ON LIGHTNESS IN WORLD LITERATURE

BEDE SCOTT

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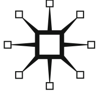

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For Liz, Conrad, and Arlo

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Finally, of course, I would like to thank my wife, Liz, without whom the project would never have been completed, and our two boys, Conrad and Arlo, who know more about this particular subject than anyone. In 1694, while passing through Owari on his way to the Western Provinces, the poet Matsuo Basho was asked by one of his disciples how to achieve the effect of lightness (*karumi*) in poetry. "Simply observe," he replied, "what children do."

Introduction

The term *light*, when applied to literature, is something we all intuitively understand. Everybody knows a light read when they see one, and we all know what to expect from such narratives. This is the kind of literature we associate with pleasure and ease—the kind of literature that requires a minimal degree of effort to read and does whatever it takes to keep us turning the pages. The quality of lightness, in other words, is what distinguishes Ian Fleming from Henry James, *Papillon* from Nietzsche. But what, precisely, does this term signify? What do we actually mean when we describe a work of literature as light? What are the defining characteristics of this quality, and what are some of the key strategies by which the effect of lightness is achieved? In what follows, I shall be working backward from the adjective to the substantive, attempting to gain a better understanding of the structural features underlying this literary-aesthetic quality.[1] My discussion of the subject will be deliberately wide-ranging and eclectic—covering four different centuries and five different countries. In each case, I shall be focusing on a particular "type" of lightness, whether it be the refined triviality of Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*, the ludic tendencies of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, or the "exhilarating and primitive vitality" (Calvino, "*Candide*" 103) of Voltaire's *Candide*. I shall be adopting this particular methodology because I believe, quite strongly, that lightness should be regarded as a transhistorical and transcultural aesthetic value: one of those rare things we find in all literate places at all times.[2] At different historical and cultural junctures, this quality may be privileged or underprivileged—it may acquire a certain aesthetic prestige, or it may be forced underground, into the realm of the popular or

folkloric—but it is always there, as a necessary counterbalance to the more "weighty" issues and values that otherwise dominate our lives. As Italo Calvino observes, "two opposite tendencies have competed in literature" throughout the centuries. One tries to give language "the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations," while the other tries to make it into "a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses" (*Six Memos* 15). The first of these tendencies has received a great deal of critical scrutiny over the years, but it is to an analysis of the second—the literature of lightness, of dust particles and magnetic impulses—that this study is dedicated.

In the Western tradition, of course, lightness as a literary quality has often been undervalued, and the term itself used pejoratively or, at best, apologetically. But this was not always the case. During the eighteenth century, the characteristics we tend to associate with light literature (spontaneity, superficiality, implausibility, etc.) were all highly regarded aesthetic principles and occupied a central place within the dominant literary culture. This, after all, was the age of Sterne, Fielding, Swift, Diderot, and Voltaire. With the rise of realism in the nineteenth century, however, we see a shift toward gravity and weight—what Erich Auerbach called the "serious treatment of everyday reality" (491). Suddenly the emerging bourgeoisie decided to assert its own aesthetic values, establishing a new genre situated somewhere between tragedy and comedy. "To the aristocratic heights of tragic passion," Franco Moretti writes, "and the plebian depths of comedy, the class in the middle add[ed] a form that [was] itself in the middle, intermediate."[3] But "intermediate does not mean *equidistant*," and it soon became clear that realism was to be more closely aligned with aristocratic tragedy than plebian comedy. The example Moretti offers is Gustave Caillebotte's somber painting *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877). Looking at this "masterpiece of bourgeois seriousness," he says, one immediately "realizes that, although serious may not mean tragic, it certainly means dark, cold, impassible, silent, heavy, solemn . . . The class in the middle [had] closed its ranks and [used] its seriousness to distance itself from the 'carnivalesque' noise of the laboring classes" (369–70).

This collective retreat from the carnivalesque may have undermined the legitimacy of light literature, but its core values were never entirely eradicated. They were merely repressed, anathematized, and forced into the ghettoes of the noncanonical and the "subliterary." If you were looking for a light read in the nineteenth century, that is to say, you were most likely to find it in the world of

popular literature—the world of melodramas, romances, and *romans-feuilletons* (Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo*, for instance, or Eugène Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*). It was only during the twentieth century that the quality of lightness regained some of its earlier prestige, many of the aesthetic values suppressed by realism being rehabilitated and allowed, once more, to reassert themselves. This was to become particularly evident as the seriousness of high modernism gave way to a postmodern aesthetic sensibility, with its playful, comedic tendencies. Not only did postmodernism revive the sense of ludic pleasure that had prevailed during the eighteenth century;[4] it also allowed a greater interpenetration of popular and "high" culture, ensuring that the typically light contemporary genres (detective fiction, thrillers, sci-fi) found their way back into the canonical fold. Yet this recovery, I would argue, was only ever partial, and our understanding of what constitutes light literature is still influenced, at least to some degree, by the aesthetic values and prejudices of the nineteenth century. We may be living in a postmodern age, but many of the legacies of the nineteenth century survive. We still tend to apply a labor theory of value to literature, for example, regarding the compositional labor of the writer (Flaubert's "agony of style" [qtd. in Sontag, "Writing" 72]) and the interpretative labor of the reader as key indicators of literary quality. We still tend to favor tragedy over comedy, profundity over play. And despite the advent of postmodernism, we still tend to associate the term *light* with narratives of little or no aesthetic value. Recalling Moretti's argument, then, one could say that we continue to occupy an intermediate zone. Only now we are caught somewhere between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, somewhere between a prerealist and realist aesthetic—no longer as serious as we once were, but not quite as playful, either: the inheritors of a divided legacy.

According to Milan Kundera, the history of the European novel resembles the two halves of a football game, with the interval falling directly "between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries—that is, between Laclos and Sterne on the one side and, on the other, Scott and Balzac." It is, he says, "as if the art of the novel . . . contained two different potentialities (two different ways of being a novel) that could not be worked out at the same time, in parallel, but could be worked out only successively, one after the other" (*Testaments* 57). The aesthetic sensibility of the first half, for Kundera, is encapsulated by Cervantes's *Don Quixote*—"a great founding work [that] was alive with the spirit of the nonserious, a spirit that was later made incomprehensible by the Romantic aesthetic of

the second half, by its demand for plausibility." In fact, he argues, this later development not only eclipsed the earlier phase but also actively repressed it, transforming the first half into the "bad conscience of the novel" and leaving us all to be raised, whether we like it or not, "in the aesthetic of the second half" (58–59).[5] Well, yes and no—that's both true and not quite true. In the spirit of prerealist spontaneity, Kundera later qualifies this declaration by deciding to give his history of the novel a third half. ("Yes, I do revise my metaphor, and all the more willingly as I am deeply, passionately fond of that third period" [75].) Many of the great writers of the twentieth century, he notes, "were highly sensitive to the nearly forgotten aesthetic of the novel previous to the nineteenth century: they incorporated essayistic reflection into the art of the novel; made composition freer; reclaimed the right to digression; breathed the spirit of the nonserious and of play into the novel; repudiated the dogmas of psychological realism in creating characters without trying to compete (like Balzac) with the *état civil*—with the state registry of citizens; and above all: they refused any obligation to give the reader the illusion of reality: an obligation that reigned supreme throughout the novel's second half" (72).[6] The point of this rehabilitation, Kundera concludes, "is not a return to this or that retro style; nor is it a simpleminded rejection of the nineteenth-century novel." Instead, the objective here is "to *redefine* and *broaden* the very notion of the novel; to resist the *reduction* worked by the nineteenth century's aesthetic of the novel; to give the novel its *entire* historical experience for a grounding" (72–73). Hence the ambivalence, the divided legacy, mentioned above. But this ambivalence is also what makes lightness such an intriguing subject, a subject so full of subtleties and nuances: the fact that it is a feature of our aesthetic sensibility that is both partially acknowledged and partially repressed; the fact that it is something we have learned to value (as part of our prerealist legacy) but also disdain (as something quite foreign to our surviving realist tendencies); and the fact that, for those of us who occupy this "third phase," it is always there, clearly visible in much of what we read, but also strangely elusive, so often obscured or eclipsed by all those other "good" literary values we have been taught to notice and appreciate and analyze.

So what, precisely, is this quality of lightness to which I have been referring? What is it that makes us describe a work of literature as light in the first place? As we shall see in the chapter on Voltaire, it is not the content of a narrative that generates this quality so much as its attitude *toward* that content, its style of being, its

"tone." Narrative tone has often been defined, rather narrowly, as the attitude a narrator demonstrates toward his or her audience. Thus, for instance, we can have a "solemn, religious tone" (Richards 42), a "cheap-magazine tone" (51), a "conversational [and] social tone" (169), or a "plaintive tone" (275). But I would prefer to use the term in a broader sense to describe a narrative's governing affective orientation or stance, its dominant structure of feeling *vis-à-vis* the world it describes and the audience it addresses.[7] This more general understanding of tone as an affective quality that circulates freely throughout a narrative, settling nowhere in particular but influencing everything it touches, perhaps comes closest to Mikel Dufrenne's notion of a "world atmosphere" (178). "When we name the world of the aesthetic object by its creator," Dufrenne writes, "we emphasize the presence of a certain style, a unique way of treating a subject." The "quality in question," he argues, is like the "supervening or impersonal principle in accordance with which we say that there is an electric atmosphere or, as Trénet sang, that there is joy in the air" (167–68). In the case of literature, it permeates the discourse at every level, creating an "internal cohesion which is amenable only to the logic of feeling" (180). For Dufrenne, the unity of such an atmosphere is "the unity of a *Weltanschauung*; its coherence is the coherence of a characteristic or quality." And this *Weltanschauung* emerges, he says, out of "the vital metaphysical element in all men, [their] way of being in the world which reveals itself in a personality." Simply put, then, just as there is a "nimbus of joy around the joyous man" (177), so, too, an aesthetic object—whether it be a novel, a painting, or a piece of sculpture—will radiate a particular affective quality, a "world atmosphere," that gives it both substance and unity. In the passage I quoted a page or two ago, Franco Moretti refers to Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day*, describing it as cold, silent, heavy, and, above all, serious. According to Dufrenne, what Moretti is really describing here is the painting's "personality": the world atmosphere it produces, the affective quality it expresses, and the *Weltanschauung* it demonstrates. Compare this, if you will, to the painting Kundera describes in a later part of the essay I have also cited above (most probably Picasso's *Homme et Femme à la Pastèque II* [1965]).[8] "I remember the Picasso exhibition in Prague in the mid-sixties," he writes. "One painting has stayed with me. A woman and a man are eating watermelon: the woman is seated, the man is lying on the ground, his legs lifted up to the sky in a gesture of unspeakable joy. And the whole thing [had been] painted with a delectable offhandedness

that made me think the painter, as he painted the picture, must have been feeling the same joy as the man with his legs lifted up" (*Testaments* 85). The difference between these two paintings could hardly be more pronounced, and it is this contrast that gives us a clearer understanding of what Dufrenne means when he refers to the personality of the aesthetic object. Whereas the Caillebotte is serious and heavy, communicating the somber *Weltanschauung* of the emerging bourgeoisie, the Picasso is surrounded by a "nimbus of joy," conveying with every brushstroke a sense of levity, nonchalance, and delight: the delight of a man eating a watermelon and lifting his legs up to the sky.

