extraordinary encounters, from narrowly escaping death before a firing squad, to being almost blinded by a stranger stabbing glass into his eyes, and finally being interrogated by doctors in a Kafkaesque hospital. As Hill explains, the madness of Blanchot's story is that it "refuses the law of narrative in its everyday demands for clarity, luminosity, and illumination," and thus the text "does not belong to the order of representation but effects a pure interruption of all representation."[110] Levinas is drawn to the text, not only for its concern for the social relation, but also for its challenging literary form and refusal of narrative closure. In his essay, he tentatively offers readings of various scenes in Blanchot's story, reflecting, for example, on the imagery of daylight and vision that permeate the story, as well as the significance of the narrator's encounters with others. As Caroline Sheaffer-Jones notes, however, at the heart of both Blanchot's story and Levinas's essay is "the question of testimony": "This issue goes beyond the problem of a narrator who is simply unreliable to the possibility, or impossibility, of testimony itself."[111] At the end of the narrative, while Blanchot's narrator is at the hospital, doctors repeatedly demand that he tell them his "story":

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[110] Hill, *Blanchot*, 100, 102.

[111] Caroline Sheaffer-Jones, "The Point of the Story: Levinas, Blanchot and 'The Madness of the Day'," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 1 (2008): 161, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2008.0026.

> I have been asked: Tell us '*just* exactly' what happened. A story? I began: I am not learned; I am not ignorant. I have known joys. That is saying too little. I told them the whole story and they listened, it seems to me, with interest, at least in the beginning. But the end was a surprise to all of us. 'That was the beginning,' they said. 'Now get down to the facts.' How so? The story was over![112]

The doctors demand the subject become an author and, in a certain metafictional circularity, he begins narrating the opening of "The Madness of the Day" itself ("I am not learned; I am not ignorant. I have known joys"). As the two doctors demand a more coherent narrative, more "facts," the narrator finishes his account as follows:

> Of course neither of them was the chief of police. But because there were two of them, there were three, and this third remained firmly convinced, I am sure, that a writer, a man who speaks and who reasons with distinction, is always capable of recounting facts that he remembers.
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> A story? No. No stories, never again.[113]

The narrator's ultimate refusal to tell a story, to attempt to convert the madness of the day into a comprehensible series of facts, reflects the text's own refusal to become fixed in a

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[112] Maurice Blanchot, "The Madness of the Day," *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lamberton (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1999), 199. Original emphasis.

[113] Blanchot, "Madness of the Day," 199.

closed, readerly narrative. Levinas finds that "the meaning of the story is lost: what happens does not succeed in happening, does not go into a story," and instead the text evinces "a sort of piling up of its meaning."[114] For Levinas, this self-conscious plurality of meaning marks "the end of the literature of the 'fable,' the end of language, i.e. the end of that verbal synchrony by which all disorder was still able to pass for a different order."[115] The doctors, in demanding a coherent story, require the narrator to re-establish order through narrative, but as Levinas notes, "to tell a story … is already to make a police report."[116] Like the corporate reports Levinas had earlier rejected for their totalising (and mundane) approach to language, the kind of story demanded by the doctors—a logical series of facts—is only a report, not the kind of literature that invites the reader into an unenglobable literary space, to return to the Saying from the Said. In closing his essay, Levinas highlights the text's refusal of closure: "somewhere in the brain, 'it keeps on knitting.'"[117] With this return to the imagery of the text as textile, Levinas indicates the reader's ongoing co-creation of meaning, as the work's interpretive possibilities continue to resonate. The writerly text has succeeded in drawing the reader in to a writerly mode of reading.

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[114] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 169.

[115] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 169.

[116] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 170.

[117] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 170.

Levinas finds Blanchot's text compelling for the way it facilitates the reader's encounter with an infinite interpretive space, or what Sheaffer-Jones identifies as "a neutral space that incessantly defies circumscription or totalization."[118] As Riera explains:

> Levinas and Blanchot share a basic premise: the other escapes both the order of discourse and the framework of narration, but must nevertheless be written. Faced with the assimilating grasp of the concept, if the other must be preserved as such, then writing has to abandon a series of guarantees and pass tangentially through the scene of knowledge and the order of representation.[119]

For Levinas, Blanchot's work demonstrates how literature can break with such totalising discourse and representation and, as Hand describes it, "hold open transcendence."[120] Robbins also notes that, after engaging with Blanchot, the "political vehemence" of Levinas's earlier writings on art and literature is tempered, with Levinas coming to recognise literature's "possible relation to ethics."[121] Through Blanchot's writings on the outside, the night, and the space of literature—ideas which resonate with his own descriptions of the *there is* and the ethical encounter with the Other—Levinas recognises

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[118] Sheaffer-Jones, "Point of the Story," 165.

[119] Riera, "*Possibility*," 16.

[120] Hand, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 74.

[121] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 154.

literature's capacity to provide access to the Saying, to a transcendent ethical space that draws the totalising powers of the subject into question.

This transformation in Levinas's thought is evident in his essays on literature from the 1970s, which provide further insights into the ethical significance of writerly texts. Hand points to Levinas's 1972 essay on Paul Celan as demonstrating "an emphatic and generally unretractable shift" in Levinas's attitude toward literature, containing clear acknowledgement that the written word can serve as a "means of communication in the ethical relation."[122] Levinas suggests that Celan demonstrates "an attempt to think transcendence" in his writings, before describing his poetry as "*conversion into the infinite of pure mortality and the dead letter*."[123] In a lengthy footnote, Levinas begins to second-guess himself, asking: "Transcendence through poetry: is this serious?," but ultimately reaffirms his conclusion.[124] According to Levinas, Celan's poetry, which is at the "height of language," provides access to a "poetic saying," a "language of proximity" that effects a movement "toward the other."[125] Like speech with the other person, this poetry "precedes all thematization" and thus "leaves the real its alterity."[126] It achieves this, Levinas explains,

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[122] Hand, *Emmanuel Lévinas*, 75.

[123] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 42. Original emphasis.

[124] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 42. 175.

[125] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 42. 41, 44.

[126] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 42. 44.

by "constantly interrupting itself."[127] This fragmentary, interruptive writing provides access to the ethical Saying that precedes totalisation by introducing ruptures to the Said and resisting logico-temporal consistency and mimetic representation. Later in this chapter, and throughout the next, we will see how this self-interruption has been practised within different SF traditions by authors such as Zamyatin and Wolfe.

The year after his essay on Celan was published, Levinas praised the work of S. Y. Agnon for demonstrating a "perfect harmony between the Saying and the Said."[128] For Levinas, the ambiguity and sonority of Agnon's use of words makes his writing "pure poetry."[129] In Agnon's dense prose, things are said to "reverberate … with all their 'unrepresentability'," making his stories "impossible to summarize."[130] Levinas also points to the self-conscious intertextuality of Agnon's work, with its direct and indirect references to biblical and rabbinic sources, as a way in which the work opens up avenues of meaning

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[127] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 42. 41. As Hill notes: "If Levinas's distrust of poetry interrupts itself in response to Celan, … it is perhaps because Celan is already the poet of interruption." See: Leslie Hill, "'Distrust of Poetry': Levinas, Blanchot, Celan," *MLN* 120, no. 5 (2005): 991, https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2006.0011.

[128] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 8.

[129] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 10.

[130] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 12, 13.

for the reader.[131] As Robbins notes, Agnon is "exemplary as an ultraethical writer for Levinas," for his work evinces a resistance to the immobilisation of the Saying in the Said.[132] This resistance is created through its open and writerly form, which puts into question the self's totalising powers of knowledge and comprehension, allowing the Other's alterity to remain, while providing access to an infinite space of interpretive possibility.

4.4.3. Levinas and the Bible: Inexhaustible Literature

Here it is worth briefly considering the approach to literature that develops in Levinas's Jewish writings, including his Talmudic readings, which he usually separated from his philosophical writings and have therefore tended not to be addressed in studies of literature and ethics.[133] While this may seem a diversion, biblical exegesis being a far cry from SF studies, Robbins rightly observes that Levinas's "discourse on the literary" is "intertwined with his discourse on the Judaic."[134] Indeed, it is here that we find his clearest articulations of the ethical and transcendent potential of literature, for the esteem in which

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[131] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 9.

[132] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 136, 146.

[133] For more on this, see: Jill Robbins, "An Inscribed Responsibility: Levinas's *Difficult Freedom*," *MLN* 106, no. 5 (1991): 1052–1062, https://doi.org/10.2307/2904600.

[134] Robbins, *Altered Reading*, xvi, xxii, 40. Despite this acknowledgement, Robbins nonetheless declares that Levinas's Judaic writings are beyond the purview of her study of Levinas and literature.

Levinas holds the scriptures and their commentaries is directly connected to their openness to interpretation and their staging of singular literary encounters. In the foreword to *Beyond the Verse* (1982), Levinas claims that the potential meanings of scriptural verses are "inexhaustible" and that they therefore represent "the 'more' inhabiting the 'less', the Infinite in the Finite."[135] According to Levinas, this inexhaustible plurality of meaning is "the prophetic dignity of language, capable of always signifying more than it says."[136] This is what makes the Bible, for Levinas, "the book par excellence," as he explained in the interview with Nemo: "It is that extraordinary presence of its characters, that ethical plenitude and its mysterious possibilities of exegesis which originally signified transcendence for me."[137] Indeed, this plurivocity and openness signifies to Levinas the "inspired origin" of the Jewish scriptures, wherein each verse "contains more than it contains" and houses "an inexhaustible surplus of meaning."[138] Inspiration is here

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[135] Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), x.

[136] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, xi.

[137] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 22, 23.

[138] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 109. As Sarah Hammerschlag explains in a discussion of Levinas and Judaism: "The Bible and the Talmud show themselves to be divinely inspired because they have the power to invoke new responses in their readers. In their polyvalence they can support multiple interpretations and can be infinitely renewed." Sarah Hammerschlag, "Literary Unrest: Blanchot,

redefined as "another meaning which breaks through from beneath the immediate meaning," beckoning the reader to an "extreme consciousness" that is "the actual 'how' of the ethical code that disturbs the established order of being."[139] Here we come upon what Levinas calls the "ethical truth" of language: that it can always "say more than it says" and "extend beyond the primary intentions that carry it," and it is in this that "the idea of God comes to us."[140] Going well beyond the tentative acknowledgement of the ethical possibility of literature in his writings on Blanchot, Celan and Agnon, Levinas now explicitly accepts the potential for literature to provide access to transcendence, and even the idea of infinity, which he had previously reserved for the face-to-face encounter alone.

Levinas's newfound willingness to connect literature and transcendence is not a special case only holding true for the Jewish scriptures, for he repeatedly extends his statements to literature more broadly. In the foreword to *Beyond the Verse*, Levinas praises "the eminent role" played by the writings of "Shakespeare, Molière, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe and Pushkin," which, like the Bible, are said to signify "beyond their plain meaning" and therefore "invite exegesis—be it straightforward or tortuous, but by no

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Levinas, and the Proximity of Judaism," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (2013): 659, https://doi.org/10.1086/655207.

[139] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 110.

[140] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 114.

means frivolous."[141] Levinas also extends his comments on inspiration in a discussion of "national literatures," those canonical works that continue to generate new interpretations and singular encounters:

> Above and beyond the immediate meaning of what is said in these texts, the act of saying is inspired. The fact that meaning comes through the book testifies to its biblical essence. The comparison between the inspiration conferred on the Bible and the inspiration towards which the interpretation of literary texts tends is not intended to compromise the dignity of the Scriptures. On the contrary, it asserts the dignity of 'national literatures.'[142]

What the Bible, Talmudic commentaries and "national literatures" share is an abundance of interpretive possibilities that breaks through the fabric of the text and interrupts the concretisation of the Saying in the Said. Levinas thus asserts that "all literature" can claim heteronomous inspiration and can thus attest to the "religious essence of language."[143] Religion is used here in the same sense as in *Totality and Infinity*, where it is defined as "the bond that is established between the same and other without constituting a totality," a bond that is the very transcendence of the Saying in the social relation.[144] The religious essence of

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[141] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, xi.

[142] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 111.

[143] Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 111.

[144] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40.

language is thus the very openness of the unenglobable literary space, which calls into question the self's totalising powers of comprehension and closure. Levinas, it would seem, has finally come to accept Blanchot's writings on the ethical dimension of the space of literature: the idea of Infinity comes not through the face of the other person *per se*, as though by looking upon their visage the idea arises, but rather through the inexhaustibility of language. Contrary to his earlier writings, this "ethical truth" of language rings forth not only in the Saying of interlocution in the face-to-face encounter, but also through the transcendence of writing, the poetic Saying.

4.4.4. The Call for Criticism

Before closing this discussion of Levinas, I wish to make a point to which I will return in the next chapter: these writerly texts, which unsay themselves and draw the reader into an encounter with the unenglobable space of literature, make an ethical demand on the reader and call for a non-totalising response. They call for responsibility in their reading. One of Levinas's consistent lines of argument concerning literature is its demand for criticism and interpretation. In "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas describes art as producing in the viewer (or reader) an "irresistible need to speak," thus demonstrating a call for "philosophical exegesis" or "criticism," although he remains vague as to what such a criticism would entail.[145] In his later writings, particularly those on the Bible and the

[145] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 130, 142.

Talmud, Levinas articulates this more clearly as literature's demand for "exegesis"—a demand that resonates in "national literatures" and Jewish scriptures alike. As Davis notes, Levinas finds that the Talmud, itself comprised of commentaries and expositions on the Bible, "calls for commentary, discussion and argument. No interpretation will ever be definitive because there is always more to be said, new connections and resonance to be found."[146] Just as the ethical Saying of the face-to-face encounter demands a response, the poetic Saying of literature demands exegesis, it demands an *ethical criticism*. Eaglestone calls such criticism "interruptive interpretation," while Critchley identifies it as deconstruction.[147] But we could also point to Barthes's writerly mode of reading as just such an interruptive approach, as demonstrated in the ceaselessly interruptive reading of Balzac in *S/Z*. This ethical criticism is, above all, a non-totalising approach to the singularity of the literary encounter. It is a criticism that respects the text's alterity, inexhaustibility, and irreducible distance from both the reader and the author.

This intrinsic call for criticism is by no means limited to the writerly text. The readerly text, however, suppresses the call beneath the closure and logico-temporal consistency of the irreversible narrative, which offers itself up for unreflective comprehension. Such works strive to reduce access to the Saying, attempting to keep the work's texture unruptured, the thread of the text unknotted. The writerly text, on the other

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[146] Davis, *After Poststructuralism*, 93.

[147] Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, 164; Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*.

hand, draws the reader into an encounter with that which cannot be contained or reduced to a concept, where the call to respond is allowed to resonate. B. H. McLean has connected Levinas's approach to the Jewish scriptures to Umberto Eco's notion of the "open work," noting that "Levinas is primarily interested in the *productive* dimension of textuality. He argues that biblical texts do not inherently possess multiple meanings; they *form* multiple meanings through the text-reception complex."[148] It is in the irreducible space between the reader and the text that the reader can create meaning, with each bringing to the text their own perspective, born of their idioculture.

Through Levinas's demanding philosophy we can recognise the ethical significance of a kind of writing that resists totalisation and invites the reader to a singular encounter with an unenglobable literary space. When reading Levinas is informed by the work of poststructuralist critics like Barthes, it can provide us with a way to reformulate the spectrum between the writerly and the readerly as a continuum between infinity and finitude, between the Saying and the Said, between ethics and totalisation. In his earlier writings on art and literature, Levinas's negativity stems from a concern for the complicity of the aesthetic in the totalising order that dominates Western philosophy. As the previous chapters have shown, this complicity is evident in the dominant modes of US pulp SF, including Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy. Yet Levinas distinguishes certain texts that

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[148] B. H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 263.

demonstrate a self-awareness of the limitations of narrative and representation. Through their self-interruption and self-awareness, such texts manage to unsay themselves and open up an unenglobable space of interpretation. Hence the appeal of Blanchot, Celan, and Agnon, in whose writing Levinas finds an opening of transcendence. This facilitates Levinas's eventual recognition that the idea of Infinity can come through literature that demonstrates inspiration in its extreme openness to interpretation. In their writerly form, such texts move toward infinity, provide access to the Saying, and demand singular responses.

4.5. Ethical Literary Form in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*

As I observed in chapter two, there is no shortage of SF outside the US pulp tradition that deploys writerly techniques to create a plurality of meaning and openness to interpretation. I contend that SF texts' approaches toward the Other and the unknown are often reflected in their approaches to literary form and representation. Indeed, in both Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy and Zamyatin's *We*, the text's approach to totalisation and the Other is mirrored in its written form, highlighting the ethical significance of different modes of literary representation. In Zamyatin's *We*, an open and disruptive literary form complements the text's focus on infinity, irrationality, and the face-to-face encounter. An ethical form goes hand-in-hand with the text's ethical themes. Through its various self-interruptions, demonstrated in the text's structure, language, characterisation, narration,

and open ending, the text's writerly form challenges the reader and offers a wide range of interpretive possibilities, inviting an encounter with a poetic Saying and presenting an ethical challenge to totalising approaches.

We is presented as the diary of D-503, written to be placed aboard the Integral and carry his description of the "mathematically perfect life of the One State" ("математически совершенной жизни Единого Государства") to alien life.[149] Early records (or *запись*, serving as chapters) are rigid and mechanised, but they become fragmentary and disordered as the narrator's totalising worldview breaks down. The keywords (or *конспекта*, abstracts) that open and organise each record start out clear and descriptive, but soon D-503 is unable to categorise his experiences—the keywords of record 27 simply read: "No Keywords of Any Kind Are Possible" ("Никакого конспекта—нельзя").[150] D-503's intention is to record events with absolute clarity and certainty, and when he finds himself troubled by unknowns, he believes that he is "duty bound" ("обязанным") as a writer, to explain them: "all unknowns are … man's natural enemy. *Homo sapiens* is only man, in the fullest sense of the word, when his grammar contains no question marks, only exclamation marks, commas, and periods" ("вообще неизвестное органически враждебно человеку, и homo sapiens – только тогда человек в полном смысле этого слова, когда в его грамматике совершенно нет вопросительных знаков, но лишь одни

[149] Zamyatin, *We*, 4; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 1.

[150] Zamyatin, *We*, 134; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 27.

восклицательные, запятые и точки”).[151] This kind of unambiguous prose and narrative closure proves impossible, however, in a world of unknowable Others.

For both its literary form and thematic concerns, *We* is often identified as a distinctly modernist text, since it emerged at a high point of literary modernism in the early twentieth century.[152] Susan Layton associates Zamyatin’s novel with the first wave of modernism between 1910 and 1925, characterised by a rejection of nineteenth-century realist and naturalist traditions of mimetic representation.[153] This certainly fits with Zamyatin’s own approach to writing and representation, as articulated in a 1923 essay: the “finite, fixed world … is a convention, an abstraction, an unreality. And therefore Realism—be it ‘socialist’ or ‘bourgeois’—is unreal.”[154] The inadequacy of straightforward writing to reflect the complexity of reality is also felt by *We*’s narrator: “If only this was really some sort of novel” (“если бы и в самом деле это был только роман”), D-503 laments, but such

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[151] Zamyatin, *We*, 104; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 21.

[152] Parrinder, for example, calls *We* “a uniquely modernist work of science fiction.” Patrick Parrinder, “Imagining the Future: Zamyatin and Wells,” *Science Fiction Studies* 1, no. 1 (1973): 19, https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/1/parrinder1art.htm.

[153] Susan Layton, “Zamyatin and Literary Modernism,” in *Zamyatin’s* We*: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gary Kern (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988), 140.

[154] Zamyatin, “On Literature,” 112.

a closed, realist form cannot be maintained when faced with the idea of infinity and the alterity of the untotalisable Other.[155]

Over the course of *We*, D-503 transitions between three broad psychological states, thereby depriving the reader of any certainty as to the identity and reliability of the narrator. Wegner identifies these states as follows: "D-503 as a happy functioning member of the State, D-503 as the conflict-ridden individual, and D-503 as the non-self."[156] Initially, as a loyal and unquestioning member of the One State, D-503 aligns his identity fully with that of the State—a singular "we"—and sets out to write an objective account of his completion of the starship Integral. "I will just attempt to record what I see" ("Я лишь попытаюсь записать то, что вижу"), he writes in the first record, "what I think—or, more exactly, what we think. (Yes, that's right: we. And let that also be the title of these records: We)" ("что думаю—точнее, что мы думаем (именно так: мы, и пусть это 'МЫ' будет заглавием моих записей)").[157] But the straightforward narrative form of D-503's early records is interrupted when he meets I-330 in an encounter that calls him into question, challenges his totalising powers, and tests the limits of language to represent the world.

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[155] Zamyatin, *We*, 91; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 18.

[156] Phillip E. Wegner, "On Zamyatin's *We*: A Critical Map of Utopia's 'Possible Worlds'," *Utopian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1993): 101.

[157] Zamyatin, *We*, 4; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 1.

As this disruption escalates and his encounters with other people (and animals) take on similarly interruptive qualities, what emerges is what Wegner calls "an elliptical stream-of-consciousness narrative voice" replete with "symbolist and expressionist imagery."[158] For Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, this demonstrates that D-503 is a modernist "split consciousness," with this split between the conscious and the unconscious realised structurally in the tension between his recording of facts and his stream-of-consciousness "automatic" writing.[159] "Let the words come as they will" ("но пусть пишется, как пишется"), D-503 writes, as he laments his inability to comprehend O-90 and R-13.[160] One way in which D-503's orderly narrative is disrupted is through his use of direct metaphor, which interrupts his otherwise literal descriptions of face-to-face encounters.[161] Recalling looking into I-330's eyes, for example, D-503 writes: "Before me were two terrifyingly dark windows, and within them a very unknown, strange life. I could only see fire—some kind of inner wood-fire was blazing there" ("Передо мною два жутко-темных окна, и внутри

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[158] Wegner, "On Zamyatin's *We*," 99.

[159] Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, "Belief in Zamyatin's *We* and Tarkovsky's *Stalker*: Critique versus Legitimation of Utopia through Art," *Transcultural Studies*, no. 9 (2013): 33, https://doi.org/10.1163/23751606-00901003.

[160] Zamyatin, *We*, 40; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 8.

[161] Introducing her recent translation of *We*, Randall notes that Zamyatin "avoids the words *like* and *such as*, preferring direct metaphor." Randall, "Introduction," xviii.

такая неведомая, чужая жизнь. Я видел только огонь—пылает там какой-то свой ‘камин’”).[162] Beyond surreal imagery and metaphor, we find the constant interruption of written expression by the language of mathematics. As noted, whatever cannot be accommodated into D-503’s totalising worldview—I-330’s smile, his own jealousy—becomes an “X” or a “$\sqrt{-1}$.”[163] Later, when he is attempting to make sense of his all-consuming desire for I-330, D-503 arrives at a mathematical formula: “if ‘L’ signifies love and ‘D’ signifies death, then L = f(D)—that is, love is a function of death” (“если через ‘Λ’ обозначим любовь, а через ‘C’ смерть, то Λ=f(C), т. е. любовь и смерть”).[164] Eventually, in record 27, when he finds himself beyond the Green Wall at the MEPHI commune, D-503 abandons all attempts to construct a narrative out of his experiences. “I’m left with only stray, embedded fragments” (“Пото—только застрявшие, разрозненные осколки”), he explains, as he goes on to write snippets of scenes, full of ellipses and surreal imagery.[165]

With its discourses constantly in tension—the conscious record and stream-of-consciousness writing; objective fact and symbolist metaphor; poetic words and cold mathematics; the narrative and the fragmentary—Parrinder finds that “D-503’s diary is a

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[162] Zamyatin, *We*, 26; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 6.

[163] See, for example, Zamyatin, *We*, 26, 40; Замятин, *Мы*, chaps. 6, 8.

[164] Zamyatin, *We*, 119; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 24.

[165] Zamyatin, *We*, 139; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 27.

theatre of linguistic conflict."[166] This conflict interrupts D-503's totalising approach to writing (evident in his striving for a realist, readerly form) as well as his totalising approach to the Other (which would deny the ethical encounter). As Eliot Borenstein explains: "The entire novel can be seen as a challenge to the linguistic and philosophical assumptions on which D-503's initial 'state-sanctioned' conception of the self is based: the logic of synecdoche and the possibility of 'wholeness' or 'integration.'"[167] Unable to integrate the unknowable Others he encounters into a mathematically pure cognitive synthesis, D-503's attempt at an orderly narrative is abandoned. When the pages of his draft manuscript are knocked to the floor, D-503 realises that "if they were put back in order, then it wouldn't be the real order anyway; there would still be thresholds, iambs, and X's" ("если и сложить, все равно не будет настоящего порядка, все равно—останутся какие-то пороги, ямы, иксы").[168] His descent into the fragmentary in record 27 is perhaps the text's greatest affront to the readerly narrative's attempts at consistency and closure. Adorno emphasised the significance of fragmentary writing in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), identifying the fragment

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[166] Parrinder, "Imagining the Future," 23.

[167] Eliot Borenstein, "The Plural Self: Zamiatin's *We* and the Logic of Synecdoche," in *Russian Science Fiction Literature and Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Anindita Banerjee (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 147.

[168] Zamyatin, *We*, 117; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 23.

as "that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality."[169] And as noted by Hill, it is precisely this disruptive quality of fragmentary writing that appealed to Blanchot, who recognised in it the potential for "plurality, multiplicity, and collective exchange."[170] Although *We* never reaches the fragmentary excesses of Blanchot's own *Awaiting Oblivion* (*L'attente L'oubli*, 1962), similarly disruptive qualities can be recognised in his foregrounding of indeterminacy and disruption of the orderly narrative.

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[169] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 45. This leads Adorno to value modern art, which he claims foregrounds the fragmentary and indeterminate nature of all art: "the turn to the friable and the fragmentary is in truth an effort to save art by dismantling the claim that artworks are what they cannot be and what they nevertheless must want to be"—that is, that artworks are coherent, reconcilable, totalisable wholes (190).

[170] Hill, *Blanchot*, 16. "The multiple and the fragmentary in writing are what come to take the place of the unity of being or thought," Hill explains, "effacing the appeal to the totality of presence in order to invoke a future without present or presence, a future that is dedicated, in Blanchot, not to identity, meaning, or self, but to the infinite alterity of that which is unknown, to a beyond that corresponds to an idea neither of transcendence nor of immanence" (142). This association of the fragment with the infinite alterity of unknown futures certainly fits with its use in Zamyatin's *We*, where it resonates with the breakdown of totalising One State ideology and the utopian potential of infinite revolutions.

At the end of the novel, D-503 is returned to the service of the One State after receiving the Great Operation (*Великая операция*), a lobotomy-like procedure that removes an individual's "imagination" ("фантазия").[171] In the final record, D-503 disavows the "ridiculous metaphors" ("нелепых метафор") and "feelings" ("чувств") that fill the pages of his diary, all evidence of his "former sickness (a soul)" ("прежняя моя болезнь (душа)"), instead holding fast to "only the facts" ("только факты") in his past records.[172] Declaring that "the facts are these" ("Факты—таковы"), he recounts his capture by One State officials, his subjection to the Great Operation, and the torture of I-330.[173] Unlike the narrator of Blanchot's "The Madness of the Day," who ultimately accepts the inadequacy of stories to represent the world, D-503 gives in to the perceived demand that he "get down to the facts."[174] Finally, D-503 addresses the ongoing MEPHI revolt, closing his records thus:

> There is still chaos, howling, corpses, wild beasts, and—unfortunately—a significant amount of ciphers betraying reason in the western quarters.
>
> But, across the city, on the fortieth avenue, they have managed to construct a temporary wall of high-voltage waves. And I hope we will win. More than that: I know we will win. Because reason should win.

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[171] Zamyatin, *We*, 156, 158; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 31.

[172] Zamyatin, *We*, 202, 203; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 40.

[173] Zamyatin, *We*, 202; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 40.

[174] Blanchot, "Madness of the Day," 199.

(все еще хаос, рев, трупы, звери и—к сожалению—значительное количество нумеров, изменивших разуму.

Но на поперечном, 40-м проспекте удалось сконструировать временную Стену из высоковольтных волн. И я надеюсь—мы победим. Больше: я уверен—мы победим. Потому что разум должен победить.)[175]

D-503 is confident that the MEPHI uprising will fail, but the One State is in retreat and the revolution seems to have popular support. Although D-503 provides the final record with the keywords "Facts" ("Факты") and "I Am Certain" ("Я уверен"), this certainty is ultimately withheld from the reader.[176] Not that readers determined to find closure, reading the text in a readerly way, have not been able to create this meaning themselves. Suvin, for example, concludes with certainty that at the end of *We*, "the rebellion fails," although this would seem to put a lot of faith in the state-sanctioned words of an uncritical D-503.[177] As Wegner notes, the possibility that the revolution will yet succeed, added to the suggestion that O-90 will raise her child outside the city walls, "forestalls any grim closure suggested at the narrative's end."[178] As D-503's fragmented stream-of-consciousness narration, replete

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[175] Zamyatin, *We*, 203; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 40.

[176] Zamyatin, *We*, 202; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 40.

[177] Darko Suvin, "Other Worlds, Other Seas: Science-Fiction Stories from Socialist Countries," preface to *Other Worlds, Other Seas*, ed. Darko Suvin, (New York: Berkley Medallion, 1972), 22.

[178] Wegner, "On Zamyatin's *We*," 111.

with metaphor and symbolism, is interrupted at the end by an emotionless and seemingly objective narrative voice, even this is interrupted in turn by the uncertainty of an open ending.

Such interruptions combine with the many interpretive codes the text activates to allow *We* a superfluity of meaning in its prose, providing the reader with a text open to myriad interpretive lenses. To use the terms Barthes deploys in *S/Z*, we find the hermeneutic code deployed throughout the narrative—as we wonder about I-330's allegiances, the origins and future of the One State, and D-503's own motivations—but straightforward closure is withheld. The unreliability of D-503 as a narrator, along with his often-erratic narrative voice, prevents closure of the proairetic code, as does the unknowability of the novel's characters, which results from what Layton calls Zamyatin's "characterization by leitmotifs," which presents us with only the "fundamental 'contours'" of characters instead of realism's "stable, knowable" egos.[179] It is this richness of characterisation in *We* that led Le Guin to declare Zamyatin "the author of the first science fiction *novel*."[180] The tension between words and mathematics complicate the text's semantic codes, while metaphor interrupting literal description provides ample matter for the symbolic code. The many cultural codes *We* self-consciously activates also provide

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[179] Layton, "Zamyatin and Literary Modernism," 142.

[180] Ursula K. Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown," in *Science Fiction at Large*, ed. Peter Nicholls (London: Victor Gollancz, 1976), 20.

endless interpretive possibilities. The One State can be read as the end-point of Soviet communism, or as the end-point of Western capitalism, or, as I have read it here, as an example of a society governed by the oppressive totalisation of the Other, or as all of these simultaneously.

Further expanding this dimension of the cultural code, *We* is also replete with self-conscious intertextual references, each inviting the reader to explore new interpretive avenues. One such intertext is the oeuvre of H. G. Wells, whose work Zamyatin read, translated, and wrote introductions for in Russian editions. A common reading of *We* takes it as anti-Wellsian, casting it as an anti-utopian response to Wells's utopian visions, which glorified Western technological progress and were firmly grounded in scientific positivism.[181] Yet interpretations of *We* as essentially anti-Wellsian are, as Parrinder notes, overly simplistic, failing to account for Zamyatin's admiration of Wells and the positive

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[181] Mark R. Hillegas, for example, argues that in Zamyatin's *We*, Wells is "strikingly turned against himself." He describes the One State as a "Wellsian superstate." Faced with Zamyatin's positive appraisal of Wells in his essay "Herbert Wells," Hillegas condescendingly concludes that "Zamyatin probably did not understand the drift of Wells's work well enough to see that the rationalism and regimentation he opposed in *We* was at least a strong element in Wells's thought. In *We* Zamyatin wrote more of a critique of Wells than he probably ever realized." Mark R. Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 99, 105.

dimensions of this influence, as demonstrated in Zamyatin's essay "Herbert Wells" (1922).[182]

Another clear intertext for *We* is the poem of the Grand Inquisitor from *The Brothers Karamazov*, and many readings of the novel foreground Zamyatin's handling of the conflict between freedom and happiness established in Dostoevsky's story.[183] This connection comes through most clearly in the musings of R-13, where it is articulated in reference to the Book of Genesis:

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[182] Parrinder isolates the fundamental difference between the two authors thus: "Wells's concern is with *facing* the unknown; Zamyatin's, with *being* the unknown." This articulation, however, fails to account for the disruptive face-to-face encounters at the core of *We*'s narrative, where D-503 is very much faced with the unknown and, moreover, the unknowable. Indeed, these encounters force D-503 to question his place in the world, tearing away the security he placed in his totalising worldview, and in this sense he is forced to face the unknown in himself—but the focus is always on the Other as the locus of the idea of infinity. Parrinder, "Imagining the Future," 20–21.

[183] Vladiv-Glover, for example, identifies Dostoevsky's poem of the Grand Inquisitor as *We*'s "philosophical and aesthetic intertext." Vladiv-Glover, "Belief in Zamyatin's *We*," 38. See also: Wegner, "On Zamyatin's *We*," 96, 101–103; Stillman, "Rationalism," 162–163; Parrinder, "Imagining the Future," 18; Giovanni Maniscalco Basile, "The Algebra of Happiness: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*," *Quaestio Rossica*, no. 4 (2015): 19, https://doi.org/10.15826/qr.2015.4.124.

Those two in paradise stood before a choice: happiness without freedom or freedom without happiness; a third choice wasn't given. They, the blockheads, they chose freedom—and then what? Understandably, for centuries, they longed for fetters. For fetters—you understand? That was the cause of world sorrow. For centuries! Until *we* figured out how to return to happiness again … And there: paradise is restored. Again we are simple-hearted innocents, like Adam and Eve. No more confusion about good and evil: everything is very simple, heavenly, childishly simple. The Benefactor, the Machine, the Cube, the Gas Bell Jar, the Guardians—all these are good, all these are majestic, wonderful, noble, sublime, crystal-clean. Because they guard our non-freedom—that is, our happiness. Those Ancients would be discussing it, deliberating and racking their brains: is it ethical, is it unethical … et cetera.

(Тем двум в раю—был предоставлен выбор: или счастье без свободы—или свобода без счастья; третьего не дано. Они, олухи, выбрали свободу—и что же: понятно—потом века тосковали об оковах. Об оковах—понимаете,—вот о чем мировая скорбь. Века! И только мы снова догадались, как вернуть счастье. … И готово: опять рай. И мы снова простодушны, невинны, как Адам и Ева. Никакой этой путаницы о добре, зле: все—очень просто, райски, детски просто. Благодетель, Машина, Куб, Газовый Колокол, Хранители—все это добро, все это—величественно, прекрасно, благородно, возвышенно, кристально-чисто. Потому что это охраняет нашу несвободу—то есть наше

> счастье. Это древние стали бы тут судить, рядить, ломать голову—этика, неэтика....)[184]

This tension between freedom and happiness infuses *We*, yet its treatment is complex and nuanced, inseparable from the tensions in interpreting utopia and dystopia in the text. Although the text is typically identified as a dystopia or anti-utopia, others find a utopian impulse lurking beneath the surface. Le Guin, for example, described *We* as "a dystopia which contains a hidden or implied Utopia," yet there is little agreement as to what constitutes this utopia.[185] One reading takes the MEPHI garden settlement outside the Green Wall as the utopia to the One State's dystopia, but the two are "formally equal" in the text, as Csicsery-Ronay observes, with neither freedom nor happiness, nor city nor country, given a positive ethical weighting over the other. "Given the indeterminacy of *We*'s narrative," he writes, "we have no ethical or axiological basis for preferring the romantic revolutions of the Mephi to the totalitarian state."[186] Wegner follows this thread to argue that the text's utopian core lies in the dialectic between its apparent oppositions; a dialectic

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[184] Zamyatin, *We*, 55; Замятин, *Мы*, chap. 11. Original emphasis.

[185] Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown," 20.

[186] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., "Zamyatin and the Strugatskys: The Representation of Freedom in *We* and *The Snail on the Slope*," in *Zamyatin's* We*: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gary Kern, 236-259 (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988), 242.

embodied by I-330's notion of the "infinite revolution," a state of endless breaking with the present that brings progress and renewal.[187]

This notion of infinite revolution is also articulated by Zamyatin in his essay "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters" (1923): "Revolution is everywhere, in everything," he writes, "it is infinite."[188] Infinite revolution is, as Wegner explains, "an explosive continuation and expansion of the process of transformation, undertaken in order to clear the space for the emergence of an unexpectedly new human situation."[189] Wegner recognises an anticipation, here, of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as infinite revolution likewise results from a dialectic wherein "two independent entities"—and in *We* there are many oppositions, including freedom and happiness, the city and the country, the individual and the collective, utopia and dystopia—"come together in such a way that each maintains its unique identity while producing a qualitatively Other substance."[190] In maintaining this non-violent, non-totalising dialectic, it also reflects Levinas's characterisation of the ethical encounter between the self and the

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[187] Wegner, "On Zamyatin's *We*," 108.

[188] Zamyatin, "On Literature," 107.

[189] Wegner, "On Zamyatin's *We*," 112.

[190] Wegner, "On Zamyatin's *We*," 110.

Other, wherein the Other maintains their transcendence with respect to the same, thus enabling "a relation whose terms do not form a totality."[191]

Beyond engagement with Dostoevsky's freedom-happiness divide, Layton also notes stylistic similarities between Zamyatin's and Dostoevsky's texts, including their ambiguity of meaning and "rejection of the stable, knowable ego."[192] Further biblical references also abound, including references to Christ's crucifixion, Abraham and the binding of Isaac, and musings about the Christian God.[193] The MEPHI resistance movement, of course, takes its name from Mephistopheles and stands in for Satan, while D-503 and I-330 can be read as reflections of Adam and Eve, respectively.[194] The text's self-conscious intertextuality and complex engagement with literature from Wells to Dostoevsky to the Bible provide the reader with a multitude of interpretive possibilities.

Randall suggests that *We* is "perhaps the most explicitly codified novel ever written," dense with allusion, symbolism, narrative ambiguity, semantic and linguistic indeterminacy, and intertextual references.[195] Zamyatin makes this dense writerly form feel essential. "The old, slow, creaking descriptions are a thing of the past," he wrote soon after

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[191] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

[192] Layton, "Zamyatin and Literary Modernism," 146.

[193] Zamyatin, *We*, 41, 186–187, 200.

[194] Stillman, "Rationalism," 162.

[195] Randall, "Introduction," xvii.

completing *We*, "every word must be supercharged, high-voltage. … And hence, syntax becomes elliptic, volatile."[196] The ambiguity and openness of *We*, inviting the reader to encounter an unenglobable space of literary interpretation, resonates strongly with the kind of writing Levinas values and to which he even attributes ethical qualities. When Zamyatin writes of disruptive face-to-face encounters, these are realised through a form that itself challenges totalising modes of thinking, the literary form becoming commensurate to the ethical content it seeks to convey. It is little wonder that Le Guin praised *We* as "a subtle, brilliant, and powerful book; emotionally stunning, and technically, in its use of the metaphorical range of science fiction, still far in advance of most books written since."[197]

The drive to conquer the unknown and the unknowable Other cognitively is at the core of both Asimov's utopian Foundations and Zamyatin's dystopian One State. Responding to very different socio-historical circumstances from Asimov, Zamyatin explores the breakdown of totalising approaches in *We* in a truly singular text about the irreducible and unassimilable singularity of the Other. The formula-driven and eminently rational philosophy of the One State cannot withstand the face-to-face encounter with the Other (whether human or animal), which thus becomes the irrational *par excellence*. Realised through a complex and challenging literary form overflowing with interpretive possibilities, *We* achieves a more ethical mode of representation while exploring the

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[196] Zamyatin, "On Literature," 111.

[197] Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown," 20.

violence of a society governed by the erasure of alterity. Unknowability has long been a theme of Eastern European SF and, since the 1960s and 1970s, the post-New-Wave SF of the West, with today's broad SF field more open to writing that challenges the tropes and traditions of earlier, more restrictive notions of genre. Zamyatin's *We* thus demonstrates the enormous potential of SF to open up an unenglobable literary space and critique the totalising ideology of an unethical, dystopian future.

5. Ethics and Interpretation:

Reading Gene Wolfe's "Seven American Nights"

"You think this is his writing?" the older woman asked, opening the notebook at random. When the younger did not answer she said, "Perhaps. Perhaps."[1]

– Gene Wolfe, "Seven American Nights"

Perhaps. We are not dealing with allegorical figures. … That is the unique configuration of Blanchot's literary space. The meaning of his world concerns our own. But interpretation is what such a work rejects; a work that is perhaps entirely the breaking through of that envelope with which non-contradictory *saying* attempts to surround all movement. Should we try to immobilize a few of its shimmering lights, without fearing that we may extinguish them in the process? Here, all must be said in the

[1] Gene Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," in *Orbit 20*, ed. Damon Knight (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 233.

> "perhaps" mode, in the manner of Blanchot himself, when he tries to explain what has said itself in his books.[2]
>
> – Emmanuel Levinas, on Maurice Blanchot

> Allegory cannot handle perhapses.[3]
>
> – Derek Attridge, on J. M. Coetzee

Previous chapters have explored the ethical dimension of literary representation in SF, interrogating the dispositions of different SF traditions toward particular ethical orientations. When ethics is implicated, questions of responsibility necessarily follow. So we must ask: what are the reader's responsibilities when encountering SF, and what would a responsible, non-totalising approach to SF literature look like? This chapter addresses these questions by way of an extended engagement with Gene Wolfe, whose writerly SF exemplifies the potential for genre texts to disrupt representation and open access to an unenglobable literary space. Alongside an examination of what makes Wolfe's work formally significant, I will present an analysis of readers' and critics' responses to his work and the ethical dimensions of the different approaches they represent. Reflections on recent

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[2] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 184.

[3] Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee*, 54.

cultural and political conflicts in SF fandom will also contextualise the issues surrounding the reception of Wolfe's work and further highlight the connections between ethics, genre and interpretation.

Central to this chapter is Attridge's notion of the singularity of literature, which is essential for understanding how readers respond to Wolfe's writerly SF and the ethical responsibilities implied in the act of reading. As explained in chapter two, "singularity" refers to the reader's experience of a text as inventive, with the event of singularity being a unique literary encounter resulting from the challenge a text presents to the reader's idioculture. Singularity and inventiveness are not objective qualities of texts, since they depend on the reader's response to the text, although Attridge indicates that it can nonetheless be useful to explore the singularity of specific texts or authors' oeuvres. One can do this by examining how the works facilitate singular encounters, identifying aspects of the texts that are "'more likely to be experienced as inventive at a particular historical moment' (and possibly 'for a particular group')."[4] Within the context of SF studies, Easterbrook refers to this as "*Textual singularity*," as distinct from the kinds of thematic or narrative singularity that permeate the SF field, including "*Cultural (or Historical) singularity*" (culture-shifting events, such as scientific or political revolutions), "*Psychological singularity*" (disruptive events of personal or society-wide epiphany or conceptual breakthrough), and "*Technological singularity*" (the common understanding of

[4] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 61.

"singularity" in SF studies, embodying disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology).[5] This textual singularity, Easterbrook notes, is distinctly and profoundly "an instance of cognitive estrangement," due to the challenge such singularity presents to the reader and their existing idioculture and modes of thinking.[6]

The singularity of the literary event demands a response from the reader. According to Attridge, it calls for a deconstructive mode of criticism that is fundamentally concerned "with the otherness and singularity of the work, its difference from all other works, its historical particularity and irreducibility."[7] Attridge argues that such criticism addresses "the supremely difficult ethical act of responding to the singularity and otherness of the unique instance," avoiding prescriptive and programmatic applications of specific critical methodologies and responding instead to the singularity of the text in question.[8] It is with this in mind that I examine Wolfe's work, responding first to the singularity of his oeuvre and how it stages encounters with otherness, then exploring the singularity of a specific text and the literary space it opens before the reader. I thus adopt Vint and Bould's approach of

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[5] Easterbrook, "Singularities," 22–23.