It is my intention here to explore the source of this affective quality, this structure of feeling we call lightness, in five quite different narratives. The phrase "structure of feeling" is, of course, derived from the work of Raymond Williams. It was a term he used to describe the "specifically affective elements of consciousness" (*Marxism* 132) that could be said to characterize any given historical period: not what people did, or even what they thought, but how they felt and how these feelings came together to form a "particular sense of life, a particular community of experience" (*Long Revolution* 48). The phrase itself is especially useful for our purposes in that it combines the diffuse intangibility of a feeling with the coherence and clarity of a structure. As Williams writes, "The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is [the] felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time . . . The term I would suggest to describe it is *structure of feeling*: it is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity" (47–48).[9] In what follows, I shall be exploring both the affective and "structural" sides of this conjunction; however, my primary emphasis will be on the latter category. Rather than offering a sociological or historical reading of the five narratives I have selected, I shall be focusing, for the most part, on the representational or discursive strategies they employ in order to generate this specific affective quality. By doing so, I hope to ground this rather vague adjective (*light*) in a more tangible semantic field and gain a deeper understanding of its underlying structural features. In one of her early essays, Susan Sontag argues with some polemical force that the function of criticism should be to dissolve "considerations of content into those of form," to "show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*" ("Against" 12, 14). And in the following pages, this is precisely what I have set out to do—beginning with the effect itself,

the "feeling" of lightness, and then attempting to uncover, through a process of reverse engineering, the various devices that made it possible in the first place.

My opening chapter focuses on the superficiality of Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (United States, 1958), exploring in some detail the novel's linguistic transparence and limited production of "secondary" meaning. By severely reducing the narrative's symbolic and hermeneutic codes, I shall argue, by privileging the signifier over the signified, and by focusing our attention on surfaces, on outsides rather than insides, Capote manages to create an aesthetic of immediate (or at least accelerated) legibility. And this legibility in turn relieves the narrative of much of its supplementary weight, allowing it to take on the "liberating anti-symbolic quality" (Sontag, "Against" 11) of an old Hollywood movie. In Chapter 2, I turn my attention to the structural and stylistic irreverence of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (Brazil, 1880). Here, the narrator creates a light, playful tone by refusing to respect the generic and aesthetic boundaries of traditional realist discourse. At almost every level, the narrative challenges the primacy of the real and, in direct contrast with *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, repeatedly compromises the legibility of the message it is conveying. In so doing, I would like to suggest, it assumes a carnivalesque quality—giving us the impression that "anything goes," even if this is not strictly true, and transforming itself into a kind of literary *brincadeira* (a lighthearted joke or game typically associated with carnival activity). Chapter 3 addresses the significance of implausibility in Voltaire's *Candide* (France, 1759). This short, satirical novel is a particularly interesting case, as the actual substance of the story we are being told could only be described as tragic. Within the space of a mere 94 pages (in my edition), we are subjected to an unremitting litany of misfortunes and atrocities, yet Voltaire somehow manages to avoid adding any affective weight to the narrative, creating instead a "comic analogue" (Crane 128) of the tragic that greatly diminishes our capacity to experience strong empathetic feeling. He achieves this effect, I shall argue, by systematically reducing the plausibility of his material, by "irrealizing" it, and thus granting the reader the same immunity to suffering that the characters themselves seem to enjoy. I then turn, in Chapter 4, to P. G. Wodehouse's *The Code of the Woosters* (England, 1938). Of all the narratives I shall be discussing here, this is the one that most obviously resembles the classic "light read," providing many of the readerly pleasures we tend to associate with popular literature. Over

the course of the chapter, I will be subjecting these pleasures to closer scrutiny and trying to understand precisely why we find such narratives so appealing. More specifically, I will be focusing on the pleasures of plotting, of predictability, and of the "utopian atemporality" that characterizes Wodehouse's fictional world. This last quality, as we shall see, serves to insulate the narrative from all social and political realities, safeguarding the carefree equanimity of the discourse and protecting us from anything that might compromise our readerly pleasure. Finally, in Chapter 5, I shall be exploring the triviality that so emphatically distinguishes Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* (Japan, c. 996–1000) from other masterpieces of the Heian period. Although the circumstances surrounding its composition were undeniably tragic, I shall argue that Sei's narrative observes a "directional taboo" that forces it to move always toward the "trivial little thing[s]" (Sei 27) and away from anything of real historical or political significance. In this chapter, I will be identifying some of the key strategies by which the discourse is able to maintain and protect such a taboo, before turning my attention to the famous catalogues—the enumerative passages of likes and dislikes, preferences and prejudices, that still give us such a clear sense of Sei's irrepressible *joie de vivre*.

Despite the apparent ubiquity of light literature, despite the fact that it can be found in all literate places at all times, very little has been written on the adjective that actually defines this diverse category.[10] In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera engages with lightness as a philosophical concept, contrasting the inevitability of fate and the notion of eternal recurrence ("the heaviest of burdens" [4]) with the weightlessness of lives that are understood to be transitory, unique, and free.[11] But he has no interest here in exploring the nature of lightness as a literary quality, as a discursive *effect* produced by a quite specific configuration of linguistic devices. For something slightly closer to that, we would have to turn to Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. In this collection of lectures, which was still unfinished at the time of his death in 1985, Calvino identifies lightness as one of five literary "values, qualities, or peculiarities" (1) to which he attaches particular significance.[12] Literary lightness, he argues, can be divided into three main categories. First, there is a "lightening of language whereby meaning is conveyed through a verbal texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarefied consistency." Then there is "the narration of a train of thought or psychological process in which subtle and imperceptible elements are at work, or any

kind of description that involves a high degree of abstraction." And finally, there is "a visual image of lightness that acquires emblematic value" (16–17) within a narrative. As the essay progresses, Calvino pays particularly close attention to the last of these three categories, citing examples from the work of writers such as Ovid, Boccaccio, Lucretius, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Cyrano de Bergerac, and Leopardi. In Boccaccio's case, we are offered a striking image of the poet Guido Cavalcanti leaping over a tomb in a Florentine cemetery. It is, Calvino writes, "the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he [still] has the secret of lightness" (12). Of course, there are many such images in the narratives I shall be discussing here, too. (I am thinking, in particular, of the moment in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* when the narrator comes across a group of soldiers singing outside a bar on Third Avenue. "As they sang," he remembers, "they took turns spin-dancing a girl over the cobbles under the El; and the girl, Miss Golightly, to be sure, floated round in their arms light as a scarf" [20].) But for the most part, as I have suggested, my attention will be focused on the first of Calvino's categories, exploring the precise method by which the weight has been removed from the "verbal texture" of these five narratives.

Such a focus will inevitably lead me, on more than one occasion, to the work of Roland Barthes. In Chapter 1, for instance, I lean rather heavily on his analysis of "typical" Japanese signifying practices and his conception of the symbolic and hermeneutic codes. In Chapter 4, I invoke his distinction between readerly and writerly discourse. And in Chapter 5, I refer not only to plot nuclei and catalyzers (as defined by Barthes in his classic essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives") but also to the notion of the *biographeme*—a term he uses to describe the fragmentary particles of meaning, the "novelistic glimmerings" (*Sade* 8), to which any life can be reduced. Needless to say, Barthes's scrupulous attention to literary structures makes his work particularly valuable for our purposes, but there is more to it than that—for here, too, we find a curious conjunction of structure and feeling, substance and tone. Earlier I discussed the way in which literary narratives radiate a particular kind of personality, and this is also true of critical or theoretical discourse. Reading Barthes, one immediately senses his desire to please and to praise, his deep and abiding affability, his *friendliness*. One also recognizes his "post-tragic sensibility," in Susan Sontag's words, his determination to see writing as a "kind of happiness" ("Writing" 76, 72), something to be enjoyed rather than

endured. And these are the qualities that I believe make Barthes, as the "lightest" and most agile of critics, a particularly appropriate—even inspiring—source for a project of this kind.

Before proceeding, it might be wise to justify in greater detail my eclectic use of primary sources. As mentioned above, I shall be covering four different centuries and five different countries, moving from tenth-century Japan to twentieth-century England and the United States, by way of eighteenth-century France and nineteenth-century Brazil. I would like to offer a threefold rationale for this rather hectic itinerary. First of all, to restate my earlier thesis, I have chosen such an eclectic methodology in order to highlight the transhistorical and transcultural qualities of this particular aesthetic value. It would be impossible to prove this point conclusively, of course, but the similarities between these disparate sources may at least provide some intimation of universality. I also believe that it is appropriate for a study of lightness to be rather "flighty" itself—refusing to stay in one location for any length of time, flitting from century to century and place to place, approaching the subject from multiple angles, all in an attempt to capture something of this elusive sensibility. And finally, I have derived some inspiration from Edward Said's eloquent defense of "amateurism" as a critical strategy. According to Said, such an approach involves "an unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, [and] in refusing to be tied down to a speciality." The "higher one goes in the education system today," he writes, "the more one is limited to a relatively narrow area of knowledge." Obviously there is nothing wrong with competence *per se*, but when it "involves losing sight of anything outside one's immediate field . . . and the sacrifice of one's general culture to a set of authorities and canonical ideas, then competence of that sort is not worth the price paid for it" (*Representations* 76). For Said, moreover, the etymology of the word *amateur* implies a certain value judgment, a love of something, and that is why he prefers it to the bland neutrality of other possible titles.[13] Curiously enough, Barthes, that consummate professional, also liked to claim amateur status, and for precisely the same reason. At the beginning of a lecture entitled "Semiology and Urbanism," delivered in Naples in 1967, he declared that the reflections he was about to offer were "those of an amateur, in the etymological sense of the word: an amateur of signs, one who loves signs, an amateur of cities, one who loves the city" (191). In the same way, the reflections I am about to put forward are ultimately motivated by an enthusiasm for these various narratives, however disparate they may be, and a deep

affinity for the aesthetic qualities they all share. Although it may seem rather eccentric, I genuinely believe that there is something to be gained by bringing Sei Shonagon into dialogue with Truman Capote or by introducing Voltaire to Wodehouse. At the very least, we may learn to recognize the wide-ranging mobility of "lightness" itself as we follow it on its journey across these cultural, historical, and generic boundaries.