[6] Easterbrook, "Singularities," 23.

[7] Derek Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 28.

[8] Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility*, 28–29.

drawing "attention to the complexity of texts and the meanings they are able to sustain," while avoiding more instrumental approaches.[9] Although I draw on some of the analytical tools of narratology, I aim to avoid its more totalising structuralist roots, using it rather as a way of understanding what is happening in a text and the effect it can have on the reader.

Wolfe holds a unique position in the field of SF literature. He emerged onto the literary scene in the late-1960s and early-1970s as a peripheral figure of SF's New Wave movement, and his challenging writerly texts, with their inversions of genre tropes and blurring of the boundaries between SF and fantasy, benefitted from the rapidly changing and ever more open atmosphere the movement brought in its wake. His work has been widely praised by SF and fantasy authors and critics, with Neil Gaiman describing Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* as "both the most remarkable SF work of the past five decades, and the nearest thing SF has come to its own *À la recherche du temps perdu*," and Le Guin endorsing his books with the declaration, "Wolfe is our Melville."[10] When discussing Wolfe, readers often focus on the experience of reading: Kim Stanley Robinson has identified in his work a certain "elusiveness" and "mysteriousness," while Joan Gordon has claimed that

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[9] Vint and Bould, "There Is No Such Thing," 51.

[10] Neil Gaiman, Introduction to *The Book of the New Sun*, by Gene Wolfe (London: Folio Society, 2019), xv; Qtd. in "The Best of Gene Wolfe," Macmillan, 2019, https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250618580.

it is "characterized by complexity and ambiguity."[11] Clute, who called Wolfe "the most obdurately fine sf writer alive," contends that he is also "the hardest of any to understand," even likening reading his more difficult stories to "clinging to the inside walls of a building by Escher built of Braille."[12] Reviewers have likewise commented on the interpretive difficulties of his fiction, calling him "a fascinating and infuriating writer" and complaining of being "baffled" and "puzzled" by his stories, with some discounting his writing as too

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[11] Kim Stanley Robinson, "Introduction: 'A Story,'" introduction to *The Very Best of Gene Wolfe: A Definitive Retrospective of His Finest Short Fiction*, by Gene Wolfe (Hornsea: PS Publishing, 2009), xviii; Joan Gordon, "Wolfe, Gene (Rodman)," in *St. James Guide to Science Fiction Writers*, ed. Jay P Pederson, 4th ed. (Detroit: St. James Press, 1995), 1029.

[12] John Clute, *Scores: Reviews 1993–2003* (Essex: Beccon, 2003), 141; John Clute, "Is The Best of Gene Wolfe the Best There Is? Critic John Clute Says Yes," *Blastr*, 2009, https://www.blastr.com/2009/04/critic_john_clute_the_bes.php. Clute does not hold back on his praise of Wolfe, writing elsewhere: "Between 1980 and 2000 there is only one writer whose creative grasp and imprint and prolificacy … are so unmistakably manifest that one may plausibly use the word 'great' in describing his work. That writer is Gene Wolfe. He may be, as a creator of autonomous works of art, the greatest writer of sf in a century which saw so many hundreds of writers do their work with high ambition and remarkable craft." John Clute, "Science Fiction from 1980 to the Present," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69.

opaque.[13] Distaste for Wolfe's writerly complexity has also been voiced within academic SF studies, with Suvin declaring that he "cannot stand postmodernists" or "follow the semantic and diegetic contortions of Gene Wolfe, fleeing the Master Narrative."[14] As Roberts notes in response to this assessment, "Suvin gives voice to a widespread suspicion … that the kind of writing [Wolfe] practises is a wrong turn in the development of prose SF."[15] Wolfe's work was caught up in the vehement reactions against experimental New Wave SF, discussed in chapter two, the perceived inaccessibility of his work seen as an affront to the clear and straightforward narratives of earlier US SF.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, although Wolfe has received high praise from some of SF's key figures, he has never attained a widespread popular readership. Wolfe has been inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame and his work has won Nebula, World Fantasy and Locus awards, but he never received a fan-voted Hugo Award and his appeal has remained limited to a niche audience. His treatment within academia has also been

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[13] Paul Kincaid, "Wolfe in the Fold," *Science Fiction Studies* 36, no. 1 (2009): 169–172, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25475222; Jenny Blackford, "Reading Gene Wolfe's Return to the Whorl," *New York Review of Science Fiction* 15, no. 11 (2003): 10.

[14] Darko Suvin, "Afterword: With Sober, Estranged Eyes," in *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science fiction and Utopia*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 241.

[15] Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 436.

sparse, perhaps due to the taxing demands of his complex and often-opaque writing. The legacy of Wolfe's work has also proved difficult to evaluate, particularly in relation to recent controversies over genre boundaries and diversity that have erupted in SF fandom and related communities of practice, including those surrounding the "Sad Puppies" and "Rabid Puppies" fan campaigns. Although Wolfe remained distant from these debates, his work is praised by SF readers and critics on both sides of this culture war. Although other factors certainly influence the mixed reception of Wolfe's work—as we will see, the lack of diversity in his stories and often-formulaic representation of women can certainly alienate readers—opposing responses can often be traced back to different attitudes towards the openness of his fiction and its writerly form.

In this chapter, I argue that there is an ethical value to Wolfe's work due to its writerly form, which resists interpretation and challenges totalisation by foregrounding the text's infinite interpretive space. It does this, I contend, by inviting the reader into literary encounters with otherness—encounters with ideas and modes of representation that deviate from, and often directly challenge, not only the tropes and narrative conventions of popular genre SF, but also the totalising modes of thinking (about other people and the world) that are dominant in Western society. By incorporating their own critique of literary representation and actively resisting closure and cohesion, Wolfe's texts disrupt totalising modes of thought while inviting singular encounters with the literary Saying.

Yet there is a certain fragility to the openness of Wolfe's work that has allowed it to be championed by much more regressive figures, as we will see. This is a fragility that threatens to undermine the challenging aspects of Wolfe's texts, to force upon their undecidability and reversibility the very logico-temporal consistency and closure they try to refuse. Such closed readings can see the text's transcendent Saying entirely engulfed in the concretised Said. Indeed, Wolfe's fiction may be more susceptible than other writerly texts to this kind of forced closure due to the complex yet precise nature of its writing, alongside the generic conventions of US SF traditions and the expectations of SF communities of practice. The occasional failures of representation that appear in his works, such as the stereotypical representations of some female characters that stem from US SF's traditional masculinism, also threaten to undermine the openness of the texts. At the core of this fragility lies the fact that the ethical demand for a responsible reading can ultimately be denied by the reader, who may be unwilling to relinquish the power promised by more exclusive and final totalising approaches. I will argue that an ethical response to the text is an open, writerly reading akin to deconstruction and Levinas's "philosophical criticism."

I begin this chapter with an examination of recent controversies in SF fandom centred around the annual World Science Fiction Convention and its Hugo Awards ceremony, focusing on the reactionary Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies campaigns. I will argue that the ends to which Wolfe's work is used in these debates over genre boundaries reveal the ethical implications of different modes of reading and, specifically, different

approaches to open, writerly texts. To further understand the experience of reading Wolfe and how his SF opens an unenglobable literary space, I will then examine the formal inventiveness of his work, considering the techniques used to create these writerly texts. This will lead into a study of Wolfe's 1978 novella "Seven American Nights" and its critical reception. Wolfe's text demonstrates the author's distinctive mode of writerly SF, and I will argue that its interpretation by Wolfe scholars has demonstrated a failure to respond ethically to the text's openness. This chapter will close with further reflections on the responsibilities of interpretation and what an ethical approach to literature would look like, drawing together earlier arguments concerning the philosophies and literary theories of Wolfgang Iser, Levinas, Barthes and Attridge.

5.1. On Puppies and Wolves: Border Policing and Interpretation in SF

5.1.1. Genre War

I will begin with a brief examination of recent debates and controversies in SF communities of practice that demonstrate the importance of this question of ethical interpretation. These debates highlight the intersection of Levinasian ethics, representations of otherness, literary form, and SF genre traditions. In the mid-2010s, a not entirely coherent group of SF readers and authors, largely confined to Anglo-American SF fandom, cast themselves as the defenders of a more "traditional" SF—essentially a mid-twentieth-century American construction of "hard" genre SF—fighting against what is now the genre's open and diverse

mainstream. Adam Roberts called the ensuing conflict a "political war," in which an angry group of "rightwingers" attempted to undo SF's increasing diversity and drown out the now-popular fiction they deride as "progressive ideological propaganda."[16] Rjurik Davidson likewise identified it as part of a broader "culture war," a "movement cutting across contemporary society, which includes Men's Rights Activists, anti-feminists of different sorts and various strains of racism."[17] The reactionary campaigns, which were championed in conservative media outlets (including by Milo Yiannopoulos in *Breitbart*), were also closely associated with the political "alt-right" and shared ringleaders with the concurrent Gamergate movement, a campaign of harassment and intimidation of female videogame developers and journalists.[18]

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[16] Adam Roberts, "The Puppies Are Taking Science Fiction's Hugo Awards Back in Time," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/jul/31/the-puppies-are-taking-science-fictions-hugo-awards-back-in-time.

[17] Rjurik Davidson, "The Mad Puppies Revenge," *Overland*, April 21, 2015, https://overland.org.au/2015/04/the-mad-puppies-revenge/.

[18] Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 507–511; Milo Yiannopoulos, "Set Phasers to Kill! SJWs Burn Down the Hugo Awards to Prove How Tolerant and Welcoming They Are," *Breitbart*, August 23, 2015, https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2015/08/23/set-phasers-to-kill-sjws-burn-down-the-hugo-awards-to-prove-how-tolerant-and-welcoming-they-are/.

The primary battleground of this conflict was the Hugo Awards, one of the most highly esteemed literary awards in SF. Named in honour of Hugo Gernsback, the Hugo Awards have been awarded annually since 1955 at the World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) based on a popular vote cast by the convention's attendees and supporters, who can also nominate works for consideration at the following year's awards.[19] It was this nomination process that was exploited in recent years leading to unrepresentative shortlists of award nominees. The first move in this saga was Larry Correia's call for his blog readers to become supporting members of the 2013 Worldcon to nominate his novel *Monster Hunter Legion* (2012), which he described as "unabashed pulp action."[20] Correia cast his plea as a stand against the establishment: "For generations literary critics and college English departments have looked down at pulp novelists and refused to give them awards," he lamented, complaining that "hoighty-toighty literati snobs prefer heavy handed, ham

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[19] David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Cheryl Morgan, "Hugo," *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight, updated 29 March 2016, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/hugo.

[20] Larry Correia, "How to Get Correia Nominated for a Hugo," *Monster Hunter Nation* (blog), January 8, 2013, http://monsterhunternation.com/2013/01/08/how-to-get-correia-nominated-for-a-hugo/.

fisted, message fiction."[21] Correia was unsuccessful in securing a nomination in 2013, but he continued his fight in 2014, publishing a slate of twelve suggested nominees from the various Hugo Award categories, including works by himself, conservative SF author Brad Torgersen, and the highly controversial and vitriolic SF author and critic Theodore Beale (who often writes under the pseudonym Vox Day).[22] Correia implored his readers to vote for "pulp novelists" like himself, likening such authors, "abused by the literati elite," to "sad puppies," thus giving the movement its name.[23] Although seven of the twelve slated titles were shortlisted, none received awards.

The conflict escalated in 2015 when Torgersen, having taken over the Sad Puppies mantle with Correia's blessing, encouraged supporters to nominate from a slate that listed up to five works in each Hugo category.[24] This coincided with Beale launching his own

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[21] Larry Correia, "How to Get Correia Nominated for a Hugo Part 2: A Very Special Message" *Monster Hunter Nation* (blog), January 16, 2013, http://monsterhunternation.com/2013/01/16/how-to-get-correia-nominated-for-a-hugo-part-2-a-very-special-message/.

[22] The pen name "Vox Day" could be read as "The Voice [of] the Day," while evoking the Latin proverb "Vox populi, vox Dei" ("The voice of the people [is] the voice of God").

[23] Correia, "How to Get Correia Nominated for a Hugo Part 2."

[24] Brad Torgersen, "Sad Puppies 3: The 2015 Hugo slate," *Torgersen: Blue Collar Spec Fic* (blog), February 1, 2015, https://bradrtorgersen.wordpress.com/2015/02/01/sad-puppies-3-the-2015-hugo-slate/.

"Rabid Puppies" campaign with a slate that largely reflected that of the Sad Puppies, but switched out a number of titles for stories and articles published by his own Castalia House.[25] When the 2015 Hugo Awards shortlist was announced, it was dominated by works on the Puppies slates, although voters overwhelmingly rejected the slated nominees.[26] This gaming of the nominations process led to widespread condemnation of the Puppies campaigns and their tactics by many leading genre authors and critics, including George R. R. Martin, John Scalzi, Connie Willis, Gary K. Wolfe, and Catherynne M. Valente. Nevertheless, both groups put forward new lists in 2016, with Beale's more militant group

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[25] Beale was also more explicit than Torgersen in condemning the "ideological rot that is rife within the world of modern science fiction and fantasy," imploring his readers to nominate the works on his slate "precisely as they are." Theodore Beale, "Rabid Puppies 2015," *Vox Popoli* (blog), February 2, 2015, http://voxday.blogspot.com.au/2015/02/rabid-puppies-2015.html.

[26] When the shortlists were released, 61 of 85 nominees across the 17 award categories were on either the Sad Puppies or Rabid Puppies slate, although several works were ruled ineligible. The only slated work to receive an award was the blockbuster film *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), with every other Puppies candidate polling below "no award," which won all five Puppy-saturated categories.

securing most nominee positions.[27] The Puppies campaigns were effectively neutralised in 2017 after a change to the Hugo Award nominations process.[28]

Beyond explicitly socio-political ideas, this conflict highlighted the question of genre boundaries. The conservative warriors of the Puppies campaigns sought to reinstate the generic conventions of pulp and "golden age" US SF, which they often cast as the domain of straight white men. This proved futile in a literary field that is increasingly open and diverse, and in which the barriers between SF, fantasy, and mainstream fiction continue their slow disintegration. As Gerry Canavan and Benjamin J. Robertson note, the Puppies' efforts to exclude women and people of colour from Hugo ballots demonstrate that they "feel compelled to police the boundaries of genre to maintain the privileged position of the straight white male author," which in turn indicates that "there is power in

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[27] The 2016 Sad Puppies list was created by Kate Paulk and Sarah A. Hoyt, who sought to avoid accusations of shortlist fixing by publishing a longer list of "recommendations" supplied by readers, as opposed to a voting slate. Beale's Rabid Puppies list secured 64 of the 85 available positions in the 2016 Hugos shortlist, seeing the nomination of works that were clearly intended to make a mockery of the awards, including a *My Little Pony* episode for Best Dramatic Presentation (Short Form) and Chuck Tingle's *Space Raptor Butt Invasion* (2015) for Best Short Story.

[28] Hoyt indicated that another list of Sad Puppies recommendations would be published in 2017, but this never eventuated. Beale published a 2017 Rabid Puppies slate, but this had little impact due to a change in nomination procedures; Beale's efforts to disrupt the Hugo Awards ceased in 2018.

genre, power we ignore and leave invisible and un-studied at our peril."[29] The entire Puppies controversy thus has inescapably ethical dimensions, as the campaigns target otherness and seek to make genre SF an exclusionary space that privileges what, for most of its proponents, is the "same"—the white male author writing pulpish adventure stories.

Significantly, the Puppies saga was also a war over literary form, with advocates for traditional genre SF, using US pulp SF as their model, praising its straightforward and entertaining narratives of action and adventure, while condemning the "highbrow" and "establishment" literary forms (generally modernist, postmodernist, or otherwise experimental) now accepted by many genre readers and critics. This leads Davidson to conclude that "the Puppies are, quite simply, conservative both politically and aesthetically, and there's a connection between the two."[30] Indeed, the Puppies' rhetoric indicates their conflation of politics with literary form, where conservative politics is tied to closed, readerly narratives and progressive politics is associated with open, writerly texts. In turn, this reflects a certain resonance between these literary forms and different modes of ethical discourse—a relationship that has been explored throughout this thesis.

Across all these axes—politics, culture, history, literary form—the genre war was fundamentally about different approaches to otherness. As the genre continues to open to

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[29] Gerry Canavan and Benjamin J. Robertson, "Guilty Pleasures: Late Capitalism and Mere Genre," *Extrapolation* 58, no. 2/3 (2017): 125, https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2017.8.

[30] Davidson, "Mad Puppies Revenge."

more diverse themes and literary forms, not to mention authors from diverse backgrounds, it increasingly embraces the kinds of works that have hitherto remained outside US genre SF's selective tradition, alien to its traditional communities of practice. The encounters with otherness that inevitably result have evoked strong, sometimes visceral reactions. Thus, there is a recognisably *ethical* dimension to these debates. Examining how Wolfe's work has been handled by those on opposite sides of this culture war highlights the ethical significance of how it is read: how the otherness its writerly form introduces is handled by the reader.

5.1.2. Interpreting Wolfe

Positive appraisals of Wolfe's work appeared on both sides of the divide during the Puppies saga, both from proponents of the Rabid Puppies campaign and its progressive opponents. Beale, for example, implored his followers to nominate Wolfe's *A Borrowed Man* for the 2016 Locus awards, although one month later he also called on his readers to boycott Tor Books, who have long been Wolfe's publishers, due to their publication and promotion of some of the genre's more progressive authors.[31] Beale also published and championed an

[31] Beale described Tor Books as "the SJW- [social justice warrior] converged propaganda organ of an unreconstructed Stalinist, feminist, and dyscivilizationist, Patrick Nielsen Hayden," one of Beale's chief opponents. "Any work published by Tor Books," he wrote, "is tainted." Theodore Beale, "SJWs Never Learn," *Vox Popoli* (blog), May 17, 2016, https://voxday.blogspot.com.au/

extensive study of Wolfe's early work, Marc Aramini's *Between Light and Shadow: An Exploration of the Fiction of Gene Wolfe, 1951 to 1986* (2015), and promoted a right-wing reading of Wolfe's "Build-a-Bear" (2006) on his Castalia House blog, both of which are examined below. John C. Wright, another far-right SF author published by Beale and associated with the Rabid Puppies campaign, is also an outspoken admirer of Wolfe, having called him "the greatest living author writing in the English language" in 2013.[32] On one level, Wolfe's appeal to these culture warriors is unsurprising—Wolfe tended toward conservativism, although he rarely discussed politics, and was a practising Catholic throughout his writing career (both Beale and Wright are outspoken Christians and frequently attack secularism). Any reading of Wolfe's major works as simple religious allegory, however, would be overly simplistic. Wolfe's work also diverges significantly from the more straightforward, pulpish, "entertainment" SF that the Puppies campaigners tended to praise, perhaps explaining why Correia and Torgersen were notably silent on Wolfe. As Davidson notes, Correia and Torgersen conveniently "ignore some of the field's greatest conservative writers like Gene Wolfe and Robert Silverberg" in their unrelenting

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2016/05/sjws-never-learn.html; Theodore Beale, "Rampaging Puppies," *Vox Popoli* (blog), April 8, 2016, https://voxday.blogspot.com.au/2016/04/rampaging-puppies.html.

[32] John C. Wright, "Gene Wolfe, Genre Work, and Literary Duty," *John C. Wright: Author* (blog), May 25, 2013, http://www.scifiwright.com/2013/05/gene-wolfe-genre-work-and-literary-duty/.

attack on "literary" SF.[33] And indeed, Wolfe's open writing demonstrates that writerly forms do not necessarily carry with them, or originate from, progressive politics.

Meanwhile, the complexity of Wolfe's work—its disruptive literary form, rich metafictionality, resistance to closure, and openness to interpretation—has seen it embraced by many of the genre authors and critics who oppose the Puppies campaigns. Scalzi, a progressive SF author deplored by Beale and his followers, described Wolfe in 2012 as "one of our greatest living SF&F writers."[34] Roberts, who has written scathing critiques of the Puppies and their tactics, wrote in 2009 that Wolfe is "one of the five greatest science fiction writers alive today."[35] Similarly Gaiman, whose acceptance speech for the 2016 Hugo Award for Best Graphic Story called out the "pitiful people" and "sad losers" participating in the Puppies campaigns, has written effusive praise of Wolfe and penned introductions to several of his re-published works, including *Peace* (Orb, 2012) and

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[33] Davidson, "Mad Puppies Revenge."

[34] John Scalzi, "Gene Wolfe Chosen as SFWA Grand Master," *Whatever* (blog), December 13, 2012, http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/12/13/gene-wolfe-chosen-as-sfwa-grand-master/.

[35] Adam Roberts, "Why Hasn't There Been a Science Fiction Booker Winner?" *The Guardian*, September 25, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/sep/24/science-fiction-adam-roberts-booker.

The Book of the New Sun (Folio Society, 2019).[36] Clute and Gary K. Wolfe, two of the genre's most esteemed critics and reviewers, have also written extensively on Gene Wolfe and praised the originality of his work, while lamenting the retrograde attitudes of the Puppies. For these writers and critics, Wolfe's stories are valued for their depth and complexity, as well as the challenges they present to genre SF's dominant forms and ideas. As the next section will explore, Wolfe's texts are not simply entertaining stories that reinforce particular beliefs, but singular texts that deploy inventive literary forms to open an infinite interpretive space for the reader to encounter.