A similar rationale also motivates my use of literature in translation, which I believe to be more liberating than disabling. As David Porter writes, the argument that "a scholar cannot contribute meaningfully to knowledge about a literary text without access to that text in the original language . . . reinforces the drive to overspecialization, closes off the possibility of broad-gauged comparative study, and contributes to the diminution of the status of world literature or world civilizations as legitimate fields of inquiry" (250).[14] Naturally, wherever possible, I have relied on secondary sources that engage with the linguistic specificities of the original (particularly in Chapter 5, where such specialized knowledge of *The Pillow Book* is essential to our understanding of its trivializing tendencies). But I would also argue that translated works take on, in the very process of translation, what Paul Ricoeur calls a "semantic autonomy" (75). In other words, these translated narratives are still narratives; they still circulate in the world, they are still read—in many cases more widely than the original on which they are based—and therefore they are still worthy of analysis *as narratives*, without our needing to be overly troubled by issues of authenticity, originality, or cultural essence. To cite Porter once more, literary history is "composed not of points but of vectors, not of fixed and bounded aesthetic objects, but of functional transmissions, connections, and recombinations"; and by "casting off illusions of disciplinary mastery we can only gain in capaciousness of vision" (255). I wouldn't want to make too many inflated claims for the study you are about to read, however, and while I certainly agree with what Porter has to say, I'm not quite sure that "capaciousness of vision" is really what I'm striving for here. By bringing these narratives together, I simply hope to gain a better understanding of the various strategies by which the effect of lightness is achieved within literary discourse. If I use an eclectic range of sources in order to do so, it is only because the similarities between these narratives often seem more pronounced to me than their differences. A thousand years may separate Sei and Capote, for instance, but they still share a common aesthetic sensibility: a fascination with surfaces, a love of

inconsequentiality, and an "inimitable delight in being" (Kundera, *Testaments* 86).

Not that it's always that simple, however. Although there are often clear similarities between these narratives (a disregard for verisimilitude, a disinclination to engage with historical and political realities, an aversion to readerly and writerly labor, etc.), there are also, in places, some striking discrepancies. Consider the difference between Wodehouse and Machado de Assis, for example. While *The Code of the Woosters* obviously privileges readability, the *Posthumous Memoirs* demonstrates many of the qualities we would tend to associate with the "writerly": a refusal to obey generic imperatives, a limited commitment to legibility, and a strong desire to undermine ideological and literary complacency. By conducting itself in this way, Machado's novel ensures that our sense-making procedures are far more challenging and labor-intensive than they really need to be—and this, too, is quite distinct from the leisurely manner in which we are encouraged to consume *The Code of the Woosters* (or, for that matter, any of the other narratives I shall be discussing here). So although both novels would still qualify as light literature, they are light in different ways, employing different strategies in order to achieve the same aesthetic objective. In cases such as these, the balance of our discussion will inevitably shift from structure to feeling, from substance to tone, and we will be forced to engage, once more, with issues of sensibility. For even if these narratives are *structurally* dissimilar, there is something in their respective personalities that produces a kind of affective compatibility. Despite their differences, that is to say, they still manage to get along with each other, and any comprehensive typology of lightness would have to find some way of accommodating such unlikely affinities. As I have indicated, it is my intention here to invest the adjective *light* with greater definitional force, yet I hope to do so without entirely eradicating its curiously free-floating tendencies. Part of what makes it so useful as a descriptive term is its very "looseness," its ambiguity, and if we were to attach the signifier too rigidly to any one signified, if we were to resolve every last inconsistency, it would lose some of this valuable mobility. It would no longer be free to transcend the boundaries that separate different cultures, times, and genres—thus providing a point of connection (perhaps the *only* point of connection) between the work of Laurence Sterne, Ian Fleming, Jorge Amado, Oscar Wilde, Cervantes, Emilio Salgari, and the type of writing found in magazines such as *Popular Detective* or *Amazing Stories.* So yes, in the pages to come, there will be structure and substance but also

feeling and tone. I will attempt to achieve a clearer understanding of lightness as a discursive effect, yet without entirely suppressing its less tangible qualities. In another one of her early essays, Sontag argues that a "sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable" ("Notes" 276); and this is particularly true of the kind of sensibility that permeates the deeper structures of light literature.[15] I do feel encouraged, however, by the optimistic subordinate clause that attaches itself to Sontag's sentence. And it is here, somewhere within this clause, this encouraging "not quite," that the following study can be situated.

Chapter 1

Superficiality

Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*

I

In September 1916, an interview with a visiting Chinese scholar by the name of Hain Jou-Kia appeared in the *New York Times*. Before coming to the United States, the newspaper's readers were told, Hain had spent several years studying "social conditions" in Japan. As his interests were "chiefly literary," however, he had also "made a careful study of Japanese literature, and [had] arrived at some interesting conclusions on the subject." These conclusions were as follows:

> Japanese literature differs from Chinese literature chiefly in that it is not concerned, as Chinese literature is, with morals and philosophy. Japanese literature is light. One thousand years ago there were published in Japan two famous books, *Genji-Monogatari* and *Ise-Monogatari*. These are the origins of Japanese literature as we know it today. They are very famous. They deal merely with the times of their authors, with the surface of things, manners, customs, gossip. They do not deal with the great basic things of life, with morals and philosophy. These books are studied in the Japanese schools and universities, and their influence is responsible for the lightness of modern Japanese literature . . . You see the same thing in Japanese paintings. The thing which interests the Japanese painter, however skillful he may be, is the thing that he sees—the superficial and momentary thing . . . Japanese poetry, especially the Japanese songs, is [also] very light—so light that it is sometimes almost impossible to discover its meaning. (qtd. in Kilmer)

Four decades later, writing in the same newspaper, William Goyen would criticize Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) for demonstrating these very qualities. It, too, focused on "over-glaze[d]" surfaces, refusing to engage with more serious (or "weighty") themes; and in place of morality and meaning, it, too, offered insubstantial fripperies—the kind of thing that might have appealed to the "Colony set" or the "El Morocco crowd." Goyen was also particularly critical of the novel's playful tone and "vaude-villian" tendencies, objecting to the "doll-like glee" with which it was written and accusing its author of "creating and dwelling in a doily story-world entirely of [his] own tatting" (Goyen). Although Capote would later describe this review as an act of treachery (*Too Brief* 445), in many ways Goyen was quite right. The novel does feature a large cast of implausible caricatures—Salvatore "Sally" Tomato, for instance, the elderly Sicilian gangster, or Rutherfurd "Rusty" Trawler, the Nazi-sympathizing millionaire playboy—and in numerous places the narrative itself challenges our credulity. As I shall argue, however, these qualities need not be regarded as literary-aesthetic failings. On the contrary, they are all strategies that contribute, in one way or another, to the success of the novel's underlying aesthetic project, bringing it as close as possible to a state of complete superficiality.

The correspondences between the aforementioned critiques, despite the intervening decades, are striking. In fact, what we see emerging in each case is essentially the same conflict of literary values. On the one hand, we have the belief that literature ought to be composed of a certain density, engage with "the great basic things of life," and use "substantial" language in order to produce tangible meaning. On the other hand, we have an aesthetic typically associated with light literature—an aesthetic founded on the principles of superficiality, insubstantiality, and the attenuation of meaning. As suggested in the introduction, this disagreement has a long and distinguished genealogy. Throughout the centuries, to cite Italo Calvino once more, "two opposite tendencies have competed in literature." One tries to give language "the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations," while the other tries to make it into "a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses" (*Six Memos* 15). My point here, essentially, is that we should understand the lightness of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* not as an aesthetic failing, nor as mere "cuteness" or "whimsy" (Goyen), but as the articulation of a particular aesthetic sensibility—one that deliberately privileges style over substance, the

"superficial and momentary thing" over the dead weight of profundity and permanence.

Although Capote himself rarely discussed such matters, a short essay written three years before the publication of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* does give us some idea of his aesthetic affinities. In this essay, he celebrates the "Japanese sense of style," reserving particular praise for the "luminous" purity of classical Japanese literature and the ornate gestural vocabulary of Kabuki theater: "[W]hen the curtain rises on a performance of the Kabuki dancers, a premonition of the entertainment, the *frisson* it will ultimately achieve, is already there in the severely rich patterns of color, [the] exotically solemn postures of the dancers kneeling in their robes like porcelain figurines . . . It is all a ceremony of Style, a phenomenon that seems to rotate, in a manner quite separate from emotional content, on absolute style alone" ("Style" 355–56). This is as good a description as any of the lightness that so often characterizes Capote's own writing and as such is probably the best place to begin our discussion of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. But precisely what kind of lightness do we find in the novel, what are some of its defining characteristics, and what are the key strategies by which this effect is produced? In the following pages, I shall argue that the lightness of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is primarily achieved through a comprehensive diminution of its symbolic and hermeneutic codes. With regard to the first of these codes, I will be discussing the narrative's readability, its deliberate attenuation of supplementary meaning, and its linguistic transparence. This transparence, I would like to suggest, ultimately impedes our standard interpretative procedures, frustrating any attempt to reinstate (plausible) symbolic meaning. Turning to the hermeneutic code, I shall then address in greater detail the "depthlessness" of the discourse, its emphasis on surfaces and immediate legibility. Ordinarily the hermeneutic code is responsible for creating a series of "obstacles, stoppages, [and] deviations" (Barthes, *S/Z* 75) whose purpose it is to defer narrative closure. In *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, however, Capote does everything he can to minimize these hindrances, thus ensuring that the narrative's "true" meaning can be located without difficulty or delay. Finally, I shall offer an analysis of Holly Golightly herself, making the argument that as a character she shares (and indeed determines) many of the novel's lighter qualities: attaching supreme value to "the surface of things," privileging the signifier over the signified, and actively pursuing the freedom and mobility of nonmeaning. As will become obvious, I have found the work of Roland Barthes especially useful in exploring some of these issues, and over the course of the chapter, I shall be referring

to *S/Z* and *Empire of Signs* (both published in 1970) with particular frequency. The former study frames my structural analysis of the novel's semiotic codes, while the latter, through its engagement with Japanese culture, provides a clearer understanding of the transparence and superficiality that are such salient features of Capote's narrative.