So how is it that Wolfe's work can be embraced by figures on both sides of this political, cultural and ethical divide? I contend that these different perceptions of Wolfe's work reflect different modes of reading, with those associated with the Rabid Puppies requiring closed, totalising, readerly interpretations of his work, and their opponents valuing Wolfe's work for its openness to interpretation. Roberts, for example, likens Wolfe to "a *nouveau romancier*, or a postmodernist," as he "deconstructs our assumptions about

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[36] Neil Gaiman, "2016 Hugo Awards - Best Graphic Story," *YouTube* video, August 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r42-C0l2yMQ. Gaiman was joint recipient of the award with artist J. H. Williams III for *The Sandman: Overture* (2015). Although the title was on the Rabid Puppies slate, which in 2016 aimed at greater disruption by listing works by more popular authors, its success was likely independent of the slating tactics, as Gaiman was already a highly successful author who had garnered many awards, including several Hugos.

narrative closure, about the description and working of character and about meaning in a series of challenging ways."[37] Gaiman, meanwhile, cautions against approaching Wolfe's works as puzzles to be solved for concrete answers, stressing that "*The Book of the New Sun* is a story, after all, not a new type of crossword puzzle," while likening the tetralogy to "a palimpsest, written on incompletely erased manuscripts," due to its layering of meaning and interpretive possibilities.[38] Likewise, Clute emphasises the openness of Wolfe's work in his review of *There Are Doors* (1988), which he notes is "reluctant to respond to any particular decoding strategy on the part of the reader; it is, in fact, a text of quite extraordinary looseness of ascription," finding that Wolfe, like Kafka, "never ties his readers to any fixed interpretation of his text," ultimately refusing "to deliver any ontological security whatsoever."[39]

Yet most dedicated Wolfe criticism to date has strived to force some ontological certainty out of Wolfe's texts, to eliminate ambiguity and arrive at final, exhaustive interpretations. It is this approach that has prevailed with Wolfe's proponents on the reactionary side of the genre war, although it is by no means limited to the Puppies and their defenders. Indeed, there is a widespread tendency in Wolfe criticism, particularly that

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[37] Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 435.

[38] Gaiman, Introduction, xiii–xiv.

[39] John Clute, *Look at the Evidence: Essays and Reviews* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), 150.

of online fan communities dedicated to his work, to treat Wolfe's fictions as puzzles to be solved, with the assumption that objective solutions hidden deep in the text can be pieced together by sufficiently skilled readers.[40] Of the handful of books that have been published on Wolfe's work, only Peter Wright's *Attending Daedalus: Gene Wolfe, Artifice, and the Reader* (2003) is a scholarly work from an academic publisher, although various Wolfe texts have found themselves the focus of scholarly articles and essays. Wright's *Attending Daedalus* nonetheless reflects the dominant critical approach to Wolfe's oeuvre, seeing his texts as "intricate, but solvable, puzzles," with Wright positioning himself as the cunning detective who follows Wolfe's "clues" to uncover "the true interpretation" of his works.[41] The same drive to find stable meanings in Wolfe's work is also evident in Joan Gordon's *Gene Wolfe* (1986), Robert Borski's collections of interpretive essays in *Solar Labyrinth* (2004) and *The Long and the Short of It* (2006), and Michael Andre-Driussi's encyclopaedic tomes *Lexicon Urthus* (1st ed., 1994; 2nd ed., 2008) and *Gate of Horn, Book of Silk* (2012).

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[40] Such fan communities (what Rieder would call communities of practice) include: the long-running Urth listserv, at urth.net, in which readers discuss Wolfe's work; the r/genewolfe subreddit (message forum) on Reddit.com; and the Ultan's Library website, ultan.org.uk, which brings together numerous essays and reviews of Wolfe's work, including the 1988-1989 *Book of Gold* fanzine that was dedicated to Wolfe's oeuvre.

[41] Peter Wright, *Attending Daedalus: Gene Wolfe, Artifice, and the Reader* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 41.

Even Clute, who has praised the openness of Wolfe's work, wrote a lengthy exegesis of *The Book of the New Sun* seeking to identify, once and for all, the identity of the protagonist's mother.[42]

The most extreme example of this interpretive approach is a recent work closely associated with the Rabid Puppies campaign: Aramini's *Between Light and Shadow*, which was published as an ebook by Beale's Castalia House in 2015 with an introduction by John C. Wright. In the expansive volume, Aramini systematically interprets each of Wolfe's early stories with what he calls "actual scientific rigor" to arrive at the conclusive meanings Wolfe apparently hid within each text.[43] He argues that every Wolfe story provides "a scaffold that allows an objective solution," while railing against "postmodern" literary criticism that "decentralizes absolutes and puts universal meaning into question."[44] With its totalising approach and commitment to absolute closure, it is perhaps unsurprising that Aramini's book was so warmly received by the Rabid Puppies campaign. Indeed, Beale slated Aramini's book for the Best Related Work category of the 2016 Hugo Awards, effectively

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[42] John Clute, *Strokes: Essays and Reviews 1966–1986* (Gillette, NJ: Cosmos, 2001), 163–172. In 2003, Clute expressed some regret over the early essay, writing that "some of my speculations there about Severian's hidden family are pretty daft." Clute, *Scores*, 248.

[43] Marc Aramini, *Between Light and Shadow: An Exploration of the Fiction of Gene Wolfe, 1951 to 1986* (Kouvola, Finland: Castalia House, 2015), chap. "Fifth Head of Cerberus," Kindle.

[44] Aramini, *Between Light and Shadow*, chaps. "Fifth Head of Cerberus" and "Introduction."

guaranteeing its nomination in a category entirely dominated by titles on his Rabid Puppies list.[45] Aramini, for his part, did not shy away from the association with the Rabid Puppies campaign, declaring his appreciation for being published by Beale and named on his slate.[46] *Between Light and Shadow* ultimately lost to "No Award," which received 70% of the primary vote.[47]

For those who rail against postmodernism and the "literati," Wolfe's writing can only be palatable if its openness and ambiguity is denied—if its *otherness* is destroyed. The only acceptable approach to Wolfe's work for those who would insist on strict genre boundaries is one that insists on the finality and exclusivity of its interpretations, casting

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[45] Theodore Beale, "Rabid Puppies 2016: Best Related Work," *Vox Popoli* (blog), February 15, 2016, https://voxday.blogspot.com.au/2016/02/rabid-puppies-2016-best-related-work.html.

[46] In a public Facebook post, Aramini wrote: "expecting that the great mass of society will never recognize greatness, even if it is smacked in the face with it … I am grateful to find my book on Vox Day's [Theodore Beale's] Rabid Puppy 2016 Hugo Award Related Work short list. … I would never forsake a nomination or a chance for recognition, when the many venues that I have sent my work to have by and large ignored it after so many years of loving and painstaking labor, on a project which would never have seen the light of day without Vox." Marc Aramini, "This Will Be My Most Obnoxious Post This Year," Facebook, February 16, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/marc.aramini/posts/10208434980342495.

[47] "2016 Hugo Award Statistics," MidAmeriCon II, August 25, 2016, http://www.thehugoawards.org/content/pdf/2016HugoStatistics.pdf, 5.

them as the "true" and "correct" interpretations that Wolfe intended. Returning to Barthes's terminology, they require an approach to Wolfe's writerly texts that is distinctly readerly. I argue that such approaches to Wolfe's work can be considered *ethically* problematic, in a Levinasian sense, since they exert violence against the texts' alterity and their plurality of meaning, denying them singular encounters and responses. This is not to suggest that there is nothing informative or valuable in the scholarship mentioned above—indeed, most offer fascinating perspectives on Wolfe's texts that can allow readers to create new meanings. But to the extent that they commit to closure and finality, while emphasising the exclusivity of their own interpretations, I contend that they demonstrate unethical responses to the unenglobable literary space.

5.2. The Singularity of Gene Wolfe

I will now turn to Wolfe's oeuvre to explore how it invites the reader into singular literary encounters through largely formal and metafictional narrative techniques. Korhonen asserts that "we cannot discern the event of the Saying—hear the face of the Other speak—in narratives unless we pay attention to those narrative techniques that open up the space for textual encounter."[48] I therefore seek to examine the singularity of Wolfe's oeuvre and its demands on the reader by focusing on how writerly forms and techniques allow his SF to unsay its own Said, opening up a Saying to which the reader is urged to respond. These

[48] Korhonen, "Towards a Post-Levinasian," 467.

formal elements, often associated with modernist or postmodernist literature, make possible an encounter with otherness, with something new and unexpected, particularly in the context of the US SF tradition where Wolfe's work is situated. This formal dimension is also the most distinctive aspect of Wolfe's work and the source of much of its inventiveness. As Roberts notes, Wolfe's "great achievement is formal, the creation of a text that construes narrative, character and atmosphere into the ambiguities and complexities of which they are made."[49] Addressing these formal qualities helps us understand the significance of Wolfe's work and how it generates such different responses from readers.

As this thesis primarily concerns SF, I will focus on Wolfe's more distinctly science fictional texts, insofar as these are separable from his more strictly fantasy fiction (including the Soldier series and the Wizard Knight duology).[50] Many examples are drawn from Wolfe's most enduring series, *The Book of the New Sun*, its direct sequel *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987), and its two follow-up series, *The Book of the Long Sun* and *The Book of the Short Sun*, often referred to collectively as the Solar Cycle.[51] SF traditions also permeate

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[49] Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 435.

[50] The Soldier series comprises *Soldier of the Mist* (1986), *Soldier of Arete* (1989) and *Soldier of Sidon* (2006); the latter duology comprises *The Knight* (2004) and *The Wizard* (2004).

[51] *The Book of the New Sun* comprises *The Shadow of the Torturer* (1980), *The Claw of the Conciliator* (1981), *The Sword of the Lictor* (1982) and *The Citadel of the Autarch* (1982), henceforth *Shadow*, *Claw*, *Sword* and *Citadel* respectively. *The Urth of the New Sun* is henceforth *Urth*. *The*

Wolfe's oeuvre, from his first novel, *Operation Ares* (1970), to *A Borrowed Man* (2015),[52] and it is the field in which Wolfe has had the most profound impact, perhaps due to the challenge his work presents to some of SF's more rigid genre traditions.

5.2.1. Metafiction, Unreliability and Unknowability

One of the most recognisable aspects of Wolfe's writing is its tendency toward metafiction. Patricia Waugh describes metafiction as fiction that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact," ultimately refusing "to allow the reader the role of passive consumer or any means of arriving at a 'total' interpretation of the text."[53] By acknowledging, and thereby breaking, what Gérard Genette calls the "*illusion of mimesis*," metafiction encourages the reader to acknowledge the inadequacy of narrative to represent

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Book of the Long Sun comprises *Nightside the Long Sun* (1993), *Lake of the Long Sun* (1994), *Caldé of the Long Sun* (1994) and *Exodus from the Long Sun* (1996), henceforth *Nightside*, *Lake*, *Caldé* and *Exodus*. *The Book of the Short Sun* is a direct sequel to *The Book of the Long Sun* and comprises *On Blue's Waters* (1999), *In Green's Jungles* (2000) and *Return to the Whorl* (2001). The series are henceforth referred to as *New Sun*, *Long Sun* and *Short Sun*.

[52] *A Borrowed Man* was the last of Wolfe's works published before his death in April 2019, although the book's sequel, *Interlibrary Loan*, is forthcoming from Tor in 2020.

[53] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984), 2, 13.

the world.[54] This self-reflexive aspect of metafiction has led to its association with both modernism, for its affront to realist conventions of transparent representation, and postmodernism, for its ontological challenge to verisimilitude.

Numerous examples of Wolfe's metafictional games can be found in his oeuvre. At the more extreme end, "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" (1982) brings a tacky pulp SF author named "Gene Wolfe" into conversation with one of his characters, who, aware of his own fictional nature, challenges the author's contrived storytelling and resists his own loss of autonomy. Metafictional commentary on the nature and practice of storytelling also finds its way into Wolfe's most enduring work, *New Sun*, where the torturer Severian, the series' protagonist and narrator, likens writing his memoirs to staging an execution, where one attempts to create a spectacle to satisfy the various onlookers, while navigating both tradition and also what they feel is necessary and just.[55] By directly addressing the demands of writing, such passages, common among Wolfe's first-person narrators, highlight the artificiality of storytelling.

Embedded narratives, which appear throughout Wolfe's work, can likewise function as metafictional commentaries. An embedded pulp SF story takes centre stage in "The

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[54] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 164, 166.

[55] Gene Wolfe, *The Shadow of the Torturer*, in *The Book of the New Sun, Volume 1: Shadow and Claw* (London: Gollancz, 2000), 280–282.

Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories" (1970), a second-person narrative in which "you" are a young boy reading an SF magazine to escape the unpleasant realities of home life. As the boy realises the inability of the straightforward good-versus-evil narrative to account for the complexities of the real world, barriers between fiction and reality break down around him. Severian, meanwhile, spends entire chapters recounting the stories, plays and myths he encountered on his travels. These stories have their unreliability foregrounded, drawing the reader's attention to the artificiality of Severian's own storytelling. They also offer different interpretive frameworks for *New Sun* itself, with the embedded play "Eschatology and Genesis," for example, readable as a re-telling of Severian's own journey.[56] As with all Wolfe's fictions, these embedded stories are eminently open to interpretation, even more so because of their presence within larger, more complex narratives.

Another hallmark of Wolfe's fiction is the unreliable narrator, a metafictional device that prompts the reader to scrutinise the narrative. Different kinds of unreliability go into creating Wolfe's narrators, which tend to have a depth and complexity that is difficult to handle, frequently obfuscating their motives and even their actions. The first-person narrator(s) of *Short Sun*, for example, is (or are) perhaps the most unstable of any in

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[56] Gene Wolfe, *The Claw of the Conciliator*, in *The Book of the New Sun, Volume 1: Shadow and Claw* (London: Gollancz, 2000), 513–538; Michael Andre-Driussi, *Lexicon Urthus: A Dictionary for the Urth Cycle*, 2nd ed. (Albany, CA: Sirius Fiction, 2008), 125–128.

Wolfe's works for unique reasons. Although it is the same hand holding the pen throughout the series (with the exception of the final chapter), the narrator's identity keeps shifting between two (or more) distinct personalities during the writings of the memoirs, although these shifts are not clearly signposted.[57] Each narrative voice also evinces its own unreliability, whether this is derived from the identity's confusion, their shame and unwillingness to face their situation, or an outright intention to deceive or conceal. Wolfe's propensity for deeply flawed or unlikeable narrators also removes any easy access to reliable moral judgements, forcing readers to reach their own conclusions about the text's moral and ethical dilemmas.

One of the most prominent themes in Wolfe's fiction is the unreliability of memory, which often serves as a source of his narrators' unreliability. Again, Severian provides one of the best examples, for although he claims to "never forget anything," there are times when he (apparently) does so, such as when an encounter leads him to write: "I recalled

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[57] Within the one body, vying for control of the pen, are: Horn, ostensibly the protagonist, introduced as the author of *Short Sun*; and Silk, the protagonist of *Long Sun*, whose physical body Horn's spirit comes to inhabit part-way through the narrative (but before the writing of the memoirs). Fans named this two-in-one narrator "Silkhorn." Michael Andre-Driussi, *Gate of Horn, Book of Silk: A Guide to Gene Wolfe's* The Book of the Long Sun *and* The Book of the Short Sun (Albany, CA: Sirius Fiction, 2012), 245.

something I had seen elsewhere (I could not remember where)."[58] This also calls into question Severian's honesty—he lies to many of those he encounters in his travels, so the possibility remains open that he is also lying in his memoirs. Attentive readers may also notice that Severian's apparently perfect recall does not make him infallible, as is evinced, somewhat ironically, in the following passage:

> I looked down the street. Lanterns swung there among the fog-muffled sounds of feet and voices. I would have hidden, but Roche held me, saying, 'Wait, I see pikes.'
>
> 'Do you think it's the guard returning?'
>
> He shook his head. 'Too many.'
>
> 'A dozen men at least,' Drotte said.
>
> Still wet from [the river] Gyoll we waited. In the recess of my mind we stand shivering there even now. Just as all that appears imperishable tends towards its own destruction, those moments that at the time seem the most fleeting recreate themselves—not only in my memory (which in the final accounting loses nothing) but in the throbbing of my heart and the prickling of my hair, making themselves new just as our Commonwealth reconstitutes itself each morning in the shrill tones of its own clarions.

[58] Wolfe, *Shadow*, 109, 90.

> The men had no armor, as I could soon see by the sickly yellow light of the lanterns; but they had pikes, as Drotte had said, and staves and hatchets.[59]

However good Severian's memory might be, it does not protect him from confusing Roche and Drotte as he writes. As Daniel Baker notes, the unreliability of Severian's narrative forces the reader "to question all representation."[60] In this case, the unreliability of the narrator, whose mistakes and omissions are seldom clearly identified, produces a thoroughly unreliable work.[61] Gregory Currie calls this kind of unreliability a "transition to openness," in which the narrator's unreliability does not direct the reader toward clearly identified alternative interpretations of events, but encourages readers to arrive at their own interpretations.[62] Wolfe rarely allows his readers to forget they are being *told* a story, encouraging them to take nothing at face value.

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[59] Wolfe, *Shadow*, 10.

[60] Daniel Baker, "Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 3 (2012): 451, http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30054846.

[61] Wolfe's Soldier series presents a fascinating inversion of Severian's professed perfect recall (eidetic or photographic memory) in Latro, the series' protagonist and narrator, who suffers a form of anterograde amnesia, losing his memory each morning and having to re-read his manuscript to understand his situation.

[62] Gregory Currie, *Arts and Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 151–152, https://doi.org/10.1093/0199256284.001.0001.

Wolfe's narrators are also characters of psychological depth and complexity, consistently portrayed as unknowable, with rich interiorities. He achieves this depth of characterisation through "distancing devices"—including unreliability, fragmentary writing and disruptive uses of language—that create a "sense that this is a character whom we can't easily pretend to know" (to borrow Attridge's words).[63] Responding to Virginia Woolf's influential essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), in which she extols modernist literature for its creation of complex and unknowable characters, Le Guin wrote "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown" (1976) and asked whether it was *possible* for SF to produce such characters, given US SF's dependence on one-dimensional character types: "Have we any hope of catching Mrs Brown, or are we trapped for good inside our great, gleaming spaceships hurtling out across the galaxy?"[64] Russ echoed this critique, suggesting that "the protagonists of science fiction are always collective, never individual persons."[65] As noted earlier, Le Guin identified Zamyatin's *We* as the first SF novel to craft such unknowable characters, and Wolfe's work certainly falls into this tradition. Significantly, Wolfe's approach to character was greatly influenced by Proust, whom he often cited as a major influence and in whose work Levinas found valuable indeterminacy and depth of

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[63] Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee*, 50–51.

[64] Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown," 16.

[65] Russ, "Towards an Aesthetic," 113.

character.[66] As we will see, however, this rich characterisation, which often extends to Wolfe's minor characters, does not always carry through to his female characters, marking a problematic blind spot in his writing.

Wolfe's approach to characterisation and narration both reflect a fundamental awareness of the unknowability of things. Jameson calls this "the unknowability thesis" and finds it in SF that affirms the "impossibility of understanding the Other."[67] Jameson's prime example is Lem, whose *Solaris* (1961) and *His Master's Voice* (1968) emphasise the absolute alterity of the alien other and its resistance to anthropocentric forms of scientific understanding. Although unimpressed by Lem's "implacably negative and skeptical position," preferring more totalising approaches, Jameson nonetheless acknowledges that it is "not without its own concomitant ethical imperative."[68] It is this ethical dimension that resonates with Levinas's critique of totalising approaches to the Other and affirmation of ethical modes of engagement that preserve the Other's alterity. Wolfe's work offers frequent affirmation of the unknowability thesis in terms of the human other (through rich characterisation), the alien other (the alien Hierodules in *New Sun* are one of the most

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[66] Wolfe, "On Encompassing," 343, 353; Gene Wolfe, "Gene Wolfe Interview," by James B. Jordan, in *Shadows of the New Sun: Wolfe on Writing/Writers on Wolfe*, ed. Peter Wright (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 115; Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 162.

[67] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 108.

[68] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 107.

perplexing and unfathomable aspects of the series), and the idea of God (which surfaces throughout his oeuvre). Certainly, some of the themes addressed in Wolfe's work are left more open than others; at times the text seems to withhold judgement, while at others it would direct the reader toward particular determinations. Wolfe, for example, identified as "a strong environmentalist" and many of his stories reflect a serious concern for humankind's impact on the natural world.[69] At the very least, one can say that his writing is seldom *prescriptive*, usually offering readers multiple avenues of interpretation.

Although part of Wolfe's appeal for conservative readers lies in his Catholicism, a look at one of his more religion-heavy series, *Long Sun*, demonstrates how Wolfe can explore religious and theological themes in great depth, but in non-prescriptive ways, instead emphasising unknowability and opening the text to a range of interpretations. The series' protagonist, Patera Silk, is an augur (or priest) aboard the generation starship *Whorl*, a self-contained world built on the inner surface of a hollowed-out asteroid. Silk's religion is a curious blend of paganism, Catholicism and "technological fetishism": adherents worship a pantheon of gods and augurs attempt divination by reading the entrails of sacrificed animals; adherents carry rosaries and make the sign of the cross (or "addition"), while the religion has a distinctly Catholic hierarchy and ecclesiastical garb; and augurs await theophanies from computer monitors (or "Sacred Windows"), while performing

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[69] Gene Wolfe, "An Interview with Gene Wolfe," by Joan Gordon, in *Shadows of the New Sun: Wolfe on Writing/Writers on Wolfe*, ed. Peter Wright (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 25.

ritualistic maintenance of technical equipment.[70] True to the generation starship formula developed in earlier SF, Wolfe's protagonist comes to understand the true nature of the *Whorl* as a starship and its long-forgotten mission of colonisation, losing faith in the gods he once worshipped.[71] Yet Wolfe subverts this trope—introduces otherness to the familiar—by making the catalyst for Silk's rejection of his religion a supernatural "enlightenment" purportedly given by a transcendent and ultimately unknowable god he calls the Outsider. In this enlightenment, which opens the series, Silk feels that time stands still as his mind is filled with information about the true nature of the *Whorl* and its

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[70] Christopher Beiting, "The Divine Irruption in Gene Wolfe's The Book of the Long Sun," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 11, no. 3 (2008): 90, https://doi.org/10.1353/log.0.0003.