II

I would like to begin by discussing the diminution of the symbolic code in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and the sense of lightness this retreat from meaning generates.[1] Rather than pursuing nonmeaning through an assault on language and narrative, however, Capote manages to achieve this objective within the confines of a "perfectly readerly discourse" (Barthes, *Empire* 81). Indeed, it is the novel's very readability, the dominance of its primary or literal meaning (what Holly calls "the story part" [24]), that enables it to shed its potential supplementary meanings with such ease.[2] And any attempt to restore these discarded meanings, I shall argue, would be to exceed the level of interpretation that the novel itself clearly encourages. On this level—that of the purely denotative—*Breakfast at Tiffany's* tells a simple story. After moving into a new apartment in Manhattan's East Seventies, the unnamed narrator, an aspiring writer, becomes acquainted with one of his neighbors, a young socialite known as Holly Golightly. Over the next year or so, he passes "many hither and yonning days" (54) with Holly, bears witness to her various romantic misadventures, and does his best to unravel the mystery of her true identity. Finally, having been unjustly implicated in a drug scandal, she flees to Rio de Janeiro, and that, we are led to believe, is the last the narrator will ever see of her. In due course, a postcard arrives, and several years later there is an unconfirmed sighting of Holly in a remote African village, but otherwise "she's gone . . . [j]ust gone" (15).

It is one of the central ironies of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* that the narrator's struggle to "read" Holly Golightly should itself be so eminently readable. None of the hermeneutical difficulties he encounters are transmitted to the reader, and nothing is allowed to disrupt the effortless eloquence (and clarity) of the sentences he produces. Throughout the novel, the narrator attempts to gain a better understanding of Holly by studying the various accretions of language that have built up around her. He begins with the name card she has left outside her apartment ("*Miss Holiday Golightly, Travelling*" [30]), before turning to other written sources: notes, newspaper articles, telegrams, and letters. By "observing the trash-basket outside her door," he discovers

that Holly's regular reading consists of "tabloids and travel folders and astrological charts," that she smokes "an esoteric cigarette called Picayunes," and that her "varicoloured hair [is] somewhat self-induced." He also learns that she receives a vast quantity of army-issue V-letters, which are subsequently torn into thin strips and discarded. "I used occasionally to pluck myself [one] in passing," he says of these strips. "*Remember* and *miss you* and *rain* and *please write* and *goddamn* were the words that recurred most often . . . those, and *lonesome* and *love*" (20). Here, suddenly, the discourse appears to be in danger of losing its characteristic transparence; yet this momentary rupture of meaning is carefully contained by the narrator, and at no point does it come close to disturbing the novel's overall semantic clarity. Having registered this temporary hermeneutical impasse, he immediately moves to reassert the dominance of the legible: "Also, she had a cat and she played the guitar" (20). The threat of syntactical disjuncture thus passes, and the narrative's readability, its serene fluency, is once again reaffirmed. Susan Sontag has argued that transparence of this kind is the "highest, most liberating value in art," for it "means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are" ("Against" 13). And this, I would like to suggest, is exactly what the transparence of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* achieves. It assures the reader that there is no deeper supplementary meaning to be found "behind" its language or discourse. What we see is what we get—and what we get takes place right there, on the narrative's elegantly filigreed surface.

Before discussing this transparence in greater detail, though, I should probably take a moment to clarify my description of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* as "meaningless." I am not proposing, of course, that Capote's narrative achieves a complete suspension of meaning. That would be impossible, for as Barthes quite rightly observes, "there is no literature without a sign, and no sign without a signified" ("Last Word" 200). In other words, "everything in [a narrative] signifies . . . Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness" (Barthes, "Introduction" 261). What I am suggesting, however, is that *Breakfast at Tiffany's* works toward an attenuation of meaning, a "thinning out" of the symbolic code, so that the narrative might be relieved of as much supplementary weight as possible. It is this drive to limit the production of connotative meaning that serves to distinguish the "nonmeaning" of Capote's novel from that of other, more "weighty" narratives. In Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, for instance, the absence of meaning carries a

quite profound meaning: it signifies absurdity. Every opacity the novel produces, every cryptic gesture it delineates, is filled with an ontological significance that we as readers are encouraged to recognize and somehow arrange into a philosophy.[3] The distinction to be made here, then, is twofold. First, the absence of meaning in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* has no meaning; it tells us nothing about the "gentle indifference" (Camus 122) of the universe or the absurd and arbitrary nature of our lives. And second, this absence of meaning never becomes a source of ontological anxiety for the reader—or, indeed, for the characters who have been made to occupy this "empty" universe. Instead, it promotes a sense of weightlessness and autonomy: the "buoyancy of a bird" (Capote, *Breakfast* 52), one might say, or the blissful inconsequentiality of a girl "spin-dancing . . . over the cobbles under the El" (20). In this respect, it perhaps comes closer to the kind of meaninglessness we find in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, who writes that "[t]he man of today . . . feels no sense of deprivation or affliction at [the] absence of meaning" ("Nature" 71). Like Capote, Robbe-Grillet discourages the "induction of poetic meaning" (Barthes, "Last Word" 198) by focusing our attention on surfaces, on outsides rather than insides, and like Capote he forgoes "transcendent" signification for the "immediate signification of things" (Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism" 166). But here, too, there are some crucial differences. There is an objective, analytical quality to Robbe-Grillet's writing that we don't find in Capote. Robbe-Grillet's emphasis on the materiality of the physical world also gives his writing a density that distinguishes it from the refined ethereality of Capote's prose style. And whereas Robbe-Grillet attempts to suspend meaning by "break[ing] the fascination of narrative" (Barthes, "Last Word" 198), by disrupting its intelligibility, Capote does precisely the opposite—despite the underlying similarity of his objectives.

So just what kind of meaninglessness *are* we talking about here? For Capote, as we have seen, intelligibility is everything—an intelligibility so complete that it purges the narrative of all traces of the esoteric or the obscure. In *S/Z*, Barthes argues that "the classic text is pensive": even as it concludes, "it still seems to be keeping in reserve some ultimate meaning, one it does not express but whose place it keeps free and signifying." According to Barthes, if a story such as Balzac's "Sarrasine" has "nothing more to say than what it says, at least it attempts to 'let it be understood' that it does not say everything." This allusion to meaning, he suggests, is "coded by pensiveness, which is a sign of nothing but itself: as though having filled the text but obsessively fearing that it is not *incontestably* filled, the discourse insist[s] on

supplementing it with an *et cetera* of plenitudes" (*S/Z* 216–17). Not so *Breakfast at Tiffany's.* In Capote's novel, there is no implied supplementary meaning, no "*et cetera* of plenitudes," in fact no latency of any kind. There is only one meaning, the most obvious, and it offers itself up to the reader with alacrity. Unlike "Sarrasine," *Breakfast at Tiffany's* does not let us know that it has not said everything; instead it lets us know, quite clearly, that there is nothing more to say. Its dominant narratorial tone, in other words, is not one of pensiveness but one of candor and volubility.[4] For Barthes, the final line of Balzac's story ("And the Marquise remained pensive" [qtd. in Barthes, *S/Z* 254]) functions as a sign of its plenitude, gesturing toward these hidden reserves of meaning, and one could argue that at a certain point in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Holly assumes a similarly emblematic status. In this case, however, she becomes a sign of the narrative's guilelessness—a sign whose purpose, here at least, is to reassure the reader that there *are* no hidden reserves of meaning. "The morning light seemed refracted through her," the narrator remembers. "[A]s she pulled the bed covers up to my chin she gleamed like a transparent child: then she lay down beside me" (29).

It is this commitment to legibility that ultimately brings about the diminution of the novel's symbolic code, for if there is never anything behind or surrounding the thing described, if it produces neither latent nor "transcendent" meaning, then the potential for symbolic substitution is reduced to a minimum. And whatever symbolism does survive this reduction of meaning itself becomes severely attenuated in the process. Take Holly's cat, for instance, the one she refuses to name "until he *belongs* to somebody." "We just sort of took up by the river one day," she says. "[W]e don't belong to each other: he's an independent and so am I. I don't want to own anything until I know I've found the place where me and things belong together" (40). The equivalence here between Holly and her cat is so direct, so obvious, indeed so *literal*, that it loses all symbolic resonance. "[H]e's an independent and so am I"—what more is there to say? Consider, too, the birdcage Holly gives the narrator as a gift: "a palace of a birdcage, a mosque of minarets and bamboo rooms yearning to be filled with talkative parrots" (19). Holly, we are told, doesn't like cages, and when she offers this one to the narrator, she makes him promise that he will "never put a living thing in it" (57). Again the symbolism is unambiguous: the cage's function here is to represent the captivity, the immobility, to which Holly is so averse. But symbolism of this kind is hardly symbolism at all; in fact, symbolism thus proclaimed barely rises above the level of metaphor. And this depletion of

symbolic meaning in turn serves to complicate any sustained critical engagement with *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, all but foreclosing the possibility of commentary or close reading. For how is one supposed to decipher a narrative that so readily decodes itself, offering no resistance whatsoever to our understanding? If the pensive qualities of a story like "Sarrasine" appear to invite critical analysis, then the candor of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* does just the opposite: encouraging a literal (or semantic) interpretation, while actively repelling the attention of the critical reader.[5]

In "Against Interpretation," an essay first published in 1966, Susan Sontag argues that "a great deal of [modern] art may be understood as motivated by a flight from interpretation"—by a desire to proclaim its own nonmeaning. One way of achieving this objective, she says, is to produce "works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be . . . just what it is." She offers as one of several examples the "liberating anti-symbolic quality" of old Hollywood movies, adding that "[i]n good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret" (11). In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes makes a similar argument with regard to the traditional Japanese haiku. For Barthes, the haiku "enters into that suspension of meaning which to us is the strangest thing of all, since it makes impossible the most ordinary exercise of our language, which is commentary" (81). This resistance to interpretation, he observes, tends to provoke two quite different critical responses within the Western academy. The first could be described as a kind of underreading, where "to speak of the haiku [is] purely and simply to repeat it" (72). The second, a form of overreading, discovers signification where there is none. "The West moistens everything with meaning," Barthes writes, "like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples"—and so, in order to spare discourse the "infamy of non-meaning," the (Western) critic is forced to deny "any nullity which might reveal the emptiness of [its] language" (70).

Like an old Hollywood movie, then, or a Japanese haiku, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* resists interpretation not because of its opacity, its hidden profundities, but because of its transparence, offering us a narrative so superficial, so patently "just what it is," that it immediately invalidates any attempt to burden it with deeper and more substantial meaning.[6] In a playfully metafictional manner, these interpretative difficulties even find their way into the narrative itself, where they are modeled for us by Holly. At one point, the narrator reads her a story he has written about "two women who share a house, schoolteachers, one of whom,

when the other becomes engaged, spreads with anonymous notes a scandal that prevents the marriage." Once he has finished reading the story, Holly "flounder[s] for something . . . to say," before eventually offering the following response: "Of course I like dykes themselves. They don't scare me a bit. But stories about dykes bore the bejesus out of me. I just can't put myself in their shoes." Then, sensing that she may have said the wrong thing, she adds, "Well really, darling . . . if it's not about a couple of old bull-dykes, what the hell *is* it about?" (25). This is a good question, and one Holly herself will answer later in the novel when she encounters similar difficulties reading a story the narrator has recently published in a magazine. "I read that story twice," she says. "Brats and niggers. Trembling leaves. *Description*. It doesn't *mean* anything" (59). Quite so (archaic language notwithstanding): it doesn't mean anything. Here we have a cue, if one were needed, for how best to interpret the novel we are reading—a gentle reminder that the narrative's most appropriate level of interpretation is to be found wherever its literal meaning resides.

III

As I have suggested, Capote's commitment to the superficial in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* also brings about the diminution of the novel's hermeneutic code, further contributing to its sense of lightness and insubstantiality. According to Barthes, the hermeneutic code is responsible for the formulation and ultimate resolution of enigmas or "opacities" within literary narratives. Under this category, he argues, we may "list the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed" (*S/Z* 19). The particular significance of the hermeneutic code lies in its control over the pace of the narrative, something it achieves through the insertion of various "dilatory morphemes" (*S/Z* 75) whose purpose it is to defer, for as long as necessary, the moment of full disclosure. Or as Barthes himself writes,

> [T]he hermeneutic code has a function, the one we . . . attribute to the poetic code: just as rhyme (notably) structures the poem according to the expectation and desire for recurrence, so the hermeneutic terms structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution. The dynamics of the text . . . is thus paradoxical: it is a static dynamics: the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial void of its answer; whereas the sentences quicken the story's "unfolding" and cannot help but move the story along, the hermeneutic code performs

> an opposite action: it must set up *delays* (obstacles, stoppages, deviations) in the flow of the discourse; its structure is essentially reactive, since it opposes the ineluctable advance of language with an organized set of stoppages: between question and answer there is a whole dilatory area whose emblem might be named “reticence,” the rhetorical figure which interrupts the sentence, suspends it, turns it aside. (*S/Z* 75)

But once again this isn’t quite what *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* does. Just as the novel’s “pensiveness” is deliberately undermined by its attenuation of supplementary meaning, so, too, is its “reticence” overcome by a desire to tell all—to confess everything it knows, like one of the gossip columns Holly keeps between the pages of her *Baseball Guide*. The narrative certainly has its enigmas, its mysteries, but these never last long, and they are never allowed to disrupt its dominant tone of candor and volubility. Whenever full meaning does retreat from view, giving the discourse the *illusion* of depth, a process of self-correction takes place, and meaning is quickly returned to the surface, where it belongs. Rather than privileging the mystificatory and the opaque, that is to say, the novel offers us an aesthetic of immediate (or at least accelerated) legibility; and it does so, I would argue, by removing many of the strategic delays, the obstacles and stoppages, that ordinarily stand between the formulation of an enigma and its ultimate resolution.

Not surprisingly, most of the enigmas in the novel tend to cluster around Holly Golightly, and one of the earliest of these is particularly revealing. It’s four thirty in the morning, and the narrator has just told her what day it is. “*Thursday*,” she replies. “My God . . . It’s too gruesome” (26). The narrator responds to this enigmatic utterance with a “request for an answer,” to use Barthes’s phraseology (*S/Z* 210). “I was tired enough not to be curious,” he tells us. “I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes. Still it was irresistible: ‘What’s gruesome about Thursday?’” (26). Although Capote could easily solve the mystery at this stage, he instead chooses to employ several dilatory morphemes—a partial answer, followed by a suspended answer or “aphasic stoppage” (Barthes, *S/Z* 75). The partial answer, essentially, is that “a girl can’t go to Sing Sing with a green face” (Capote, *Breakfast* 26), but this doesn’t tell us why Holly should be going to Sing Sing in the first place or who she will be visiting there. The suspended answer comes when she suddenly tells the narrator to go to sleep. “Please,” he says. “I’m interested.” To this, she replies, “I know you are. That’s why I want you to go to sleep. Because if I keep on, I’ll tell you about Sally” (27). Despite these strategies, however,

and within a page or two of its initial formulation, the enigma is swiftly resolved. Holly, like the discourse itself, would *like* to keep quiet, and for a moment or two she prevaricates, but the narrative's will to disclosure is far too strong for her to resist: "They never *told* me not to tell anyone. In so many words. And it *is* funny" (27). Some mystery, as the girl herself might say.[7]

Embedded within Holly's narrative, there is another enigma that will not be explicitly resolved until the end of the novel. Holly, it transpires, is paid one hundred dollars a week to communicate a weather report from the incarcerated gangster Sally Tomato to his lawyer, Mr. O'Shaughnessy. Asked by the narrator what the purpose of these reports might be, she replies, "[I]t's nothing. Just messages I leave with the answering service so Mr. O'Shaughnessy will know for sure that I've been up there. Sally tells me what to say, things like, oh, 'there's a hurricane in Cuba' and 'it's snowing in Palermo'" (29). On the face of it, we would seem to have a genuine mystery here—one that will not be explained for another fifty pages or so (when we finally learn, courtesy of the *Daily News*, that these reports are "coded messages" by which Sally Tomato has been able to control "a world-wide narcotics syndicate" [84]). But in fact, this enigma offers little more than the simulacrum of a mystery, for at the very moment of its formulation, it is rendered transparent and thus destroyed. Like the novel's symbolism, its mysteries are simply too obvious, too immediately intelligible, to survive. In *S/Z*, as we have seen, Barthes argues that the hermeneutic code establishes an elaborate system of "obstacles, stoppages, [and] deviations" by which the solution to an enigma may be deferred. Yet what kind of enigma is it that demonstrates no "reticence" whatsoever, that surrenders itself so easily, that offers simultaneous formulation *and* disclosure? The underlying significance of these weather reports is, from the outset, so obvious to the reader (if not to Holly herself) that they constitute what Robbe-Grillet calls "an opacity without mystery" ("Enigmas" 81). And it is this antiesoteric quality that once more concentrates our focus on the privileged "surface of things," where the narrative's meaning can be located without difficulty or delay.

The diminution of the hermeneutic code also influences the construction of character in Capote's novel. Traditionally, of course, there has been a tendency to favor "round" characters over "flat" ones—the intricacies of the three dimensional over the reductive implausibility of the two dimensional. But not in this case. Consider Rusty Trawler, for instance, a character whose flatness and artificiality are foregrounded from the moment he is first introduced to the reader: "He was a

middle-aged child that had never shed its baby fat, though some gifted tailor had almost succeeded in camouflaging his plump and spankable bottom. There wasn't a suspicion of bone in his body; his face, a zero filled with pretty miniature features, had an unused, a virginal quality: it was as if he'd been born, then expanded, his skin remaining unlined as a blown-up balloon, and his mouth, though ready for squalls and tantrums, a spoiled sweet puckering" (36–37). Here we have a character who never even comes close to plausibility, a character who has been denied interiority and substance ("there wasn't a suspicion of bone in his body"), and whose very face, "a zero filled with pretty miniature features," serves to proclaim his emptiness.[8] Elsewhere Rusty is described as an "absurd foetus" (70)—an image that captures him perfectly, for he is, like something seen by ultrasound, little more than an undeveloped caricature of a human being. And he's not the only one in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* who appears to have entered the world prematurely. Joe Bell, the lugubrious bartender; Mr. Yunioshi, the Japanese photographer; Mag Wildwood, the "cover girl" (71) from Arkansas; O. J. Berman, the Hollywood agent; and José Ybarra-Jaegar, the Brazilian diplomat with the "bullfighter's figure" (46)—at no point do any of these characters lose their cardboard qualities and assume the full weight of ontological plausibility. In Goyen's review of the novel, this is regarded as an artistic failing on Capote's part. His characters are criticized for being too thin and "less [than] feasible." We are told that their improbable names "often supplant depth of characterization" and that by resorting to "vaudevillian devices," he "weakens his originally serious conception of . . . character" (Goyen). But this seems to me to be a misreading of the novel—or at least a misreading of the aesthetic logic behind its implausibility. By stripping his characters of their "fullness" as human beings, by reducing them to the status of caricatures, Capote manages to free them from the burden of genuine referentiality. Here, too, the signifier is attached to the signified as loosely and as lightly as possible. Like the "Oriental transvestite" Barthes discusses in *Empire of Signs*, these characters do not "copy" human beings but instead "signify" them: character in this case being "the gesture of [humanity], not its plagiarism" (89).

This sense of insubstantiality is further heightened by Capote's use of a technique we might describe as "strategic transparence."[9] Despite the novel's emphasis on appearance and spectacle, its unqualified candor also enables the reader to see, quite clearly, what lies behind the characters' flat surfaces and empty gestures: nothing, a void, the degree zero of personality. To cite Barthes once more, "what is carefully, preciously given to be read is that there is nothing

there to read" (*Empire* 62). The characters are what they are, and they are obviously (and eternally) so. There are no hidden depths to Joe Bell, O. J. Berman, or José Ybarra-Jaegar—no mysteries, and no surprises, either; everything we need to know about them can be summarized in a sentence or two. One loves Holly from afar; another considers her a "phony" (32) yet "sincerely like[s] the kid" (35); the third is only interested in finding an appropriate wife for "a man of [his] faith and career" (91). And of course the narrator himself is the most transparent of all the novel's characters, the one through whom we see everything else, the one whose "emptiness" makes possible the very story we are reading. Only Holly is allowed to complicate things, for at first sight she does seem to offer both meaning and mystery. But as I shall argue, these are qualities she ultimately abjures by insisting on her own indeterminacy and superficiality. Indeed, Holly is the one character in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* who actively pursues nonmeaning—and in so doing, manages to determine the tone, structure, and density of the narrative she occupies.