[71] The generation starship trope first appeared in Don Wilcox's "The Voyage That Lasted Six Hundred Years" (1940), then more fully in Heinlein's "Universe" and "Common Sense" (both 1941). Subsequent iterations included Clifford D. Simak's "Spacebred Generations" (1953), Aldiss's *Non-Stop* (1958), Harry Harrison's *Captive Universe* (1969), and the *Star Trek* episode "For the World is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky" (1968), all of which follow a very similar structure. Jameson described the "lost-spaceship-as-universe" theme as "a pretext for the spectacle of the artificial formation of a culture within the closed situation of the lost ship," while Christopher Beiting labelled the trope a "materialist allegory: the scales fall from the eyes of the ignorant, benighted protagonists, who abandon their primitive beliefs for the truth of a glorified Science and a bright, technological future." Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 254–255; Beiting, "Divine Irruption," 88.

imminent depletion of resources. He occasionally questions his experience and often speculates on the nature of the Outsider, but ultimately accepts his enlightenment as a supernatural event. Yet the reader is not forced to accept the divine origins of Silk's enlightenment or entertain his theological musings, although one could argue that the text privileges such an interpretation. Doctor Crane, the rational sceptic of the series, takes pleasure in "debunking" Silk's newfound faith: "You had a cerebral accident, that's all," he tells Silk, "Most likely a tiny vein burst as a result of your exertions. … When that happens in the right spot, delusions like yours aren't all that uncommon. Wernicke's area, it's called."[72] Alongside this medical explanation, there is Silk's regular proximity to devices that can download information from the *Whorl*'s computer networks into a person's brain. Straightforward interpretation of events is further complicated when the final chapters of the series reveal that the hitherto seemingly omniscient third-person narrative was written primarily by the character Horn, who was a child during the narrated events and remains an ardent disciple of Silk's. Roberts notes that "although [Wolfe's] books are all 'religious', none of them resolves into straightforward allegory, or even symbolism, although all of them are replete with Christian symbols. … But the action of beginning to decipher these symbols creates more rather than less textual insecurity."[73] Even for Silk, his religious

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[72] Gene Wolfe, *Lake of the Long Sun*, in *Litany of the Long Sun* (New York: Orb, 2000), 494.

[73] Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 307. Roberts, however, sees *Long Sun* and *Short Sun* as significantly less ambiguous in their treatment of Christian themes than the "radical relativism" of

experiences are indeterminate and the Outsider is ultimately unknowable—he accepts early on that "no one can ever know the mind of the Outsider."[74] It is thus left up to individual readers to decide how to interpret the text's religious elements, with the text's openness resisting allegorical interpretations.

5.2.2. Language, Structure and Open Endings

The challenges to interpretation presented by Wolfe's use of metafictional devices, unreliable narrators and themes of unknowability are all reflected in his approach to language and structure. Rather than attempting to maintain the mimetic pretence of

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New Sun, ultimately finding in the three connected series a "rather conventional monotheism." His assertion that the reader ends up being "too certain" of God's existence by the end is perhaps an overstatement, downplaying the ambiguity introduced to *Long Sun* by competing explanations for Silk's enlightenment and the final revelation of the narrative's author, and the radical instability of *Short Sun*, which may be the most opaque and unstable of Wolfe's works. By contrast, Peter Wright downplays the significance of the Outsider and Silk's enlightenment in his interpretation of *Long Sun*, privileging an entirely materialist reading. Andre-Druissi likewise argues against reading the Outsider as the Catholic God, instead connecting him to the Ancient Greek Titan Cronus. Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 309–311; Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 198–203; Andre-Driussi, *Gate of Horn*, 77–78, 227–228.

[74] Gene Wolfe, *Nightside the Long Sun*, in *Litany of the Long Sun* (New York: Orb, 2000), 44.

writing's ability to communicate the world accurately, Wolfe remained aware of the representational limitations of language, stating in an interview:

> Any writer who tries to press against the limits of prose, who's trying to write something genuinely different from what's come before, is constantly aware of these paradoxes about language's power and its limitations. Because language is your medium, you become aware of the extent to which language controls and directs our thinking, the extent that we're manipulated by words—and yet the extent to which words necessarily limit our attention and hence misrepresent the world around us.[75]

Wolfe draws the reader's attention to the instability and ambiguity of language in *New Sun*, for example, through the creative use of archaic and unfamiliar words, and by a metafictional pretence of translation. To illustrate the former, consider the following sentence from *Shadow*, in which Severian reflects on the torturers' guild: "I sometimes think the reason the guild has endured so long is that it serves as a focus for the hatred of the people, drawing it from the Autarch, the exultants, and the army, and even in some degree from the pale cacogens who sometimes visit Urth from the farther stars."[76] Here, Wolfe uses the obsolete term *autarch*, derived from the Greek for "self-ruler," to refer to the authoritarian ruler of the Commonwealth in which Severian lives, and the word *exultants*

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[75] Wolfe, "On Encompassing," 341.

[76] Wolfe, *Shadow*, 23.

to refer to the Commonwealth's ruling class, although unravelling the nature of this class and their supposedly pure bloodlines proves difficult. The passage also contains Wolfe's first use of the word *cacogen*, a derivation of the uncommon English word *cacogenic* (antonym of *eugenic*, used to refer to the breeding of genetically inferior people), which readers can eventually recognise as a slur against the Hierodules. Ultimately, readers must reconstruct the meanings of these words based on context, thus highlighting the changing nature of language and the ambiguity of words. *New Sun*'s pretence of translation, meanwhile, is sustained in appendices at the back of each volume, each signed "G.W." In "A Note on the Translation," which concludes *Shadow*, "G.W." describes translating the manuscript from "a tongue that has not yet achieved existence," often choosing words that were "suggestive rather than definitive."[77] In subsequent appendices, "G.W." notes difficulties encountered during translation, acknowledging the creative license that had to be used. How a contemporary "G.W." came to acquire the manuscript is hinted at in the final volume, but even those readers most willing to suspend disbelief will have difficulty accepting the accurate translation of a non-existent language, introducing further layers of metafiction and unreliability.[78]

Beyond these linguistic games, Wolfe also challenges ideas of structural integrity through his prominent use of fragmentary writing to create interpretive challenges. This

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[77] Wolfe, *Shadow*, 302.

[78] The Soldier series is likewise presented as a translation by "G.W." from ancient papyrus scrolls.

narrative form is particularly strong in "V.R.T." (1972), which follows an officer going through a box of evidence pertaining to an anthropologist's ongoing criminal case. Most of the text comprises fragments of taped interviews, the anthropologist's notebooks, and other loose leaves, although they are not collected in any logical sequence and many of the records are undated, making chronological reconstruction difficult. As the officer attempts to make sense of everything, so too does the reader. In a review of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972), the three-novella collection containing "V.R.T.," Thomas Monteleone notes that the text "forces the reader to patiently piece together all the separate incidents" of a story that at times "turns inward and becomes so circular that the meaning is lost."[79] What results, according to Monteleone, is "a great open-ended experiment" in which "the conclusions are left up to individual readers."[80] Other critics took a different approach, seeking concrete answers. George Turner claims that "the answers are there, but Wolfe does not throw them at you," pointing to the "clues" Wolfe placed in the text to indicate a specific solution.[81] Peter Wright likewise maintains that "sufficient clues exist for the reader

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[79] Thomas Monteleone, Review of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*, (November 1972): 123–124, 129, quoted in Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 6.

[80] Monteleone, Review, 129.

[81] George Turner, Review of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *Science Fiction Commentary*, (November 1973): 4–7, quoted in Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 6.

to determine a large proportion of what has happened."[82] Although the reader may be able to reconstruct some semblance of a narrative, this will always require considerable gap filling and will ultimately be a subjective exercise. As Monteleone suggests, the text's openness actively resists the kind of objective interpretation sought by Turner and Wright and exemplified by Aramini.[83] There is also, however, a sense in which both positions are correct, for *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* is neither completely open nor completely closed. There may be little disagreement among readers that the character John V. Marsch, who appears in all three novellas, is at one point replaced by a shape-shifter, but other elements find less consensus.[84] "V.R.T." thus maintains a balance between the writerly and the

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[82] Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 7.

[83] The opening of Aramini's essay on *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* is as we might expect—a doubling-down on his search for closure: "In the wake of the postmodern explosion that decentralizes absolutes and puts universal meaning into question, it is at times difficult to approach Gene Wolfe's work with the actual scientific rigor it demands. Even the cover blurb of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* by Ursula Le Guin claims that the text itself is 'the uncertainty principle embodied in brilliant fiction.' While this hyperbole is perfectly acceptable in characterizing the text, there really is a consistent method of reading Wolfe's corpus from the 1960s and 1970s that leads to definitive conclusions." Aramini, *Between Light and Shadow*, chap. "Fifth Head of Cerberus."

[84] Prominent interpretations have also been offered by Clute (*Strokes*, 154–161), Borski ("Cave Canem," https://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=CaveCanem.Index), and Aramini.

readerly, even if it falls to the writerly end of Barthes's spectrum, with its fragmentary form drawing the reader into an act of critical interpretation.

This fragmentary and disjointed writing style is also common in Wolfe's first-person narratives. Baker describes *Shadow* as "inherently post-structural," as the text "opens up, fragments, and ruptures unity."[85] Likewise, *Short Sun* is at times highly fragmented, as the unstable narrator ceaselessly picks up and puts down his pen, introducing gaps throughout the narrative. Narrative ellipses also abound in *New Sun* and *Long Sun*, which have significant gaps between each volume. The events that transpired in such gaps are sometimes revealed gradually in the narrative, although often unreliably and only in part, causing the reader to continue asking what "really" happened.

Another formal technique often found in Wolfe's fiction is the manipulation of narrative pacing to create disorientation and uncertainty. This is particularly common in descriptions of action, violence, and war, where it becomes difficult for readers to keep track of what is happening. One could perhaps detect in Wolfe's war scenes the influences of his own experience serving in the US general infantry during the Korean War. Robinson notes that "the depiction of war and the battlefield in the aftermath is particularly intense and horrible" in the Solar Cycle, likening these scenes to Wolfe's wartime letters, collected in *Letters Home* (1991), which display "the urge both to conceal and to reveal at once."[86]

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[85] Baker, "Why We Need Dragons," 451.

[86] Robinson, "Introduction," vii.

The confusion produced by these fast-paced scenes suggests that Wolfe succeeds in expressing this dual urge to represent simultaneously the violence of war and show it to be unrepresentable.

The narrative forms and metafictional devices discussed above interact and contribute to what may be the most memorable aspect of any Wolfe story—its open ending. To varying degrees, Wolfe's endings deny the closure often expected of popular fiction, particularly US SF in the pulp tradition. Eyal Segal defines the "effect of closure" as a narrative's bringing "to a halt the operation of all kinds of narrative interest by filling in all of the significant informational gaps about the represented world that have arisen along the textual sequence."[87] Such closure depends on the revelation of information that sees the story's main narrative strands resolved and its lingering questions answered in some satisfying way. Barthes would call this the closure of the hermeneutic code, or the code of the enigma. As with Barthes's readerly-writerly opposition, however, open and closed endings fall along a spectrum, or what Segal calls "a finely gradated and multidimensional continuum."[88] Although absolute closure is always denied in Wolfe's endings, the interaction between elements of openness and closure varies between texts. Wolfe creates his more open endings not only by withholding definitive solutions, but also through the

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[87] Eyal Segal, "Closure in Detective Fiction," *Poetics Today* 31, no. 2 (2010): 162, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2009-018.

[88] Segal, "Closure in Detective Fiction," 162.

manipulation of pacing. Robinson coined the term "slingshot ending" in reference to Wolfe's work to describe "a story in which the events begin to speed up as the narrative nears its end, and the story ends precisely at the moment of maximum acceleration into some new state, with the reader left to ponder open-mouthed what has been portended."[89] Clute and Langford subsequently used this term in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, noting that the slingshot ending is often used "to close the telling in a rush of wonder" such that "the story closes *as though* before its proper ending."[90]

By way of example, each instalment of *New Sun* delivers an open "slingshot" ending: *Shadow* ends with a dizzying flurry of action as Severian gets drawn in to a deadly brawl; *Claw* ends as Severian and his companions, recovering from a perplexing and seemingly magical encounter, find their horses stolen and one of their party dead; *Sword* ends after a confrontation leaves Severian's mysterious talisman, the Claw of the Conciliator, broken, but revealing a more profound magical power of unexplained potential. The tetralogy ends with *Citadel*, which Disch described thus:

> Of the four volumes *Citadel* is surely the oddest, for it is almost perversely anticlimactic in its denial of those pleasures usually associated with finishing a long

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[89] Robinson, "Introduction," xiv.

[90] John Clute and David Langford, "Slingshot Ending," *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight, updated October 4, 2013, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/slingshot_ending.

> epic narrative; there are no confrontation scenes between Severian and the many major characters from the earlier volumes (no accounting, indeed, for many of them), no poetic justice for the villains, no coronal ceremonies for the triumphant hero.[91]

The book ends slowly, with Severian returning to where he grew up (in the fashion of the hero's journey, or Joseph Campbell's *monomyth*),[92] but speeds up at the end with the approach of a long-anticipated encounter that is never described, just as so much of what was forecast in the series, including the coming of the New Sun, remains undelivered by the book's end.[93] Such openness characterises most of Wolfe's fiction, to differing degrees, with his stories tending to deny readers the resolutions they would expect, while leaving the future open to infinite possibilities.

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[91] Thomas M. Disch, *On SF* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 123–124.

[92] See: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, Ca.: New World Library, 2008).

[93] Hartwell, the series editor, tried to insist Wolfe expand the ending of *Citadel* to offer more closure. Wolfe instead agreed to write a follow-up novel, *Urth*, that ends more openly than its predecessor, later joking to Robinson, "I got him in the end, because *The Urth of the New Sun* has an even bigger slingshot ending!" Robinson, "Introduction," xiv; Gene Wolfe, "Suns New, Long, and Short: An Interview with Gene Wolfe," by Lawrence Person, in *Shadows of the New Sun: Wolfe on Writing/Writers on Wolfe*, ed. Peter Wright (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 170.

5.2.3. Intertextuality and Genre

The formal characteristics outlined above are effective at introducing otherness to the reader insofar as they are received as inventive, as introducing something new or challenging existing ways of thinking. Thus, Attridge asserts that "works that flout formal integrity and closure are effective only because of the expectations they thwart."[94] The rich and often self-conscious intertextuality of Wolfe's work serves as a means of reinforcing expectations that are subsequently challenged. Julia Kristeva used the notion of intertextuality to describe the "transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) to another," highlighting the importance of pre-existing systems of signification, such as genre, in the formation of new texts.[95] Wolfe's writing certainly evinces a diverse range of intertexts and a rich interplay of sign systems, revealing influences from within and beyond the SF and fantasy genre traditions.

Central to Wolfe's oeuvre is the intertextual network it maintains with other SF and fantasy texts. Clute suggests that Wolfe's importance lies in his "spongelike ability to assimilate generic models and devices, and in the quality of the transformations he effects

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[94] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 11.

[95] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 59–60. Barthes likewise emphasised the intertextual nature of all writing, describing the text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." Barthes, "Death of the Author," 170.

upon that material."[96] Robinson likewise emphasises the intertextual nature of Wolfe's work, "in which a syntax, sensibility, precision, and analytical power reminiscent of Proust are set on the clones, robots, six-armed monsters, and all the rest of the matter of his beloved pulp tradition."[97] Wolfe himself acknowledged his indebtedness to SF and fantasy forbears, discussing his childhood reading of *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* comic strips and various genre pulps, including *Astounding Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Weird Tales*, *Startling Stories*, and *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*.[98] He also noted resonances between his work and that of other SF and fantasy authors, including H. G. Wells, Theodore Sturgeon, Algis Budrys, Ursula K. Le Guin, Jack Vance, Joanna Russ, Michael Moorcock, Harlan Ellison, Brian Aldiss, Kate Wilhelm and R. A. Lafferty.[99] Allusions to genre predecessors frequently appear in Wolfe's work: Vance's Dying Earth series (1950–1984), for example, can be detected beneath *New Sun*; knowing references to L. Frank Baum's Oz novels appear in "The Eyeflash Miracles" (1976) and *Free Live Free* (1984); and H. P.

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[96] Clute, "Wolfe, Gene."

[97] Robinson, "Introduction," xii.

[98] Gene Wolfe, "Autobiographical Essay," in *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series, Volume 9*, ed. Mark Zadrozny (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), 301; Gene Wolfe, "The Best Introduction to the Mountains," 2001, http://home.clara.net/andywrobertson/wolfemountains.html.

[99] Wolfe, "On Encompassing," 343, 353; Wolfe, "Suns New," 170–171; Wolfe, "Interview," 27.

Lovecraft's influence is evident in much of Wolfe's horror-tinged SF and fantasy, particularly "The Tree is My Hat" (1999) and *An Evil Guest* (2008).

Wolfe's disruptive literary forms also reveal the influence of modernist literature, the aesthetics of which Wolfe brings to SF in unique and challenging ways, as discussed in chapter two. Strong traces (and outright discussions) of Proust, Dostoevsky and Vladimir Nabokov are particularly prominent in *Peace*, while the influence of Jorge Luis Borges is apparent in *New Sun*. Franz Kafka is most effectively channelled in "Forlesen" (1974), although Kafkaesque sequences also appear in many of Wolfe's works. References to G. K. Chesterton abound, with Wolfe's "Westwind" (1973) echoing Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) and Wolfe's Patera Silk mirroring Chesterton's Father Brown. Wolfe's frequent use of religious intertexts and signifying systems—his works are replete with Christian imagery and biblical references—offer further avenues for interpretation. Familiarity with these sources can allow the reader to find powerful new meanings in Wolfe's texts. Take, for example, the first sentence of "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" (1972): "When I was a boy my brother David and I had to go to bed early whether we were sleepy or not."[100] This may evoke the first sentence of Proust's *Swann's Way*—"For a long time I used to go to bed early"—directing the knowing reader to the novella's Proustian concern

[100] Gene Wolfe, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (London: Gollancz, 2004), 11.

with memory and perception, suggesting a possible interpretive framework.[101] Thematically linked stories also form a kind of intertextual network *within* Wolfe's oeuvre, indicating each other as a means of creating further meanings.[102]

Highlighting intertexts in this manner presents the reader with a range of interpretive possibilities, challenging straightforward readings that would uphold the text's autonomy. Catherine Belsey notes that "by self-referentially naming their own intertextuality" and "knowingly alluding to existing works," texts can break "the illusion

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[101] Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (1922; repr., Adelaide: ebooks@Adelaide, 2014), http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/proust/marcel/p96s/index.html.

[102] Such a network exists between "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories," "The Death of Doctor Island" (1973), "The Doctor of Death Island" (1978) and "Death of the Island Doctor" (1983), collected in *The Wolfe Archipelago* (1983). As Clute explains, "these four stories, each fully autonomous though each mirroring the others' structural and thematic patterns, comprise an intensely interesting cubist portrayal of the mortal trap (or coffin) of Identity, a problematic of ontology written in terms that are intrinsically sf in nature." With their unique settings, characters, and plots, each story provides a different perspective on the questions of being and identity that connect them, while implying each other as lenses through which to interpret the narrative. Clute, "Wolfe, Gene."

that they give transparent access to a fictional world."[103] Waugh identifies self-conscious intertextuality as a key feature of metafiction, since it "offers both innovation *and* familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions."[104] The self-aware intertextuality of Wolfe's texts thus contributes to their singularity and inventiveness: by drawing on familiar signifying systems, Wolfe allows his readers to develop expectations based on the recognisability of the same, before challenging these expectations by introducing what is other. This staging of otherness can be created through new elements or ideas, the collision of conflicting signifying systems (SF and fantasy; pulp content and modernist form) or simply the refusal to meet readers' expectations of knowability and closure.

Wolfe's reworking of genre traditions and subversion of expectations often makes it difficult to categorise his fiction. *New Sun* again provides a powerful example, demonstrating an innovative use of genre and intertextuality to activate competing interpretive frameworks. When the reader begins *Shadow*, the impression is of a sword-and-sorcery fantasy epic, complete with guilds, witches, powerful swords, magical talismans, monstrous creatures and a violent anti-hero. This immediately draws readers into a series of expectations based on fantasy genre traditions, although these expectations

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[103] Catherine Belsey, "Poststructuralism," in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Simon Malpas and Paul Wake (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 48.

[104] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 12.

are soon disrupted. As the series progresses, it becomes evident that this fantastic world, Urth, is the post-apocalyptic Earth of the far-distant future, Severian's society having reverted to more superstitious belief systems and medieval socio-political structures. Further reading reveals that the Matachin Tower, home of the guild of torturers, is an enormous rocket ship; Severian's strange friend Jonas is really an android; the fantastic creatures he encounters are either aliens or genetically engineered animals; and much of what appears magical is explained (pseudo-)scientifically. But readers are not permitted to become too comfortable with the expectations of knowability and rationality brought by US SF genre conventions: at one point, Severian meets a group of witches who seemingly reanimate the ghosts of the dead, and the powerful aliens he encounters claim to be emissaries of a transcendent deity. The reader must thus question whether the unexplainable and the supernatural can be accommodated in an SF framework. Warding off the debate over whether *New Sun* is SF or fantasy, Wolfe adopted the term "science fantasy" to describe the series.[105] Nonetheless, readers and communities of practice have been divided over what Peter Wright calls the text's "generic duplicity," since its rich

[105] Gene Wolfe, "What Do They Mean, SF?" in *Shadows of the New Sun: Wolfe on Writing/Writers on Wolfe*, ed. Peter Wright (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 216.

interplay of SF and fantasy tropes and aesthetics invite different approaches to interpretation.[106]

Wolfe's subversion of genre-based expectations and syntheses of diverse literary traditions are key sources of the *novelty* of his work. As Attridge explains, "novelty is achieved by means *both* of the refashioning of the old *and* of the unprecedented advent of the new; or, more accurately if more paradoxically, that the advent of the new *is* a particular kind of refashioning of the old."[107] By taking the tropes and traditions of SF and fantasy and reworking them with writerly forms influenced by modernist literature, Wolfe fashions

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[106] Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 56. Volumes of *New Sun* won distinctly SF awards, including the John W. Campbell Memorial Award (for *Citadel* in 1984) and the British SF Association Award (for *Shadow* in 1981), as well as distinctly fantasy awards, including the World Fantasy Award (for *Shadow* in 1981) and the British Fantasy Award (for *Sword* in 1983). Publishers also appear divided, with Gollancz releasing the omnibus volumes *Shadow and Claw* and *Sword and Citadel* in their Fantasy Masterworks series in 2000, then re-releasing them in their SF Masterworks series in 2016. The Folio Society, meanwhile, marketed their 2019 limited edition of *New Sun* as speculative fiction. Readers and critics also tend to reach their own conclusions, with Gaiman, for example, adamant that the tetralogy is "science fiction, not fantasy." Gaiman, Introduction, xiii. See also: "Gene Wolfe," Science Fiction Awards Database, updated July 5, 2019, https://www.sfadb.com/Gene_Wolfe; "The Book of the New Sun," The Folio Society, accessed September 17, 2019, https://www.foliosociety.com/au/the-book-of-the-new-sun.html.