IV

"I'd been living in the house about a week," the narrator remembers, "when I noticed that the mailbox belonging to Apt. 2 had a name-slot fitted with a curious card. Printed, rather Cartier-formal, it read: *Miss Holiday Golightly*; and, underneath, in the corner, *Travelling*. It nagged me like a tune: *Miss Holiday Golightly, Travelling*" (Capote, *Breakfast* 16). This card is what initiates the hermeneutical project around which *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is structured, the narrative that follows being an account, essentially, of the narrator's struggle to fill this sign with meaning. Just who is Holiday Golightly, and how should one interpret her "curious" use of the present participle? But what makes the novel particularly interesting is the tension that arises out of this project—a tension between two opposing forces within the narrative, each constituting two quite different aesthetic and epistemological perspectives. The first of these, represented by the narrator, values "solidity" and stability of meaning. According to this understanding of the world (and of literature), every sign carries recuperable supplementary meaning, and every chain of signifiers, however elusive or enigmatic it may be, eventually discloses an ultimate signified. The second position, represented by Holly, promotes what Barthes calls "the ethic of the empty sign" ("On *S/Z*" 83), privileging superficiality and nonmeaning over their opposites. As we have seen, this latter perspective is the one the novel itself finally endorses. In other words,

Breakfast at Tiffany's is light and superficial, committed to the freedom and mobility of nonmeaning, not because of its narrator but in spite of him. Although everything that occurs is focalized through his eyes, the narrative's dominant sensibility clearly belongs to Holly. Furthermore, by striving to empty herself of meaning in this manner, it is Holly who is ultimately responsible for the attenuation of the novel's symbolic and hermeneutic codes. "I *hate* snoops" (30), she tells the narrator when he attempts to pry into her past life. And she feels this way not because she would like to maintain her enigmatic status within the narrative but because she would prefer to destroy the hermeneutical process altogether—not because there is a hidden meaning she would like to protect but because she would rather "contain" no meaning at all. In this regard, Holly could be compared to the elaborate packaging Barthes found so appealing during his visit to Japan in 1966. "[I]t is precisely a specialty of the Japanese package," he writes, "that the triviality of the thing be disproportionate to the luxury of the envelope: a sweet, a bit of sugared bean paste, a vulgar 'souvenir' . . . are wrapped with as much sumptuousness as a jewel. It is as if, then, the box were the object of the gift, not what it contains . . . [T]he package is not empty, but emptied: to find the object which is in the package or the signified which is in the sign is to discard it: what the Japanese carry, with a formicant energy, are actually empty signs" (*Empire* 45–46). In a similar way, Holly attempts to reduce as far as possible her inward reserves of meaning so that the "package" is of greater currency than the object it encloses. After peeling away the layers of signification surrounding Holly, the narrator finally discovers her "secret": that her name is actually Lulamae Barnes and that she had been married, at the age of 14, to a simple rustic type called Doc Golightly. But this discovery has practically no impact on the trajectory of the narrative and does almost nothing to stabilize or determine Holly's identity. It is, in short, a secret without value, one that we as readers uncover only to discard.

Throughout the novel, then, Holly refuses to allow her meaning to be fixed, or arrested, by a transcendental signified of any kind—what she herself would probably call the "absolute finito" (Capote, *Breakfast* 76). Instead, she strives to remain "elusive, nameless, placeless" (52). At one point, the narrator remembers asking her why she had left home at such a young age: "She looked at me blankly, and rubbed her nose, as though it tickled: a gesture, seeing often repeated, I came to recognize as a signal that one was trespassing. Like many people with a bold fondness for volunteering intimate information, anything that suggested a direct question, a pinning-down, put her

on guard" (24). It is significant that what troubles Holly here is not the threat of disclosure but the threat of being "pinn[ed]-down," of having her identity rendered stable and finite by the enforced ascription of meaning. She is happy to volunteer "intimate information," but only so long as it retains a loose, polysemic quality; anything too specific scares the "bejesus" out of her. And this fear is what makes it possible for us to read Holly herself as a kind of floating signifier. It was Claude Lévi-Strauss, you may recall, who first used this term to describe signifiers with vague, variable, or unspecified symbolic value. Such signifiers, he argued, have a "fluid, spontaneous character," and because they "represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning," they are "susceptible [to] receiving any meaning at all" (55). This serves as a good description of Holly, too, for by resisting all attempts to secure her meaning, by striving to achieve a state of "zero symbolic value" (Lévi-Strauss 64), she exposes herself instead to an excess of meaning and a proliferation of readings. I would like to suggest, however, that these meanings are never quite definitive, and a degree of provisionality is imposed on any interpretation of Holly's character precisely *because* of her semiotic emptiness. Simply put, if she is no one particular thing, then that makes her (potentially) everything—and meaning this profligate, this generous with its own resources, very quickly becomes no meaning at all.

I have used the term *mobility* more than once while describing Holly, and it would be useful at this stage to clarify the dual meaning I intend this word to carry. The first of these meanings is entirely literal. Like a floating signifier, Holly's emptiness enables her to detach herself quite easily from her surroundings, to remain "travelling" at all times. "You can't give your heart to a wild thing," she declares. "[T]he more you do, the stronger they get. Until they're strong enough to run into the woods. Or fly into a tree. Then a taller tree. Then the sky" (Capote, *Breakfast* 69).[10] In order to maintain this degree of mobility, however, it is necessary for Holly to distance herself from all proprietorial entanglements, from all the responsibilities of ownership and belonging. Explaining why she refuses to name her cat, for instance, she says, "I haven't any right to give him [a name]: he'll have to wait until he *belongs* to somebody . . . I don't want to own anything until I know I've found the place where me and things belong together" (39–40). Nor does she consider the city itself hers, "the way something has to be, a tree or a street or a house, something, anyway, that belongs to [her] because [she] belong[s] to it" (78). And the same logic would seem to determine the "fly-by-night" (31) appearance of her apartment. When the narrator first visits her there,

he describes a parlor in which there was "nothing to sit on." It seemed "as though it were just being moved into," he says. "[Y]ou expected to smell wet paint. Suitcases and unpacked crates were the only furniture" (31). Then, some time later, he is ushered into her bedroom, where he registers "the same camping-out atmosphere; crates and suitcases, everything packed and ready to go, like the belongings of a criminal who feels the law not far behind" (51). This minimalist aesthetic serves a quite deliberate purpose for Holly. By creating an architecture of unbelonging—by emptying her apartment of anything that would allow her body to constitute itself, or be constituted, "as the subject (or master) of a space" (Barthes, *Empire* 110)—she is able to remain undomesticated, mobile, and free. She is able to keep traveling, drifting from one place to another, because there is simply nothing to stop her from doing so: nothing that "belongs to [her] because [she] belong[s] to it."

In addition to its literal meaning, however, I am also using the term *mobility* in its Byronic sense, to describe the "vivacious versatility" (Byron 515) of Holly's character, its radical instability.[11] Lord Byron once described himself as "hav[ing] no character at all" and claimed that this allowed him to be "every thing by turns and nothing [for] long" (qtd. in Gardiner 389–90). As we have seen, this is also true of Holly, whose emptiness enables her to become everything (and at the same time, ideally, nothing). Her curious indeterminacy is made clear in the very first description we are given of her face: "A pair of dark glasses blotted out her eyes. It was a face beyond childhood, yet this side of belonging to a woman. I thought her anywhere between sixteen and thirty" (Capote, *Breakfast* 17). Then, several days later, the narrator is introduced to the Hollywood agent O. J. Berman, who further reinforces this sense of indeterminacy and instability. "She's okay," he says, recalling his own first encounter with Holly. "[S]he comes across. Even when she's wearing glasses *this* thick; even when she opens her mouth and you don't know if she's a hillbilly or an Okie or what. I still don't. My guess, nobody'll ever know where she came from. She's such a goddamn liar, maybe she don't know herself any more" (33–34). She is, Berman concludes, a phony, but at the same time "[s]he isn't a phony because she's a *real* phony. She believes all this crap she believes" (32). This assessment of Holly's character seems to me entirely accurate. To be a phony presupposes the existence of some genuine essence that has been deliberately concealed. Yet in Holly's case, what you see is what you get: like the narrative itself, she has managed to remove her inner core of meaning (or more precisely, to bring it to the surface) so that she is what she appears to

be—if, indeed, she is anything at all. Elsewhere in the novel, she is variously described as "a Hollywood degenerate" (45), "a crude exhibitionist" (60), "an utter fake" (60), "a child-wife from Tulip, Texas" (64), a "hausfrau" (75), a "glittery voyager" (78), a "PLAYGIRL" (82), a "GLAMOUR GIRL" (82), a "*beautiful movie starlet and café society celebrity*" (83), "*a fragile eyeful*" (84), "*a tomboy*" (84), "a whore" (85), a "beautiful child" (91), and a "bawling baby" (91). And one could argue that she is, at one time or another, all of these things—but not for long, not essentially, and not with any meaningful degree of stability or finality.

I have thus far been suggesting that Holly's determination to pursue nonmeaning leads to the attenuation of the novel's symbolic and hermeneutic codes, transforming her, along the way, into a floating signifier capable of representing (almost) anything. It is this free-floating quality, this enthusiasm for what lies on the surface of things, that provides her character with such mobility, both literally and in the Byronic sense of the word. But why should she aspire to the condition of meaninglessness in the first place? Why should she strive to become pure surface—all signifier and no signified? Once more, Barthes's engagement with Japanese culture offers us some useful answers.

What fascinates Barthes about Japan is that its "sign systems, with their extraordinary virtuosity, their subtlety, their strength and elegance, are, in the end, empty." And they are empty, he says, because they do not lead to an ultimate signified: "[I]n Japan, as I read things, there is no supreme signified to anchor the chain of signs, there is no keystone, which permits signs to flourish with great subtlety and freedom" ("*L'Express*" 98–99). The crucial word here is the last one. For Barthes, Japan offers liberation from the tyranny of meaning he associates with Western semiotic structures, and it does so through its emphasis on depthless surfaces, empty gestures, and the free-floating play of signifiers. "All civilizations in which monotheism plays a role," he argues, "are necessarily under the constraint of monism; they stop the play of signs at some definite point. And that is [why] I give such importance to everything that tends to break away from Western monocentrism, everything that opens onto a possible image of the plural" ("*L'Express*" 99). This kind of semiotic autonomy is something Barthes particularly associates with the signifying practices of traditional Japanese theater. In his 1968 essay on Bunraku puppetry, for example, he celebrates the "tranquillity, lightness, and grace of beings free of thinking, of meaning" (Sontag, "Writing" 78).[12] Here, as is so often the case in his writing, the theatrical becomes "the domain of liberty, the place where identities are only roles and

one can *change* roles, a zone where meaning itself may be refused" (Sontag, "Writing" 82). All of this gives us some idea of why Barthes should feel such a strong affinity for Japanese culture. In Japan he found an epistemology, a way of looking at the world, that confirmed many of his own aesthetic principles—particularly the notion that, to quote Sontag once more, "depths are obfuscating [and] demagogic, that no human essence stirs at the bottom of things, and that freedom lies in staying on the surface, the large glass on which desire circulates" ("Writing" 80–81). But how does all this relate to Holly? Well, she, too, demonstrates the "tranquillity, lightness, and grace of [a being] free of . . . meaning." She, too, occupies a "domain of liberty"—a place where "identities are only roles" and one can change roles as frequently and as effortlessly as one pleases. She, too, offers us a "possible image of the plural," and she, too, obviously believes that "freedom lies in staying on the surface," where one can be whatever one appears to be.

As previously noted, the narrative of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* hinges on an opposition between two quite different sensibilities: that of the narrator and that of his subject, Holly Golightly. If Holly can be associated with those cultures that allow signs "to flourish with great subtlety and freedom," then the narrator represents the monocentrism of the West—its determination to "moisten" everything with finite meaning, like "an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples" (Barthes, *Empire* 70). And this, as we shall see, is precisely what he attempts to do with regard to Holly, whose declaration of mobility ("*Miss Holiday Golightly, Travelling*") he finds so "provocative" (Capote, *Breakfast* 42). At once intrigued and threatened by Holly's indeterminacy, he strives to produce a definitive reading of her character—one that will terminate forever her carefree days of "hither and yonning" (54).

The narrator's sedentary nature is revealed in the very first sentence of the novel. "I am always drawn back to places where I have lived," he confesses, "[to] the houses and their neighbourhoods" (9). He makes his proprietorial tendencies, his attachment to things, clear from the outset, too: "[M]y spirits heightened whenever I felt in my pocket the key to [my] apartment; with all its gloom, it still was a place of my own" (9). Of course, it was always going to be difficult for a perspective of this kind to accommodate a difference as great as Holly's, and as the novel progresses, the narrator's unease at her "flighty" ways becomes increasingly pronounced. On hearing that she will soon be leaving for Brazil with José, he imagines Holly as "a glittery voyager of secure destination, steam[ing] down the harbour

with whistles whistling and confetti in the air" (78), and he begs her to reconsider: "[Y]ou can't. After all, what about. Well, what about. Well, you can't *really* run off and leave everybody" (79). But she refuses to listen, anticipating instead the glamorous wedding she will have in Rio. Then, later in the novel, when it becomes clear that she is still intending to leave, despite the end of her affair with José, the narrator tries again: "Holly. Holly. You can't do that." Her reply is typical: "*Et pourquoi pas?*" (92).

And why not? Because, I would like to suggest, the narrator is attempting to reinstate the symbolic and hermeneutic codes within the narrative, and this is something he can only do by ascribing to Holly a stable and finite meaning, by reducing her to a state of rigid singularity. There is nothing he fears quite so much as Holly's mobility, her status as a floating signifier, for it risks evacuating the narrative itself—*his* narrative—of meaning. At one point, for instance, he sees Holly entering the 42nd Street public library and decides to follow her inside. As he watches her read and take "laborious" notes, he muses that "the average personality reshapes frequently, every few years even our bodies undergo a complete overhaul—desirable or not, it is a natural thing that we should change." But not Holly, he decides; she would "never change" (55). Needless to say, this is wishful thinking, and more than once in the novel we encounter evidence that suggests otherwise. For a start, the narrator has already acknowledged that "Holly and libraries [are] not an easy association to make" (55), so her very presence there represents change (or at least atypicality) of some kind. And then, immediately after making this claim, he describes how he "came to, startled to find [himself] in the gloom of the library, and surprised all over again to see Holly there. It was after seven, she was freshening her lipstick and perking up her appearance from what she deemed correct for a library to what, by adding a bit of scarf, some ear-rings, she considered suitable for the Colony. When she'd left, [he] wandered over to the table where her books remained; they were what [he] had wanted to see. *South by Thunderbird. Byways of Brazil. The Political Mind of Latin America*. And so forth" (56). There is, in this passage, an obvious determination on the part of the narrator to ignore all evidence that would contradict his belief in Holly's immutability. Although she is changing before his very eyes, transforming herself from one Holly into another, he refuses to acknowledge the reality of this metamorphosis. After wandering over to the table where her books are lying, he discovers still more evidence of her mobility, her plurality. Yet here, too, a kind of self-censorship occurs: a refusal to register the actuality of her shape-shifting. Instead, we are given a

list of titles, followed by a somewhat dismissive "[a]nd so forth." As the narrator of a story that has already established the transparence of its discourse—its legibility—he is obliged to tell us what he finds on the table; yet at the same time, he does everything he can *not* to tell us, as this would negate his earlier statement regarding Holly's immobility. Hence the deliberately vague *et cetera* with which he concludes this anecdote: a rhetorical ploy that enables him to perform an act of simultaneous disclosure *and* erasure. For as Barthes writes of a similar passage in Balzac's "Sarrasine," this "last attribute, like any *et cetera*, censors what is not named, that is, what must be both concealed and pointed out" (*S/Z* 70).

As I have argued, the narrator demonstrates a genuine fear of Holly's plurality and will do whatever it takes to reduce her to a state of singularity. This is suggested, obliquely, when he begins to see more than one Holly after falling from a bolting horse: "The trouble was, I couldn't see her; rather, I saw several Hollys, a trio of sweaty faces . . . Then there were four of her, and I fainted dead away" (82). Again the termination of the scene represents a retreat from an uncomfortable reality—one the narrator is being forced to confront, against his will, by the very substance of the story he is telling. At other junctures, however, he is left with no choice but to acknowledge Holly's mutability. When he encounters Doc Golightly, for example, he feels compelled to warn him that he will "find Holly, or Lulamae, somewhat changed" (66). And then, later in the novel, when she undergoes yet another transformation in anticipation of her marriage to José, he is obliged (in his capacity as narrator) to describe the process: "Her hair darkened, she put on weight. She became rather careless about her clothes . . . A keen sudden un-Holly-like enthusiasm for homemaking resulted in several un-Holly-like purchases . . . She spent whole hausfrau afternoons slopping about in the sweatbox of her midget kitchen" (74–75).

But despite these scattered acknowledgments, the narrator remains determined to secure Holly's identity, to ground her in an ultimate signified, and one could regard the narrative itself as his final attempt to do so. On the last page of the novel, he receives a postcard from her that reads, "*[L]ooking for somewhere to live . . . and will let you know the address when I know it myself.*" Significantly, however, a second postcard never arrives. "The address," he says, "if it ever existed never was sent, which made me sad." He then describes seeing Holly's lost cat in the window of an apartment building, and concludes on a rather wistful note: "I wondered what his name was, for I was certain he had one now, certain he'd arrived somewhere he belonged. African hut or

whatever, I hope Holly has, too" (100). That "whatever" is revealing, as is the sudden shift in tense. Such strategic vagueness allows for the possibility that he is referring not to an unspecified place but to the narrative itself, and the transition into the present tense reinforces this possibility. Now, having come to the end of his story, the story we have just finished reading, he hopes to have achieved one thing at least: he hopes to have accommodated Holly within the structure of the narrative, to have given her somewhere to live, somewhere she "belongs." Yet here, too, she proves elusive. All that remains of her are several photos taken by Mr. Yunioshi in an African village in "the tangles of nowhere" (12). These photos, we are told, depict "a tall delicate Negro man . . . displaying in his hands an odd wood sculpture, an elongated carving of a head, a girl's, her hair sleek and short as a young man's, her smooth wood eyes too large and tilted in the tapering face, her mouth wide, overdrawn, not unlike clown-lips. On a glance it resembled most primitive carving; and then it didn't, for here was the spit-image of Holly Golightly, at least as much of a likeness as a dark still thing could be" (12). As much of a likeness as a dark still thing could be—which is to say, barely a likeness at all. This sculpture represents something of a triumph for Holly, for she has finally attained the kind of freedom she has been pursuing all along. She has disappeared into pure "signification," becoming all signifier and no signified; or more precisely, she has disappeared into a series of proliferating signifiers, a "duplicative chain of bodies and copies" (Barthes, *S/Z* 71) whose ultimate signified, her true identity, appears to be almost infinitely recessive. Here, as Barthes writes of Bunraku theater, "*citation* rules, the sliver of writing, the fragment of code" (*Empire* 55). We have before us a written description of a photo of a sculpture that may or (crucially) may not depict Holly Golightly. But how can one possibly hope to locate the "real" Holly among all these citations and copies? The simple answer, of course, is that we can't—for "she's gone . . . [j]ust gone" (Capote, *Breakfast* 15).

V

Four years before the publication of *Madame Bovary* in 1856, Gustave Flaubert famously wrote of his desire to produce a novel that was all style and no substance:

> What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth,

> suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter . . . I believe the future of Art lies in this direction. I see it, as it has developed from its beginnings, growing progressively more ethereal. (*Letters* 154)

In many ways, this passage also serves as an apt description of Holly Golightly's project in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Like Flaubert, Holly attaches supreme value to style, to surface and gesture. She, too, strives to immerse herself in the signifier, and she, too, pursues a kind of semiotic autonomy—the right to refer to "nothing," to be "suspended in the void." And the same thing could be said of the novel itself, for at a certain point it becomes clear that Holly's objectives and those of the narrative she occupies are in almost perfect alignment. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* offers us literal meaning (as it must if it is to avoid the symbolic resonance of the unintelligible), but it refuses to generate or support any other kind of meaning. Hence the novel's lightness, which, as I have suggested, is grounded in the comprehensive diminution of its symbolic and hermeneutic codes. In the former case, this is achieved through the narrative's deliberate attenuation of supplementary meaning, which in turn frustrates many of our standard interpretative procedures. In the latter case, it is achieved by minimizing the strategic delays ordinarily imposed by the hermeneutic code and thus producing an aesthetic of immediate or accelerated legibility. In both cases, as Barthes writes of Robbe-Grillet, Capote manages to "disappoint" meaning and mystery "precisely when he makes it possible"; and any attempt by the reader to reinstate these qualities would involve a considerable degree of resistance to the novel's most plausible level of interpretation—"the level on which it is perfectly and immediately intelligible" ("Last Word" 200).