[107] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 24.

singular texts that can offer a sense of newness to the reader. According to Attridge, such writing demonstrates literary creativity:

> The creative writer registers, whether consciously or unconsciously, both the possibilities offered by the accepted forms and materials of the time, and their impossibilities, the exclusions and prohibitions that have sustained but also limited them. Out of the former emerge reworkings of existing models, out of the latter emerges the otherness which makes these reworkings new works of literature.[108]

The wide-ranging and often self-conscious intertextuality of Wolfe's texts, which create new forms and content out of existing literary traditions and frameworks, challenges the reader's expectations, offering multiple avenues for interpretation and staging literary encounters with otherness.

5.2.4. Moving Toward Closure

Wolfe's later novels tend more toward closure than his earlier work, at least on preliminary readings, incorporating more readerly elements of form and offering a greater degree of narrative completion upfront. Perhaps his last major work to foreground problems of language and reliability and to relish experimental literary techniques was *Short Sun*; subsequent novels, including *Pirate Freedom*, *Home Fires*, and *A Borrowed Man*, have been a far cry from the multi-layered unreliability and literary sophistication of *New Sun*, or the

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[108] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 20–21.

modernist aesthetics of *Peace* and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. In a 2014 interview, Wolfe acknowledged that receiving "so much criticism for being unreadable and overcomplex and hard to get into" had led him to "loosen up" his writing and strive to make it more accessible.[109] Elements such as word re-definition were phased out, and the evocative descriptions and long, flowing sentences of earlier works were replaced with simpler language and an emphasis on dialogue. In his late novels, it is easier for the reader take the first-person narratives at face value and pass over "minor" inconsistencies and unanswered questions to find straightforward and, to some extent, satisfying surface narratives. The mystery at the core of *A Borrowed Man*, for example, seems to be fully resolved by the novel's conclusion—a rarity in Wolfe's work. An attentive reader, however, could take hold of these texts' disruptive elements—the knots in the textual tissue—and further interrogate the narratives, finding openings that invite the reader to explore the limitless meanings the texts stage, that invite active and creative *writerly* readings.

Wolfe's later work thus evinces a more even balance of writerly and readerly elements, positioning the texts in a kind of middle ground of the readerly-writerly spectrum. Here, the texts' openness or closure to interpretation depends largely on the reader's approach, the text itself less actively driving the reader toward a particular mode of reading. Wolfe's more experimental and enduring works, on the other hand, are

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[109] Gene Wolfe, "A Q&A with Gene Wolfe," by Jason Pontin, *MIT Technology Review*, July 25, 2014, http://www.technologyreview.com/news/529431/a-qa-with-gene-wolfe/.

recognisably more writerly, although there are determinate, readerly elements (identifiable characters and settings, broad contours of narrative plots) that allow them to function as narratives. Just as Barthes determined that the pure writerly text was an impossibility, Booth likewise noted that openness and closure must always exist in balance, since "total openness is total entropy—and hence total apathy for a reader."[110] Clear and unambiguous division of Wolfe's work (or of any fiction) into either side of a readerly/writerly binary would be fraught with difficulty, but by conceiving of such distinction as a spectrum we can more freely consider how readerly and writerly elements play off each other and encourage different modes of reading.

5.2.5. Failures of Representation

Before moving on, we must address an unavoidable problem in Wolfe's work, its frequently negative representation of women. Even *New Sun*, with its deftly realised protagonist and detailed world, struggles to avoid associating its female characters with tired stereotypes of femininity: the passivity and submissiveness of Dorcas, the vanity of Jolenta, the treachery and sexual deviancy of Agia. Troubling depictions of violence against women also permeate the series: sexual violence forms a key part of torturer's practices in the opening chapters of *Shadow*, for example. Severian's descriptions of the women he encounters also make for

[110] Booth, "Are Narrative Choices," 67.

uncomfortable reading, too often focusing on sexual attraction and physical appearance.[111] Although much of this could be attributed to *New Sun*'s dystopian setting and Severian's anti-hero qualities, such representations of women pervade Wolfe's oeuvre, appearing too frequently to be excused as gritty worldbuilding or implied critique. Carolyn Wendell astutely notes another problematic convention in her analysis of Wolfe's "The Death of Dr. Island," which uses the death of its only female character as a means of improving the conditions of one of the men. "Too often," Wendell writes, "our society expects and demands that the woman be so dependent on the male that she will sacrifice herself to his well-being," concluding that Wolfe reinforces this "expected passivity" of women.[112] This observation remains true for many of Wolfe's major female characters, from Dorcas in *New Sun*, to Hyacinth in *Long Sun* and Seawrack in *Short Sun*.

The association of women with sexist clichés—weakness, passivity, deceptiveness, villainy, sexual immorality—is particularly prevalent in Wolfe's later work. *A Borrowed Man*, for example, embraces many of these clichés in relation to its female characters: the

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[111] An example: "Jolenta straightened up as people do who are straining not to stoop," Severian writes, "Above the waist her creamy amplitude was such that her spine must have been curved backward to balance the weight." Wolfe, *Shadow*, 277.

[112] Carolyn Wendell, "The Alien Species: A Study of Women Characters in the Nebula Award Winners, 1965–1973," *Extrapolation* 20, no. 4 (1979): 347, https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.1979.20.4.343.

female lead, Colette Coldbrook, tells the protagonist that "we women lie and lie, because we're good at it," reinforcing a common refrain in Wolfe's fiction, while Gordon notes that the protagonist's main love interest, Arabella Lee, "is more a romantic ideal than a living woman."[113] Only two of Wolfe's novels feature a female protagonist, *Pandora, by Holly Hollander* (1990) and *An Evil Guest* (2008), and the young Holly proves a much more independent and compelling character than *An Evil Guest*'s Cassie Casey. "Casey is not a strong woman," wrote Roberts in his review of the novel, "she is a conservative's notion of a strong woman … defined almost entirely in terms of her physical appearance and her effect upon men."[114] Scenes of violence against women also remain prevalent in Wolfe's later work, as exemplified by the rape of human women by giants in *The Knight* and the brutal violence depicted in "King Rat" (2010). None of this is to suggest that stronger and more complex female characters are entirely absent from Wolfe's work—Mint in *Long Sun*, first a sibyl then a military general, is one example—but they are far outnumbered by more one-dimensional and stereotypical female characters.

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[113] Gene Wolfe, *A Borrowed Man* (New York: Tor, 2015), 19; Joan Gordon, "The Haunted Library of Gene Wolfe," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 3, 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-haunted-library-of-gene-wolfe/.

[114] Adam Roberts, Review of *An Evil Guest*, by Gene Wolfe, Strange Horizons, October 13, 2008, http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/an-evil-guest-by-gene-wolfe/.

Unsurprisingly, this aspect of Wolfe's work, off-putting to so many contemporary readers, has appealed to some readers in more conservative and reactionary fan groups, including those associated with the Rabid Puppies campaign. In 2013, Beale wrote a blog post distinguishing between what he calls "Pink SF" and "Blue SF" (this is unfortunately not satire). He argued that most SF published today is "Pink," being "goopy, narcissistic female-oriented" fiction "about feelings rather than ideas or actions." Such "Pink SF," we are told, is "a cancer" and "an invasion" into the SF genre, which used to be characterised by "Blue SF" that "says 'fuck that' to strong independent female protagonists … [and] sexual equality," ultimately being about "masculine ideas. Masculine challenges. Masculine action. Masculine energy."[115] On the Castalia House blog, Daniel Eness sought to apply Beale's principles to two short stories, characterising "Pink SF" through Rachel Swirsky's "If You Were a Dinosaur, My Love" (2013), a Nebula Award winner and Hugo Award nominee, and "Blue SF" through Wolfe's "Build-a-Bear," one of his less noteworthy short stories. As elsewhere in Wolfe's fiction, the female protagonist of "Build-a-Bear," Viola, is passive, becoming a damsel in distress at the end of the story.[116] She is saved from her attacker, who is intent on raping her, by a robotic toy bear she built earlier. Suddenly activated, the (apparently male) bear grabs the attacker's firearm to defend her. In Eness's reading, the

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[115] Theodore Beale, "Pink SF vs Blue SF," *Vox Popoli* (blog), December 4, 2013, https://voxday.blogspot.com/2013/12/pink-sf-vs-blue-sf.html.

[116] Gene Wolfe, "Build-a-Bear," *Jim Baen's Universe* 1, no. 1 (2006), eBook.

story hits all the right notes of reinforcing traditional gender roles, displaying women as weaker than men, and not being "politically correct."[117] Unfortunately, Wolfe's story offers little resistance to such a reading, although a less reductive and totalising approach (a *writerly* reading) would find openings to alternative interpretations. Set aboard a cruise ship, human men in "Build-a-Bear" are characterised by dishonesty (married men hoping to find new mistresses) and sexual violence (by Viola's attacker, with the suggestion that other men aboard are behaving likewise). Viola is ultimately defended by a fluffy pink teddy bear she constructed with the help of another woman. One could certainly argue that reading the story as a straightforward affirmation of masculinity and male supremacy is overly simplistic, intentionally ignoring the text's various ambiguities.

Problems surrounding the representation of minority groups are also apparent in Wolfe's oeuvre. Perhaps the only identifiably LGBTIQ+ characters in Wolfe's work appear in *Long Sun*, where Blood and Musk are passingly acknowledged as a gay couple. These men, however, are also two of the series' villains, although not without their complexities and more sympathetic moments. The absence of positive representations of people of diverse genders and sexualities stands as another of Wolfe's unfortunate blind spots. His representation of ethnic minorities also tends toward the reductive, particularly in his later work. Roberts observes *An Evil Guest*'s "jolting sallies into racist stereotyping," including

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[117] Daniel Eness, "Pink and Blue SF: An Applied Breakdown," *Castalia House* (blog), August 26, 2014, http://www.castaliahouse.com/pink-and-blue-sf-an-applied-breakdown/.

cringe-worthy attempts to replicate stereotypical Japanese accents, and the same could be said of the representation of Asian characters in *The Sorcerer's House* (2010).[118] The main cast of Wolfe's novels is overwhelmingly white and whiteness is often held as a standard of beauty by Wolfe's male protagonists.[119]

In part, these problems of representation are inherited from the literary traditions Wolfe draws on, particularly the US pulp SF tradition. Reflecting on American SF, Le Guin wrote that "the very low status of women in SF should make us ponder about whether SF is civilized at all," since the genre "has either totally ignored women, or presented them as squeaking dolls subject to instant rape by monsters … or, at best, loyal little wives or mistresses of accomplished heroes."[120] Much of Wolfe's work fits this characterisation all too well. In his history of SF, Roberts likewise observes that pulp and "golden age" SF had significant issues with gender representation, noting that "it is striking how rarely (in many cases, how *never*) female characters with agency appear in the writing of these male golden

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[118] Roberts, Review of *An Evil Guest*.

[119] In *Shadow*, for example, Severian is said to have exceptionally white skin, and when praising the beauty of his female companions, he often comments on their whiteness: Thelca's white skin is noted repeatedly in the opening chapters; Aiga's skin is "palest gold" in the sunlight; Dorcas is so white that she "seemed to glow"; and Jolenta, whom Severian calls "the most beautiful woman in the world," is "fair" and "creamy." Wolfe, *Shadow*, 100, 152, 228, 275, 277.

[120] Le Guin, "American SF," 97.

age SF 'masters'. There is, in many of these stories, a tacit identification of science with white masculine authority."[121] The machismo at work in the US pulp SF tradition, glorifying toxic masculinity and heteronormative ideals, was already being challenged by many of Wolfe's contemporaries, including Le Guin, Delany, Russ, and Disch, all of whom Wolfe read and admired.[122] It remains a problem that Wolfe's challenges to outdated genre traditions fail to extend to representations of women, LGBTIQ+ people, and ethnic minorities. This also reveals the limitations of the ethical value of Wolfe's work, for at times the writerly slips away and the author's totalising prejudices are revealed. In these moments of closure, when the writerly is suspended, these texts are particularly open to critique from the standpoints of normative ethics and moral philosophy, which may find negative representations that sit at odds with the texts' formal openness elsewhere.

5.3. Gene Wolfe's "Seven American Nights"

Wolfe's "Seven American Nights" displays many of the distinctive formal elements that characterise the singularity of his work, disrupting straightforward interpretation and opening an unenglobable literary space. It also proves to be one of Wolfe's more self-consciously metafictional texts, becoming an exploration of the nature and limits of writing and literary representation and providing an example of writerly SF that unsays its own

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[121] Roberts, *History of Science Fiction*, 303.

[122] Wolfe, "An Interview," 27.

Said. The following analysis of the novella will lead into an examination of the various critical responses it has received, many of which, I argue, have failed to engage responsibly with the singularity of the literary encounter.

5.3.1. The Singularity of "Seven American Nights"

First published in Damon Knight's highly esteemed *Orbit* anthology series, Wolfe's "Seven American Nights" was nominated for 1978 Hugo and Nebula awards.[123] The main body of the text is presented as the travel diary of a wealthy Iranian man, Nadan Jafferzadeh, written during a visit to Washington, D.C. The near-future America described by Nadan has the feel of a post-collapse dystopia and the miserable state of the country is attributed, at different times, to the rampant production and consumption of harmful chemicals and the devastation of a recent war. A straightforward reading of the text, taking what is written at face value and ignoring as many obstacles as possible, might arrive at a story like this. Nadan arrives in America by cruise ship and starts keeping a journal, which covers one week in the city. The journal relays the events and encounters of each day, including visits to ruined buildings and dangerous parks. In an early entry, Nadan attends a play at a small theatre and becomes infatuated by one of the performers, Ardis Dahl. He soon becomes entangled in some kind of plot with Ardis and another actor, Bobby O'Keene, which even

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[123] "Gene Wolfe," Science Fiction Awards Database, updated July 5, 2019, https://www.sfadb.com/Gene_Wolfe.

he does not fully understand, although it eventually brings him to the attention of local authorities. One of Nadan's more bizarre encounters comes when a monstrous creature attacks him at night on an empty city street, although he seemingly manages to shoot it using his pistol. Nadan later recounts consummating his desire for Ardis "in perfect darkness," but on the final evening recorded in the journal, when they are intimate for a second time, Nadan sees Ardis by firelight and is horrified, apparently murdering her in response, although it is unclear what he sees and whether any of his experiences on this final day are drug-induced hallucinations.[124] The entries end abruptly with the police banging on his door, Bobby pacing the halls outside, and a monster entering through his window. This brief attempt to summarise the narrative fails to do any justice to the text, which is so unrelentingly unstable that any attempt to outline even the most basic plot becomes nearly impossible—another reading of the text might easily lead to a completely different interpretation of events.

Much of this instability comes from the narrator, Nadan. Despite his early insistence that he will tell the truth in his journal—"what good is a dishonest record?" he writes—Nadan proves to be devastatingly unreliable.[125] In one of his later entries, he declares: "here I am not exaggerating or coloring the facts, though I confess I have

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[124] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 226.

[125] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 197.

occasionally done so elsewhere in this chronicle."[126] Yet Nadan's unreliability goes well beyond this penchant for exaggeration, or even wilful deception. In an amusing inversion of the condescending orientalism of colonial travel writing, Nadan shows contempt toward the American public and an ignorance of US history and culture, such as when he is shown a "summer palace" at the heart of the city and writes: "The beggars have now forgotten its very name, and call it merely 'the white house.'"[127] As he recounts the events of each day, he also makes assumptions that seem improbable upon further reflection. For example, when Bobby tries to steal a notebook from his pocket, Nadan assumes he mistook it for a wallet, failing to consider that Bobby might have a motive for attempting to steal the notebook itself, or perhaps to instigate the resulting altercation. After the police insist on arresting Bobby for attempted theft, Ardis exhorts Nadan to accompany her to a police building the next morning to have the charges against Bobby dropped. Upon arriving at a building owned by the Federated Enquiry Divisions (the FED, or what Nadan calls "the national secret police"), Nadan is interrogated by one official after another through a dizzying maze of bureaucracy in the novella's most Kafkaesque sequence.[128] Nadan continues to believe that this is all toward securing Bobby's release, although his very presence in the building could have been contrived to allow for this extensive interrogation.

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[126] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 224.

[127] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 181–182.

[128] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 219.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Nadan's narrative, however, is the unreliability of everything he claims to have perceived and experienced. After his first night in America, Nadan writes that he has been "paralyzed by a fear" that came upon him the previous evening, suspecting that someone on the ship drugged him.[129] Later, apparently feeling adventurous, Nadan takes the opportunity to purchase what he believes is a hallucinogenic drug. Taking it back to his hotel, he coats one of six small marzipan eggs in the drug, then mixes it with the others, deciding to eat one egg each evening so that the drug takes him unaware. Until the very end of the journal it remains unclear when, if ever, the drugs have altered Nadan's moods or perceptions. He exhibits rapid mood changes throughout his records, fluctuating between excitement and depression, while his obsession with Ardis makes him seem deranged at times. At first it would appear easy to attribute Nadan's near-fatal encounter with the monstrous creature to the effects of a drugged egg, especially since all evidence of the encounter has disappeared the following day, but the reappearance of such a creature in the final pages of the journal challenges such an interpretation. Nadan's insistence that one of the eggs was stolen from his room raises even more interpretive possibilities—was the drugged egg stolen, or does Nadan not remember eating it, or is he simply lying in his account? This use of a narrator with multiple levels of unreliability encourages the reader to scrutinise the text and recognise the artificiality of the

[129] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 179.

discourse they are encountering.[130] Wolfe also makes Nadan a flawed and unlikeable narrator, as he will again with Severian in *New Sun*, making it difficult to sympathise with the narrator's judgements and opinions, pushing readers to think for themselves about the text's moral dilemmas and implications.

Wolfe's proclivities toward fragmentary writing are also evident in the novella, further disrupting straightforward interpretation and creating a sense of openness. Nadan's journal entries vary in length from a few lines to several pages, often ending abruptly, and the time between entries is not always accounted for in the narrative. Nadan also refers to removing pages from his journal in order to hide the real reason for his visit to America—a plan that may have involved stealing miniatures of Iranian heritage from the National Gallery of Art. The text's fragmentary nature results in significant narrative ellipses and refuses the reader the comfort of being able to accept what is written, instead requiring them to fill in the gaps and reconstruct the narrative.[131] Although they might not be entirely

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[130] Another challenge to the text's reliability, and its documentary pretence, is the increasing implausibility of Nadan finding time to write his journal entries, the last of which he apparently wrote while a monster came through his window and the police charged his door.

[131] Nadan himself describes the assumptions involved in such concretisation and "gap filling" when he writes: "Science has so accustomed us to devising and accepting theories to account for the facts we observe, however fantastic, that our minds must begin their manufacture before we are aware of it." After writing this, Nadan describes how he instantly attempted to create a reasonable story that

unsubstantiated by textual evidence, the stories readers create to fill in these narrative gaps and account for inconsistencies are their own, and in a text as unstable and unreliable as "Seven American Nights," readers' interpretations can vary significantly, as we will see. Even the meanings created by individual readers can change dramatically between readings, with each literary encounter presenting new and unexpected challenges.

Perhaps the most disruptive fragments in the novella are the framing narratives that precede and follow Nadan's embedded journal. The text begins with a short letter to Nadan's mother from a private detective, who presents the journal as reason to believe that her son is still alive, thereby justifying his request for more money to continue his investigation. Thus, we already have reason to be suspicious of the journal and its authenticity, since the detective could have ulterior motives and be attempting to extort money on false grounds. Nadan's final journal entry is followed by another fragment that destroys the documentary pretence maintained throughout the rest of the narrative. This fragment switches, for the first time, to a distant third-person narrative voice and describes a brief conversation between two women who have just finished reading the journal. When the younger woman declares, "He is alive then," the older woman replies, "You think this is his writing? … Perhaps. Perhaps."[132] These final words rekindle the problem of the journal's

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would account for what he believed was the sudden appearance of his wife, Yasmin (presumably his wife in Iran), before realising it was someone else. Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 194.

[132] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 233.

authenticity, directing the reader back to the detective's questionable motives, or to the possibility of interference by the FED, or to the oblique references, by a museum curator that Nadan meets at the theatre, to forgery machines that can imitate someone's handwriting and written style. These framing fragments, loaded with possible implications, further invite the reader to encounter the text's inexhaustible interpretive potential. They also challenge the reader's expectations of a trustworthy narrative and a basic level of mimesis by introducing what is *other* to the familiar conventions the documentary pretence of the travel diary.

Similar effects are produced by Wolfe's manipulation of narrative pacing, which is particularly evident in the journal's "slingshot ending." There is an increase in narrative density and pacing in the final, short journal entry, along with a perplexing final sentence:

> Later. Kreton is walking in the hall outside my door, and the tread of his twisted black shoe jars the building like an earthquake. I heard the word *police* as though it were thunder. My dead Ardis, very small and bright, has stepped out of the candle-flame, and there is a hairy face coming through the window.[133]

This open ending leaves the reader wondering what really happened in Nadan's final egagement with Ardis, the nature of the beasts he has encountered, and what *will* happen during the anticipated confrontations with the monstrous creature, Bobby (Kreton) and the police. By ultimately refusing the closure so often expected of popular fiction, this

[133] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 233.

ending introduces a challenging openness that directs the reader towards the unknown, towards an otherness not immanent to the work.

"Seven American Nights" also demonstrates the disruption of language common to Wolfe's earlier fiction, further problematising the reader's relationship with the text. Issues concerning the instability of signification become apparent when Nadan refers to writing his journal in Farsi, indicating that the embedded narrative is an English translation of a foreign-language original. Another example of this disruption of language comes when Nadan talks to a beggar with a genetic deformity toward the start of the novella; frustrated by the man's speech impediment, Nadan explains his interpretation of the man's words:

> He had no lower jaw, so that I had quite a bit of difficulty in understanding him at first; but after we had shouted back and forth a good deal—I telling him to depart and threatening to kill him on the spot, and he protesting—I realized that he was forced to make the sound of *d* for *b*, *n* for *m*, and *t* for *p*; and after that we got along better.
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> I will not attempt to render his speech phonetically, but he said that since I had been so generous, he wished to show me a great secret—something foreigners like myself did not even realize existed.[134]

The ensuing dialogue between Nadan and the beggar reads naturally, but interpretive possibilities are created by Nadan's possible misunderstanding—he recounts the beggar

[134] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 182.

boasting "Someday we are great again," for example, when he could equally have said "Sunday we are great again," indicating an event to come after Nadan's seventh night in America. This foregrounding of the complexities of language and its susceptibility to misinterpretation adds yet another layer to the text's unreliability, further opening it up to a multitude of potential meanings.

The self-conscious intertextuality of "Seven American Nights" creates a rich interpretive space, opening a wide range of interpretive possibilities for the reader to explore. The most explicit intertextual references come through the plays performed at the theatre, the first of which is an adaptation of Gore Vidal's *Visit to a Small Planet* (1956), although Nadan notes that the director made significant changes to the original, apparently to modernise the work. Comparing the play described to Vidal's original SF comedy, for example, could reveal something about "the war just passed"—what had been a play about Cold War tensions between America and Russia now seems to involve Turkey.[135] The significances of the play's other changes, however, are less apparent and could either point to deeper intertextual connections or simply represent the tendency for stories to change over time. The second play Nadan sees is J. M. Barrie's *Mary Rose* (1925), a fantasy with supernatural elements. Ardis plays the titular Mary Rose and Nadan suggests it is Ardis's "innocent affinity for the supernatural" that allows her to excel in the role—an observation

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[135] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 186; Gore Vidal, *Visit to a Small Planet* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956).

that proves foreboding, since the journal ends with Ardis's apparent death and return (Mary Rose is a ghost by the end of the play).[136] There are also references in Nadan's journal to the theatre's next scheduled play, Goethe's *Faust* (1808), which is again grounded in the supernatural. Bobby is said to be playing Mephistopheles, Ardis is assumed to be playing Margaret, but Nadan wonders who will play Doctor Faust. The reader can guess at a possible answer: Nadan himself is Faust and the play is already in progress. After all, Nadan makes a shady deal with Bobby, who agrees to facilitate his first encounter with Ardis, but Nadan's obsessive desire for Ardis leads to her apparent death. Each of these plays can therefore serve as the basis of an interpretive framework upon which possible meanings can be constructed. This intertextual aspect of "Seven American Nights" is so intense it can be difficult to tell where the plays begin and end: Nadan's acquaintances are frequently referred to by the names of the characters they have played on stage and he even notes the "Faustian determination" of his writing after reflecting on "the play that is our lives."[137]

The novella's direct intertextual references also extend beyond the plays, its title being a self-conscious reference to *The Thousand and One Nights* (هزار و يك شب, or *Alf Layla wa-Layla*), also translated as *The Arabian Nights*, a medieval Arabic work with Persian sources that has seen many different versions and translations. "In its exceptional

[136] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 198.

[137] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 227.

variability," David Damrosch explains, "*The Thousand and One Nights* is better read in two or three versions than in any one alone. Like Shahrazad herself, we may fatally compromise our experience if we confine ourselves to a single story—or a single translation—as we make our way into this most hybrid of works."[138] Nadan's diary is likewise a work ostensibly in translation, possibly having multiple contributors and source texts, with endless available interpretations.[139] Parallels could also be drawn between Shahrazad, who delays her execution by telling King Shahryar stories each evening, and Ardis's storytelling in the novella's plays, both texts becoming about performance and narrative. Such references in "Seven American Nights" combine with a plethora of allusions to SF and fantasy tropes—from pulse pistols and other advanced technologies, to genetic mutations and the suggestion that the monstrous creatures are werewolves—to set multiple signifying systems into play.

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[138] David Damrosch, "Reading in Translation," in *How to Read World Literature* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 82.

[139] *The Thousand and One Nights* was also a favourite of Borges, one of Wolfe's great influences, for its infinite openness to interpretation and re-telling, with self-conscious references to the work appearing in influential stories including "The South" (1944) and "The Book of Sand" (1975). Borges even wrote an essay on the work's various interpretations: Jorge Louis Borges, "The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*," trans. Esther Allen, in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 1999), 92–109.

Attridge identifies "narrative contradictions" as "the most flagrant challenge to the tradition of the realist novel," recognising them as a key means of staging a literary encounter with otherness.[140] The introduction of such contradictory elements challenges the reader and actively thwarts attempts to harmonise or concretise the narrative. We find such elements throughout Wolfe's novella, where there is often significant inconsistency in the characters' behaviours. During a conversation with Bobby, for example, Nadan claims not to drink alcohol, but later he apparently drinks arrack with Ardis. Other characters also appear to behave inconsistently, Bobby fluctuating between friendly and aggressive, Ardis between serious and cheerful, affectionate and distant. Perhaps the novella's most curious contradiction is in its title, "Seven American Nights," which is seemingly at odds with the journal itself, which only clearly accounts for six nights. This discrepancy implies further narrative gaps the reader must attempt to "fill in," the text constantly being at odds with itself, unsaying its own Said.

Many of Nadan's encounters reinforce the novella's concern with representation and interpretation. One of the earliest and most fascinating of these is Nadan's conversation with the museum curator at the theatre. Claiming that "smell is the essence of communication" since it can honestly convey one's "emotional state" (apparently through pheromones), the curator describes his research on "the principle of extended abstraction":

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[140] Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee*, 14.

> When you speak, you are telling another how you would smell if you smelled as you should and if he could smell you properly from where he stands. … When you write, you are telling the other how you would speak if he could hear you, and when you print [letters] with your turnip [using it as a stamp], you are telling him how you would write. You will notice that we have already reached the third level of abstraction.[141]

The curator proceeds to speculate on how many "levels of abstraction [are] possible before the original matter disappears altogether."[142] If all of the original content is lost after a certain number of levels of abstraction then the curator characterises this as a "closed curve," giving the significant example of a hand-written presidential address composed and written by forgery machines. The curator claims that "open curves" are possible when some original matter remains even after an infinite number of levels of abstraction. To demonstrate this open curve, he shows Nadan what appears to be a blank piece of paper, but before he can explain this any further the play resumes. The significance of this, and the rest of this mystifying conversation with Nadan, is left entirely to the reader. Does the blank piece of paper represent an idealised "open curve" because there is no meaning to lose in the first place, or because it can accommodate any meaning the reader can create? This notion of "extended abstraction" recurs throughout the novella and finds an interesting

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[141] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 186–187.

[142] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 187.

parallel when Nadan, a Muslim, recounts witnessing a Catholic procession and suggests that for the "inattentive, bickering followers" the "ritualized plea for life renewed" has become "more foreign to them than to me."[143] As thematic concerns over representation and reliability are juxtaposed with the novella's use of Catholic imagery, readers are encouraged to consider the implications for contemporary religion of ideas of abstraction and lost meaning. Yet as is often the case with Wolfe's open treatment of religious themes, the meaning of these implications is left entirely in the hands of the reader—the unreliable and unlikeable Nadan cannot suffice as guide to these matters. Through its many levels of unreliability and reversibility, "Seven American Nights" can be seen putting these ideas of "extended abstraction" into practice, leaving the reader to consider what will be lost in the final level of abstraction: their own interpretation.

The novella's final words are both a gesture inviting the reader to deeper engagement with the text's interpretive space, and a reflection of the text's overall ambiguity: "Perhaps," the unnamed character says, "Perhaps." Brooke-Rose notes that realist narratives depend on "a strongly detonalised, merely assertive discourse," that seeks to deliver "transparent" writing by avoiding "'subjunctive' locutions like *seems*, *as it were*, *perhaps*."[144] Yet it is the uncertainty of "perhaps" that Wolfe embraces, flying in the face of the detonalised readerly discourses that dominated US pulp SF. As Levinas said of

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[143] Wolfe, "Seven American Nights," 232.

[144] Brooke-Rose, *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 88.

Blanchot's fiction, everything in "Seven American Nights" is offered "in the 'perhaps' mode," where the "*saying* attempts to surround all movement"—no closed and concrete Said immobilises meaning.[145] Suvin, as we noted, accused Wolfe of "fleeing the Master Narrative," and by embracing the "perhaps" mode, "Seven American Nights" does indeed fight against the very possibility of a single interpretation tying together all its disparate elements.[146] The novella resists straightforward allegory—which, as Attridge notes, "cannot handle perhapses."[147] Instead, Wolfe weaves a complex text that self-consciously destroys any pretence of transparent mimetic representation, staging the reader's singular encounter with literary Saying by combining writerly modes of representation with new approaches to familiar literary tropes and traditions.

Attridge associates the event of singularity with the *demand* that a text makes on the reader, as it raises certain questions and challenges the reader's assumptions, calling for a response. Just as the face of the other person calls me to offer part of my world in an act of generosity, the irreducible text calls me to respond with a singular reading made possible by my unique idioculture. In both cases, this is the effect of an encounter with the Saying. Levinas himself acknowledged that when facing inventive art, "one cannot contemplate in

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[145] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 184.

[146] Suvin, "Afterword," 241.

[147] Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee*, 54.

silence," but "feels an irresistible need to speak."[148] The infinity of the literary Saying raises ethical questions about how readers respond to this demand to speak, this demand to interpret. Levinas's discussion of the need for criticism in "Reality and Its Shadow" follows his reflections on Mallarmé's poetry, where he asks: "Is not to interpret Mallarmé to betray him?"[149] We are left, then, with Levinas's conclusion on how to approach Blanchot: one must maintain the "perhaps" mode when attempting to unravel and interpret such a work, thereby preserving its openness, its alterity.[150] It is this open and tentative mode of criticism, which would offer singular, creative responses to texts, that has been lacking in scholarly responses to Wolfe. To demonstrate this, and further explore the ethical dimensions of criticism, I will now turn to the main critical responses to "Seven American Nights."

5.3.2. A Failure of Critical Response

There is a tendency in Wolfe scholarship, and particularly in online fan communities dedicated to his work, to treat Wolfe's fictions as puzzles to be solved. This, of course, implies a final, objective "solution," intended by the author and hidden in the text, which sufficiently skilled readers can piece together. These attitudes towards reading and textual

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[148] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 130.

[149] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 130.

[150] Levinas, *Proper Names*, 184.

interpretation are evident in the critical responses to "Seven American Nights," which have been dominated by critics claiming discovery of this solution, this hidden meaning, by pointing to the "clues" Wolfe supposedly placed in the text that validate their specific interpretation. In what remains of this chapter, I will consider various studies of "Seven American Nights" before reflecting on the ethics of reading and the responsibilities of interpretation.

In her 1986 guide to Gene Wolfe, Gordon called "Seven American Nights" Wolfe's "finest short work."[151] Although she acknowledges in her analysis some aspects of the narrative's unreliability and ambiguity, Gordon's description of the story and its events states many matters of interpretation as fact, despite their being surrounded by considerable ambiguity in the text itself. For example, Gordon's states that the "stolen" marzipan egg and the discrepancy between the novella's title and the journal's timeline are "proof" that the hallucinogenic drug was contained in the missing egg which, once consumed by Nadan, "caused him to lose a day."[152] Gordon even includes a diagram attempting to explain the structure of the novella and its framing narratives, striving to make the novella more comprehensible to readers.

Kathryn Locey took a different approach in her 1996 essay in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, "Three Dreams, Seven Nights, and Gene Wolfe's Catholicism," offering a

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[151] Joan Gordon, *Gene Wolfe* (Mercer Island,WA: Starmont House, 1986), 71.

[152] Gordon, *Gene Wolfe*, 69.

distinctly Catholic interpretation of the text that seeks to identify the novella's "Christian themes and symbols."[153] Locey's interpretation contains many insightful observations that demonstrate how the text can accommodate religious readings. Identifying the procession Nadan witnesses as a Good Friday procession, and assuming (unlike Gordon) that no days were "lost" from the journal, Locey suggests that Nadan arrived in Washington DC on Palm Sunday, the feast day that celebrates Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. She also interprets Nadan's conversation with the curator as the story's "focal discourse" and suggests that the journal is exemplary of a "closed curve," transmitting only "inauthentic" information, whereas the Good Friday procession represents an "open curve," as it contains "absolute truth."[154] Locey cites "textual clues" to support her own interpretations and refute Gordon's, although both find in "Seven American Nights" a promise of hope and renewal, if not for Nadan or Ardis, then at least for America.

Borski, however, calls such optimism "a total misread" and in his 2006 essay on the story reads it as "a symbolic decent into Hell."[155] Finding the text "rife with typical Wolfean complexity and indeterminateness," Borski focuses on accounting for the "missing night"

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[153] Kathryn Locey, "Three Dreams, Seven Nights, and Gene Wolfe's Catholicism," *New York Review of Science Fiction* no. 95 (1996): 1.

[154] Locey, "Three Dreams," 11.

[155] Robert Borski, *The Long and the Short of It: More Essays on the Fiction of Gene Wolfe* (New York: iUniverse, 2006), 59. Drafts of this essay were first posted on the Urth mailing list in 2002.

and what happens in the final journal entries.[156] Maintaining that neither Gordon's nor Locey's interpretation is satisfactory, Borski argues that the pages Nadan removed from his journal included an account of the supposedly missing night and the consumption of the marzipan egg he (falsely) claimed was stolen, while the events of the final night are attributed to consumption of the hallucinogenic drug in the final egg. Like Gordon and Locey before him, Borski presents his own interpretation of the story and its meaning as the only one that fits, to the exclusion of all other readings.

A few years later, Dave Tallman posted on *WolfeWiki* a very detailed interpretation of "Seven American Nights" that was developed through conversations with other Wolfe devotees on an online mailing list.[157] Tallman's reading is radically different to those of his predecessors as it claims, among other things, that the last five journal entries (covering the final day and night) are forgeries produced by the forgery machines mentioned by the curator. Tallman argues that this was done because Nadan inadvertently stumbled upon a top-secret American plot to regain global power using a secret stockpile of weapons (although he was too oblivious to realise it), requiring the authorities to dispose of him and leave behind a false trail. Tallman's reading attempts to explain everything, and we have

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[156] Borski, *Long*, 52.

[157] Dave Tallman, "Seven American Nights," *WolfeWiki*, 2010, http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=Stories.SevenAmericanNights; "May 2008 Archives by thread," *Urth.net*, 2008, http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2008-May/thread.html

accounts of the supposedly missing night, the drugged marzipan egg, the significances of the plays, the importance of the curator, the meaning of the story's Catholic symbolism, and the true nature of the plot Ardis and Bobby were involved in. Tallman's interpretation is indeed thought-provoking and his observations concerning the text's intricacies can open new ways of looking at the novella, yet it fails to do justice to Wolfe's text, closing off the possibility of other readings or approaches, seeking to reduce the Saying to pure Said.

Most recently, Aramini delivered an essay on "Seven American Nights" in *Between Light and Shadow*, subjecting the text to the same "scientific rigor" he forced upon Wolfe's other early fictions. After a prolonged "objective summary" of the novella, Aramini examines Borski's and Tallman's interpretations. He determines that Borski's relies too much on "the almost magical presence of a lycanthropic character" (despite the novella's implications that the monsters are werewolves, this does not fit Aramini's reading of the novel as pure SF) and finds the idea of Nadan excising a day from his journal unlikely.[158] He finds Tallman's reading, which he reproduces in full, more compelling, ultimately making only a few changes to the nature of the American plot to regain power (he suggests the attack will be in the form of chemical warfare). Aramini is adamant that any sound interpretation must "make use of every detail in the text," but is still left with a series of unanswered questions at the end of his chapter.[159] Nonetheless, the impulse remains to

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[158] Aramini, *Between Light and Shadow*, chap. "Seven American Nights."

[159] Aramini, *Between Light and Shadow*, chap. "Seven American Nights."

eliminate as many openings and ambiguities from the text as possible, settling on a complete and conclusive interpretation that would make Wolfe's writerly fiction palatable to Aramini and his readers.

Not all interpretations of "Seven American Nights" have tended toward closure in this way, and there are responses that have embraced the text's openness and indeterminacy. In *Attending Daedalus*, Peter Wright asserts that "Seven American Nights" is "an insoluble self-referential puzzle about the conundrum of perception rather than an enigma for the reader to solve by detection."[160] (Aramini, meanwhile, accuses Wright of adopting a "rather secular and post-modern stance," proceeding to mock him and discount his approach out of hand.[161]) Wright credits Wolfe with a "sense of fair play" in the novella, since he indicates the narrator's unreliability up front and thus alerts the reader that "the mysteries of the story cannot be resolved."[162] This is a curious conclusion for Wright to reach, since it sits at odds with his assumptions concerning the determinacy of most of

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[160] Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 39.

[161] Discussing Wright's approach, Aramini writes: "while this sounds like a nifty way to approach the story (it's like … about the infinite indeterminacy of perception, man …) we should know better. This is the least useful interpretation of *Seven American Nights*, and we will discard it here." Aramini, *Between Light and Shadow*, chaps. "Introduction" and "Seven American Nights."

[162] Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 39.

Wolfe's other texts, including *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* and *New Sun*.[163] Wright, however, concludes that "Wolfe constructs both unresolvably open texts, which in his opinion do 'counterfeit life', and those fictions that contain an intended actuality or interpretation, and therefore do not."[164] It is left up to the reader, Wright suggests, to determine whether a particular Wolfe text is open or closed—but here, again, there are right and wrong answers. With Wright's acknowledgement of the openness of "Seven American Nights," one gets the sense that if he had formulated interpretations like those of Tallman or Aramini, he would have determined the text closed. Either way, Wright never leaves the realm of strict authorial control and deference to presumed authorial intent.

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[163] In Wright's reading of *New Sun*, Severian is an individual without free will, endlessly manipulated by the Hierodules. He argues that this was Wolfe's intended meaning, with other interpretations of the text being "simply wrong." This reading of *New Sun* did not find widespread support. In his review of Wright's book, Paul Kincaid detected "a whiff of elitism" in the suggestion that "if every other critic is 'simply wrong' then Wright alone is right." Concerning *New Sun*, Wright's primary focus, Kincaid argues that the text is "a remarkably democratic work open to many possible readings," doubting "that any of them, not even Wolfe's own, are wholly right or wholly wrong." Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 124; Paul Kincaid, *What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction* (Essex, UK: Beccon, 2008), 326.

[164] Wright, *Attending Daedalus*, 42.

The one piece of scholarship on "Seven American Nights" that does some justice to the text's writerliness and openness to interpretation is George Aichele Jr.'s "Self-Referentiality in Gene Wolfe's 'Seven American Nights'," published in the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* in 1991. Aichele traces many dimensions of the novella's metafictionality and self-conscious intertextuality, from the narrative's framing fragments, to Nadan's references to the writing and editing of the journal, to the novella's direct references to Arab and Persian literature and legend. Aichele also foregrounds the curator's notion of "extended abstraction," finding it central to the narrative and noting the abstractions between what Nadan experienced and what the reader encounters. He concludes that "'Seven American Nights' transgresses and defeats simple generic identification," such that "the possibility of a re-capturing of meaning … disappears in a textual abyss."[165] Aichele suggests that "Seven American Nights" therefore taps into the rich indeterminacy of all literature, even that which remains committed to "the deceptions of realism."[166] Writerly texts such as Wolfe's "do not comfort us," he writes, "they do not reconcile us with reality," thus reaching the same conclusion as Levinas and Blanchot, that art leads to the shadow of reality, to darkness, night, non-truth. But in doing so, such texts

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[165] George Aichele Jr. "Self-Referentiality in Gene Wolfe's 'Seven American Nights'," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 3, no. 2 (1991): 37, 45, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308089.

[166] Aichele, "Self-Referentiality," 44.

invite us to encounter the unenglobable literary space, where the Saying resonates and demands a response that would sustain its irreducibility.

With the exceptions of Peter Wright and Aichele, the above interpretations all strive to account for at least the major indeterminacies of Wolfe's text, eliminating ambiguity as exhaustively as the critics can manage. By attempting to ensure that "everything holds together," the critic responds to the writerly text with a readerly reading, trying to close the open text and thereby eliminate its otherness.[167] Ultimately, Wolfe's text accommodates all these interpretations but is satisfied by none of them. In each, something vital is lost: the text's plurality. Refusing this plurality and attempting to reduce the openness of the text is a failing of ethical responsibility to the text's irreducible alterity. It is no coincidence that the most totalising approaches to the novella are those that gained resonance with the conservative genre police of the Rabid Puppies campaign. Totalising and reductive worldviews cannot accommodate the disruptive writerly aspects of Wolfe's work, so they must adopt readerly approaches that aim to eradicate the text's otherness and inexhaustibility.

5.4. The Responsibility of Interpretation

Discussing Blanchot's novel *Aminadab* (1942), Hill acknowledges that readers might be tempted to "decode" the bizarre text and search for allegorical meanings. He notes,

[167] Barthes, *S/Z*, 156.

however, that if it is possible to read *Aminadab* in this way, this is only because, "by its very resistance to interpretation, the novel implicitly appeals at every turning to the possibility of there being another text, another interpretation, another commentary able to frame the text and somehow efface its startling indeterminacies." Yet the text's instability and openness to interpretation ultimately ensure that "nothing in Blanchot's novel allows itself to be deciphered in this way."[168] The same can be said of Wolfe's "Seven American Nights," which sets the reader up to attempt to unravel its mysteries—to figure out what happened to Nadan and to judge the trustworthiness of the journal—but in its ceaseless self-interruptions, in its unsaying of its own Said, it resists any interpretation taking hold.

Yet critical responses to Wolfe have been dominated by searches for final, totalising interpretations that, in their exclusivity and search for closure, reject the singularity of the literary encounter. It is for this reason that such searches for objective "hidden meaning" are condemned by Iser in *Act of Reading* (1978):

> if this meaning, as the very heart of the work, can be lifted out of the text, the work is then used up—through interpretation, literature is turned into an item for consumption. This is fatal not only for the text but also for literary criticism, for

[168] Hill, *Blanchot*, 66–67.

> what can be the function of interpretation if its sole achievement is to extract the meaning and leave behind an empty shell?[169]

Where Roman Ingarden privileged certain "concretizations" of the work, conceiving of the reader's task as one of realising or restoring the "original polyphonic harmony existing 'in the work itself,'" Iser opposes judgements of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" concretisations.[170] In Iser's phenomenology of reading, the determinate points in a text (its sentences) are likened to the stars in the night sky, which onlookers can connect in different ways, without any constellation being truer than the others. "The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed," he writes, "the lines that join them are variable."[171] This makes the literary work, which results from the contact between the author's text and the reader's interpretation, "infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations."[172] Like Levinas, Iser praises the self-conscious indeterminacy and fragmentation of "modern texts," which are

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[169] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 4–5.

[170] Menachem Brinker, "Two Phenomenologies of Reading: Ingarden and Iser on Textual Indeterminacy," *Poetics Today* 1, no. 4 (1980): 204, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1771896.

[171] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. J. P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 57.

[172] Iser, "Reading Process," 55.

said to draw readers' attention to their own gap-filling acts of interpretation. Yet such writerly texts constantly interrupt totalising interpretations by foregrounding their indeterminacy, making "the act of reading … an exemplary encounter with the unknown."[173] Davis, finding a strong resonance between Iser and Levinas, concludes that "reading is an encounter with otherness which shatters self-understanding and re-orientates our very subjectivity," making it "a properly ethical encounter."[174]

The ethical dimension of the literary encounter carries with it a responsibility to maintain a non-destructive relationship with the alterity of the literary text, with its infinite interpretive space. In the face-to-face encounter, Levinas explains, the Other appears simultaneously vulnerable, with the "extreme exposure" of "nakedness and defencelessness," and from a "height," as master and teacher.[175] Likewise, in the encounter with literature, the text is both at the reader's mercy, able to be forced closed through totalising readings, and at an unreachable height, with limitless signifying potential that can always teach or challenge the reader. It is this duality of vulnerability and height that establishes the self's responsibility to and for the Other in Levinas's philosophy, and the same duality founds the reader's responsibility in interpretation. Iser, while not operating

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[173] Colin Davis, "Levinas and the Phenomenology of Reading," *Studio Phaenomenologica* 6 (2006): 276, https://doi.org/10.7761/SP.6.275.

[174] Davis, "Levinas," 277, 280.

[175] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 83; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 67.

in an explicitly ethical framework, argues that "the interpreter's task should be to elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not to restrict himself to just one."[176] Barthes makes a similar statement when he appeals to "*interpretation* (in the Nietzschean sense of the word)": "To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it."[177] Approaching the text as a puzzle to be solved, as containing a hidden meaning to extract, denies the plurality of the work, its dimension of height, and its infinite potential for singular encounters.

What kind of response, then, does the text demand? For Levinas, as noted in the previous chapter, the text calls for a "philosophical criticism" that would examine how the "thread" of the Said is interrupted by the "knots" of the Saying.[178] These knots can, in turn, be followed back to the realm of the literary Saying, a space of infinite meaning and potential. As Eaglestone notes, "The task of philosophy is to draw awareness to the knots, to the ethical saying entwined with the said."[179] Likewise, Korhonen asserts that "in literature, what counts is not the Said—the thesis, theme, or cognitive meaning of a book—but Saying, or the event of encounter where we welcome the face of the Other."[180] Only

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[176] Iser, *Act of Reading*, 22.

[177] Barthes, *S/Z*, 5. Original emphasis.

[178] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 170.

[179] Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism*, 150.

[180] Korhonen, "Towards a Post-Levinasian," 462.

occasionally does Levinas hint at what such a reading would entail. In his Jewish writings, he insists that the Bible must be read "without images," for to read it as an allegorical picture book closes off an infinite potential of meaning, petrifying the face of the other into a static figure.[181] Levinas advocates a kind of reading that avoids prescribed allegorical or historical interpretations and instead responds to and extends the text itself. Goodhart describes this as "reading midrashically" and sees it practised in Levinas's Talmudic readings, which each appear "to fill in a gap the text offers," making them "not representational but extensional, participatory, a continuation outside of the subject matter within."[182] Such extensional reading follows the knots of the Saying, the ruptures in the textual fabric, to explore the potential meanings available through the gap-filling process of

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[181] Emmanuel Levinas, "Lire la Bible sans images: Entretien avec Emmanuel Lévinas," *Esprit* 162, no. 6 (1990): 120, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24274181. One of Levinas's criticisms of Christianity is its tendency toward figural interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, wherein all persons and events prefigure Christ and a narrative of personal salvation. "If every pure character in the Old Testament announces the Messiah," he writes, "if every unworthy person is his torturer and every woman is his Mother, does not the Book of Books lose all life with this obsessive theme and endless repetition of the same stereotyped gestures?" Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 121.

[182] Sandor Goodhart, "'A Land that Devours its Inhabitants': Midrashic Reading, Emmanuel Levinas, and Prophetic Exegesis," *Shofar* 26, no. 4 (2008): 14, 20, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42944902.

reader response emphasised by Iser. The work is thus freed from the concretised realm of ontology, of the Said, to regain its otherness and signifying potential.

Barthes's writerly approach, examined in chapter two, is likewise a mode of ethical criticism that disrupts totalising reading practices governed by passivity and the pleasure of contentment. By emphasising the text's difference, exploring its competing systems of signification, and breaking apart its readerly elements to explore its writerly openings, Barthes's writerly approach is also a recognisably deconstructive mode of reading. Seán Burke questions this association, seeing Barthes's *S/Z* as only a "movement toward" a deconstructive approach, due to its "insistence that the literary text can be exhaustively reconstructed via the five organising codes."[183] But exhaustiveness is not something Barthes claimed; he did not argue that his choice of codes in *S/Z* was the only one possible and acknowledged that his division of the text into *lexias* was "arbitrary in the extreme."[184] In his analysis of Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," Barthes deploys a different grouping of codes, which he notes is not "rigorous" or "scientific," but the creation of "associative fields" whose "structuration … does not proceed beyond that spontaneously

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[183] Burke, *Death and Return*, 235 note 46. For critics who have been more willing to align Barthes with deconstruction, see Johnson, *Critical Difference*, 3–5; Dale Townshend, "Work and Text in the Later Writings of Roland Barthes," *Journal of Literary Studies* 14, no. 3–4 (1998): 424, https://doi.org/10.1080/02564719808530209.

[184] Barthes, *S/Z*, 13.

achieved by reading."[185] As he explains, his goal in reading "is ultimately to conceive, to imagine, to experience the plurality of the text, the open-endedness of its *signifying process*."[186] This is indeed a deconstructive mode of reading, since it explores the text's inconsistencies and difference not to uncover some ineliminable truth about the text or its author, but to present the meanings it stages for Barthes at a particular time and place. Challenging the text's apparent closure and transparency, these readings attempt to respond in an open and non-reductive way to the text's plurality.

This writerly, deconstructive approach, spontaneous and responsive to the text, embraces the singularity of the literary encounter. Rather than bringing pre-determined critical methods or instrumentalist approaches to individual texts or authors' oeuvres, Attridge argues that readers should instead respond to the text's singularity. He describes this ethical, responsible reading thus:

> To respond responsibly to a work … is, in the first place, to read attentively and, in the second place, to read with an openness to that which one has never encountered before. An attentive reading, deploying all the codes and conventions one regards as relevant to the work, is the necessary foundation for the second kind of reading, what might be called "literary" or "creative" reading. … If one doesn't do these things, if one reads carelessly or with a closed mind, one is failing to do

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[185] Barthes, "Textual Analysis," 288.

[186] Barthes, "Textual Analysis," 262.

> justice to the work (which is to say to the work's singularity, inventiveness, and otherness) and hence to the writer of the work.[187]

The text demands to be encountered in its singularity. And like the encounter with the other person, the encounter with the literary text requires an acknowledgement of the futility of totalisation, since, as Attridge notes, "literature, or rather the experience of literary works, consistently exceeds the limits of rational accounting."[188] The interpretations of Wolfe's "Seven American Nights" examined above are dominated by instrumental readings that seek to solve a perceived puzzle, reading not with an eye to exploring the possible meanings the text stages, but with a closed mind that fails to do justice to the work.

The writerly form of Wolfe's work brings with it an ethical value. By challenging readers' totalising tendencies through disruptive literary techniques including metafiction, complex language, open endings, fragmentary writing, and self-conscious intertextuality, Wolfe's writerly texts invite readers to encounter an unenglobable literary space, the realm of the literary Saying. This encounter with an irreducible otherness that exceeds any single interpretation, any attempt at gap filling or concretising the text, brings with it a responsibility to engage in readings that maintain this plurality of meaning. Yet Wolfe criticism has been permeated by closed, readerly approaches to the author's oeuvre, with critics often claiming exclusive knowledge of some final truth they decode. The appeal of

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[187] Attridge, *Work of Literature*, 72–73.

[188] Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 3.

such readings to alt-right reactionary figures, ever hostile to otherness, reveals the ethical and political dangers of such totalising approaches. By attempting to close the open text and reduce it to a single meaning, to a pure Said, they strip the work of its ethical potential. To counter these closed readings, we need writerly and deconstructive approaches that respond to the singularity of the literary encounter and invite further encounters with the literary Saying.

6. Conclusion:

The Ethical Potential of Science Fiction

Writing about the interpretation of SF, Samuel R. Delany emphasised that a text's interpretive space is home to a limitless play of meanings, created by readers and always open to having new meanings added. He lamented, however, that many SF readers have denied the existence of this interpretive space in order to sustain "unitary or authoritarian" literary values. Foremost among these values is the declaration that SF is mere entertainment, which Delany recognises as "an appeal not to the notion of a plurality of values but to a single value, 'entertainment value,' meant to totalize the whole field."[1] The insistence that SF should be entertaining is, Delany observes, connected to various other assertions of genre boundaries. As he notes, a related refrain is that SF should be "told in good, simple language" with "a nice, clear beginning, middle and end," without "fancy writing or experimentation," which is ultimately "an appeal for a unity of style." Likewise, the call for SF to return to what it was in the past—to the heights of the pulp SF era, for example—is a "cry for historical unity."[2] Drawing on poststructuralist literary theory,

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[1] Delany, "Science Fiction," 114.

[2] Delany, "Science Fiction," 115.

Delany recognised the plurality of meaning that flowed through SF texts and connected this to the diversity of the SF field, which was always broader than the proponents of a narrow definition of SF would allow. There is no unity of style, history, form, or content, but a vast range of traditions and modes of SF, each with their own sets of dominant values and orientations.

6.1. Science Fiction's Ethical Modes

With the plurality and diversity of SF, the genre cannot be said to have a single ethical predisposition, just as it cannot be said to have a single overriding politics. Within the field of SF, we can recognise various literary traditions that blend together, bounce off each other, and otherwise interact in interesting ways. Each of these traditions, responding to different cultural and historical circumstances, and kept alive by the selective traditions of different communities of practice, can be examined for their dominant ethical orientations. An understanding of Levinas's writings on ethics and alterity, when informed by the literary theories of Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida, Attridge, and others, can help us understand the relationship between literature and ethical approaches to otherness, while recognising the ethical dimensions of different literary forms. This thesis has shown how such an ethical critique can be brought to bear on genre fiction, which has traditionally fallen beyond the scope of studies of Levinasian, deconstructive, and postmodern ethical analysis.

As chapters two and three demonstrated, the "golden-age" SF of the US pulp magazines was dominated by totalising themes and modes of representation that have significant ethical implications. This tradition reveals that totalising worldviews built on scientific positivism, which see all Others (including other people and the alien other) as ultimately knowable, are concomitant with literary forms that Barthes describes as readerly, modes of representation that depend on a mimetic illusion of transparent representation. This ethical dimension is apparent in the case of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, where the author's uncritical acceptance of US pulp SF's generic tropes and styles resulted in the series displaying an unsettling hostility to otherness and the tired repetition of fascist tropes, despite the more progressive politics of Asimov himself. Ultimately, the readerly narrative conventions of US pulp SF reinforced a totalising approach to otherness that saw all difference, including diversity of written forms, worldviews, and indeed authors, as obstacles to be overcome in a reassertion of the same.

The ethical potential of SF, however, can be recognised in many of the field's more innovative and writerly texts. Taken as an example of challenging Russian SF and modern dystopian fiction in chapter four, Zamyatin's *We* demonstrates how thematic concern for infinity and unknowability, which is prevalent in Eastern European SF traditions, goes hand-in-hand with open, writerly forms. The novel's focus on the disruptive potential of the face-to-face encounter and its implications for ethical responsibility resonate strongly with Levinas's writings on ethics and infinity. The challenges these themes present to

totalisation are in turn reinforced through the novel's complex characters and modernist literary form, which embraces ambiguity, fragmentary writing, and dense language. The radical political dimensions of this ethical orientation are also significant and central to Zamyatin's novel, standing in stark contrast to the conservative politics that dominated US pulp SF.

Finally, chapter five returned to the US to consider an SF tradition influenced by the New Wave movement, focusing on the work of Wolfe, which is an example of SF at the height of its writerly potential. Texts such as Wolfe's "Seven American Nights" reveal an extreme openness to interpretation that stages the reader's encounter with an unenglobable literary space of ethical significance. By actively unsaying their own Said, they invite the reader into relation with a literary Saying that cannot be reduced to a fixed concept and incorporated into a totality. However, Wolfe's work also highlights the fragility of this openness, and the ultimate fragility of ethics, as the texts are at once irreducible, able to challenge readers' totalising tendencies, but also vulnerable, susceptible to having any reductive meaning inscribed upon them. These open texts can be forced closed, as has been the trend with the more totalising and exhaustive readings that have dominated Wolfe scholarship. The ambiguous position Wolfe's work holds in recent controversies over genre history and identity highlights the ethical significance of different modes of reading, with only the most totalising approaches appealing to the deeply conservative figures of the Rabid Puppies campaign. A writerly text, such as "Seven American Nights," can only be

made palatable to those who would align themselves with such an alt-right movement if its infinitely plural literary space is denied. Politics, as we have seen, is inseparable from ethics and how we respond to otherness.

There are invaluable resources, in SF, for authors and readers to explore infinity, the unknown, and the unknowable. Not only in outer space, as Ballard noted, but also in inner space, with the irreducible alterity of the other person. The totalising tendencies of US pulp SF have been waning in US SF since the 1960s, as the tradition has opened up to more diverse forms, content, and authors, and SF communities of practice have become more global, recognising the great diversity of SF traditions. In closing, I wish to offer some reflections on the state of SF today and point in the direction of avenues of further research.

6.2. Science Fiction Today

At the 2019 World Science Fiction Convention in Dublin, Jeannette Ng began her acceptance speech for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer as follows:

> John W. Campbell, for whom this award was named, was a fucking fascist. Through his editorial control of [*Astounding Science Fiction*], he [was] responsible for setting a tone of science fiction that still haunts the genre to this very day. Stale.

> Sterile. Male. White. Exalting in the ambitions of imperialists, colonialists, settlers and industrialists.[3]

After declaring—to rapturous applause from an auditorium of SF fans—that one of the canonical figures of the US SF genre was fascist, Ng proceeded to express solidarity with pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong, where she was born. Her brief speech caused waves through SF fandom, reigniting debates over SF genre histories and the legacies left behind by the US pulp SF tradition. Past recipients of the Campbell Award joined in the conversation and expressed support for Ng. John Scalzi, for example, reinforced Ng's statements, noting that Campbell "was a racist and a sexist … and from his lofty perch he was able to shape the genre into what he thought it should be, in a way that still influences how people write science fiction."[4] Cory Doctorow also echoed Ng's comments and

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[3] Jeannette Ng, "Jeannette Ng's Acceptance Speech for Formerly Named John W Campbell Award for Best New Writer 2019," *YouTube* video, August 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQ58zf0vzB0. An edited transcript of the speech can be found at: Jeannette Ng, "John W. Campbell, for Whom This Award Was Named, Was a Fascist," Medium, August 19, 2019, https://medium.com/@nettlefish/john-w-campbell-for-whom-this-award-was-named-was-a-fascist-f693323d3293.

[4] John Scalzi, "Jeannette Ng, John W. Campbell, and What Should Be Said By Whom and When," *Whatever* (blog), August 20, 2019, https://whatever.scalzi.com/2019/08/20/jeannette-ng-john-w-campbell-and-what-should-be-said-by-whom-and-when/.

observed that "science fiction (like many other institutions) is having a reckoning with its past and its present."[5] In the wake of the conversation Ng reignited, the Campbell Award was renamed the *Astounding* Award for Best New Writer, maintaining the connection to the US pulp SF era, but distancing it from the individual of Campbell.[6] SF communities of practice that had previously embraced and canonised the content, styles, and worldviews of the US SF pulps have been forced to face, head-on, the legacy left behind by the tradition's dominant modes, including its ethical and political dimensions.

After reflecting on the problematic politics and exclusionary attitudes that dominated US pulp SF, Ng continued: "These are the bones of the genres we were given, but from that we have grown a wonderful, ramshackle genre wilder and stranger than

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[5] Cory Doctorow, "Jeannette Ng Was Right: John W. Campbell Was a Fascist," *Locus*, November 4, 2019, https://locusmag.com/2019/11/cory-doctorow-jeannette-ng-was-right-john-w-campbell-was-a-fascist/.

[6] The change was announced by the current editor of *Analog* (the title of *Astounding* since 1960), Trevor Quachri, who acknowledged that "Campbell's provocative editorials and opinions on race, slavery, and other matters often reflected positions that went beyond just the mores of his time and are today at odds with modern values." Trevor Quachri, "A Statement From the Editor," *The Astounding Analog Companion* (blog), August 27, 2019, https://theastoundinganalogcompanion.com/2019/08/27/a-statement-from-the-editor/.

[Campbell's] mind could ever dream or even would allow."[7] As SF became a global genre in the late twentieth century, as different SF traditions interacted with each other in new and challenging ways, the scope of the field changed. The exclusionary legacy of US pulp SF has been largely cast off, with SF becoming more diverse than ever before, with only a few pockets of reactionaries clinging to outdated ideas of what SF should be. More and more works of SF today, particularly from authors who would have historically been excluded by the overwhelmingly straight, white, male US SF genre, are realising the ethical potential of SF. As the field continues to embrace more nuanced representations of otherness, more complex and creative forms of writing, and works with more progressive politics, the overall ethical orientation of the field shifts.

Although the Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies campaigns disrupted the Hugo Awards for several years in the mid-2010s, attempting to border-police SF so it would more strongly adhere to US pulp SF traditions, the recipients of the fan-voted Hugo Award for Best Novel in each of these years reveals how far the SF field has come since the pulp era the Puppies valorise. In 2014, the award went to Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013), a hard SF space opera that addresses issues of identity and gender inclusive language; 2015 was the first time the award went to a work of Chinese SF, Liu Cixin's *Three Body Problem* (三体, 2008; English translation by Ken Liu, 2014); and between 2016 and 2018, all three volumes of N. K. Jemisin's ground-breaking *Broken Earth* trilogy (*The Fifth Season*, 2015;

[7] Ng, "Jeannette Ng's Acceptance Speech."

The Obelisk Gate, 2016; *The Stone Sky*, 2017) received the award. In the latter series, Jemisin, often a target of the racist and misogynist anti-diversity rhetoric of the Puppies crowds, blends SF and fantasy genre conventions with a complex narrative to explore themes of oppression and otherness.[8] Through its nuanced treatments of race and gender, complex narrators, and non-linear storytelling, the series demonstrates how ethical themes and ethical literary forms support one another.

There is enormous potential for further studies of SF informed by a Levinasian ethics of alterity. The case studies in this thesis, chosen as key historical texts in just a few of SF's selective traditions, represent only a very limited range of the potential for such ethical critique. Although Asimov, Zamyatin and Wolfe came from different social and ethnic backgrounds, they were all men and their SF is largely entrenched in traditionally masculinist perspectives. The case studies each reflect the masculinism that dominated the SF traditions these authors represent, from the US pulps, to Eastern European SF, and even to the New Wave, although this movement did see the genre start to open up more fully to women SF authors. Future studies of ethics and SF, particularly those adopting a Levinasian framework and examining representations of otherness and unknowability,

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[8] Beale, the ringleader of the Rabid Puppies, was expelled from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America for calling Jemisin an "ignorant half-savage" in a blog post, then linking to this from the official SFWA Twitter account. See: "SFWA Board Votes to Expel Beale," *Locus*, posted August 14, 2013, https://locusmag.com/2013/08/beale-expelled-from-sfwa/.

would find a wealth of resources in milestones of feminist SF, Afrofuturist SF, different global SF traditions, and critically acclaimed contemporary SF. Robust ethical critique of SF's various canons, and the diverse field that thrives today, will aid in ongoing efforts to re-evaluate past genre traditions and chart an ethical path forward.

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