There is, as we have also seen, a tension in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* between two opposing forces: the first, represented by the narrator, privileges stability and density of meaning (classic literary values); the second, represented by Holly, promotes what Barthes calls "the ethic of the empty sign" ("On *S/Z*" 83). And it is the second of these perspectives, I have argued, that eventually achieves aesthetic and epistemological dominance within the narrative. By emptying herself of meaning, by becoming an entirely superficial "thing," Holly also manages to evacuate the narrative of much of its meaning and mystery. Of course, a complete absence of meaning is impossible to achieve, for every signifier signifies something. But in *Breakfast at*

Tiffany's, I would like to suggest, we come very close indeed to this elusive ideal—approaching it, one might say, asymptotically. On the surface, we have a finely wrought level of literal meaning and at times, perhaps, a secondary level of signification representing the principle of lightness itself, but otherwise all latent and transcendent meaning has been effectively eradicated. Like the Japanese haiku, Capote's novel is "just what it is" and nothing more. It demonstrates all the "attributes of the 'good' (literary) message: clarity, simplicity, elegance, finesse" (Barthes, "Digressions" 119), yet repeatedly deprives us of the deeper symbolic meanings that are supposed to accompany this message. And in so doing, it manages to defy all but the most "superficial" of commentaries, for without meaning, without substance, there is really nothing more to add and nothing left to say.

Chapter 2

Irreverence

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*

I

In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera describes the history of the European novel since the eighteenth century as a "cemetery of missed opportunities." With the rise of realism in the early nineteenth century, he argues, the qualities of irreverence and playfulness lost the salience they once had: "Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Denis Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* are for me the two great novelistic works of the eighteenth century, two novels conceived as grand games. They reach heights of playfulness, of lightness, never scaled before or since. Afterward, the novel got itself tied to the imperative of verisimilitude, to realistic settings, to chronological order. It abandoned the possibilities opened up by these two masterpieces, which could have led to a different development of the novel." "[Y]es," Kundera concludes parenthetically, "it's possible to imagine a whole other history of the European novel," a history grounded in the ludic tendencies, the "grand games," of the eighteenth century (*Art* 15–16). As I have suggested once before, this argument strikes me as entirely plausible. But perhaps it is not necessary merely to imagine this alternate universe; perhaps this "other history" actually did transpire, only somewhere else—somewhere beyond realism's immediate sphere of influence, on the global periphery of European literature and culture.

In this chapter, I shall be exploring the playful, "prerealist" qualities of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's *Posthumous Memoirs of*

Brás Cubas (first published in Rio de Janeiro in 1880), for it is here, in this curiously neglected novel, that we find clear evidence of such an aesthetic surviving well into the nineteenth century.[1] Before this date, Machado had himself produced a series of "middling, provincial narratives" (Schwarz, *Master* 150) in the realist mode, but with the *Posthumous Memoirs*, suddenly everything changed.[2] As the title indicates, Machado's novel offers a retrospective account of its hero's life told from beyond the grave. "I am not exactly a writer who is dead," he explains, "but a dead man who is a writer, for whom the grave was a second cradle" (7). Aside from this single fantastical detail, however, the narrative itself is not particularly distinctive. Born into a wealthy family during the reign of Emperor Pedro II (1831–89), Brás Cubas enjoys a privileged childhood and when the time comes—following a fairly typical trajectory for those of his pedigree—completes his studies at a prestigious Portuguese university. He then wanders around Europe for several years (also typically), before returning to Rio, where he endures a series of banal and forgettable love affairs: "If you smell some dressing-table perfume, don't think I had it sprinkled for my pleasure. It's the vestige of N. or Z. or U.—because all of those capital letters cradle their elegant abjection there . . . The excitement itself has vanished and left me with the initials" (80). In due course, he initiates an affair with a married woman, Virgília, but even this relationship fails to achieve any genuine significance or intensity, and like almost everything else in the novel, it ultimately comes to nothing. Our hero then dabbles in politics (as a member of the Chamber of Deputies) and metaphysics, before succumbing to pneumonia and dying at the age of 64. In the novel's final lines, Brás summarizes his life for us, offering as his only real achievement the fact that he has had no children—for in this way, he says, he has avoided "transmitt[ing] the legacy of our misery to any creature" (203).

Overall, then, if we were to consider only the substance of the narrative, the story itself, the *Posthumous Memoirs* would seem to be a kind of Brazilian *Sentimental Education*, subjecting the reader to two hundred pages of superficiality, banality, and failure. However, it is the manner in which Machado chooses to tell this story, the defiantly *unrealistic* nature of the discourse, that makes all the difference. By 1880 it was clearly too late to ignore realism—to disregard the legacy of Balzac, say, or Flaubert—but it was still possible to "play" with its governing aesthetic principles, its values and ideologies. And this is what ultimately distinguishes Machado from his eighteenth-century predecessors, despite their stylistic similarities: his *belatedness*, his

decision to bring an eighteenth-century sensibility to bear on a discursive world dominated by the reality principle—by the need to contain, or at least sublimate, one's ludic desires. In other words, it was Machado's outstanding innovation to have combined, in this novel, the banal substance of realism with the formal incandescence of prerealist narratives from the eighteenth century, thus transforming the various life stages of bourgeois mediocrity into something altogether more challenging and transgressive. With the publication of the *Posthumous Memoirs*, the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz writes, "Machado's daring [became] more encompassing and spectacular, *affronting the presuppositions of realist fiction*, that is, the nineteenth-century scaffolding of the bourgeois status quo" ("*Posthumous*" 817). At almost every level, the narrative undermines the primacy of the real, refusing to obey any structural or stylistic imperative that would oblige it to do otherwise. And in so doing, it manages to repudiate many of the "good" literary values that we are supposed to look for in a (realist) narrative: thematic and stylistic unity, directionality, discipline, order, consistency, and verisimilitude. As Schwarz observes, such irreverence "recycled an erudite and refined range of prerealist conventions, in open defiance of the nineteenth-century sense of reality and of its objectivity." But it was also, in many ways, postrealist: "interested in reflecting in a poor light the verisimilitude of the bourgeois order, opening up to visitation its unconfessed aspects, [and] unmasking it in the modern manner that would prevail at the end of the century" ("*Posthumous*" 817–18).[3]

In the following pages, I shall be subjecting this quality of irreverence—and the light, playful tone it generates—to closer scrutiny. I will begin by exploring the novel's digressive tendencies, its scandalous violation of the rules of relevance and continuity. As we shall see, this refusal to stay in one place, to occupy a limited field of reference or follow a single trajectory for any length of time, makes the *Posthumous Memoirs* a particularly good example of the digressive mode of writing that Ross Chambers has labeled "loiterature." According to Chambers, the typical "loiterly" narrative constitutes a "site of endless *intersection*," its narrator's attention being "always divided between one thing and some other thing, always ready and willing to be distracted." Of course, that is how narratives of this kind give pleasure: by allowing us to trace joyful arabesques of inconsequentiality, by liberating us from the tyranny of teleology. And that is why, for Chambers, such pleasure could also be regarded as subversive: because "it incorporates and enacts . . . a criticism of the disciplined and the orderly, the hierarchical and the stable, the

methodical and the systematic, showing them to be unpleasurable, that is, alienating" (9–10). I shall then discuss the novel's failure to formulate an "appropriate" literary message—the bewildering disjuncture it establishes between story and discourse, either by telling us more than we need to know, by lapsing into irrelevance, by withholding vital knowledge, or by allowing the "intrusion of disorder, entropy or disorganization into the sphere of structure and information" (Lotman 75). In this case, I shall argue, the narrative consistently violates the rules associated with Paul Grice's cooperative principle, particularly those governing the quantity and "relation" (i.e., relevance) of any given utterance. Finally, I will be drawing a connection between these different varieties of structural and stylistic irreverence and the notion of the carnivalesque. Rather than simply invoking the carnivalesque in a general sense, however, I would like to compare the *Posthumous Memoirs* to a quite specific carnival: the one that takes place every year, just before Lent, in Rio de Janeiro. For like the carnival in Rio, Machado's novel also operates in the subjunctive mood; it, too, distances itself from "the formal rules that govern the social structure" (DaMatta, *Carnivals* 209); and it, too, privileges above all else the *brincadeira* (a playful, joking kind of performance or game).[4]

But there is clearly a limit to the degree of transgression any narrative can accommodate without descending into mere static or undifferentiated noise. As Jurij Lotman observes, "[C]reation independent of rules and structural relations is impossible. This would contradict the nature of a work of art as a model and a sign; it would make it impossible to understand the world with the help of art and to convey the results of that understanding to an audience." A work of literature may represent "the destruction of a *familiar system*," that is to say, but not "the *principle of system-ness* [itself]" (292). And this is certainly true of the *Posthumous Memoirs*, for despite its obviously transgressive qualities, it is never too transgressive. In places it may cross the line, but it never moves too far beyond that line—always recognizing, and tacitly acknowledging, its dependence on certain structural necessities (whether they be of a semiotic, typographical, or generic nature). So the governing aesthetic principles of literary realism may be challenged, probed, and interrogated, but they are never entirely abandoned. The legibility of the novel's message may be disrupted and distorted, in places even momentarily jammed, but it is never entirely destroyed. And the referential function of this message may be denounced as false, but it is never entirely rejected. For Schwarz, ambivalence of this kind is emblematic of the complicated

relationship between Western modernity and the peripheral cultures it "infiltrates." "[The narrator's] infractions," he argues, "neither ignore nor cancel the norms they affront; but, at the same time, these are derided and rendered inactive, relegated to a status of half-valence that aptly encapsulates the ambivalent position of modern culture in peripheral countries" ("*Posthumous*" 817). Schwarz may well have a point here, yet such ambivalence is also inherent within the very nature of transgression itself, for a transgressive act and the prohibition it violates are ultimately indissociable, each depending on the other to validate its existence, to underwrite its "density of being." As Michel Foucault wrote in one of his early essays on Georges Bataille, "Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more . . . to the horizon of the uncrossable" ("Preface" 33–34).

In the *Posthumous Memoirs*, our narrator explores similar territory, crossing and recrossing the boundaries of what was permissible for a novel written in Rio de Janeiro (or anywhere else, for that matter) in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, more than once over the course of the novel, we are brought perilously close to the "horizon of the uncrossable," to the ultimate taboo of complete discursive collapse. But Brás Cubas is always careful to ensure the survival of the story he is telling, and whenever the narrative faces a genuine threat to its continuity or coherence, all those "good" literary values we mentioned earlier (structure, meaning, order, discipline, linearity, etc.) are allowed to reassert themselves. Here, too, then, the *Posthumous Memoirs* could be said to resemble a *brincadeira*—a teasing, provocative game that invites the reader to participate in the pleasurable testing of boundaries, yet without going too far, without entirely repudiating the structural necessities that make literature (and carnival) possible in the first place. In short, as we shall see, the irreverence of the narrative is always carefully circumscribed, exploring but never completely disregarding the line that separates structure from chaos, meaning from noise, and playful teasing from something altogether more threatening.

II

On the very first page of the novel, our narrator rather defiantly acknowledges his debt to the digressive tradition of the eighteenth century, and it doesn't take him long to put the "free form of a Sterne or a Xavier de Maistre" (Machado 3) into practice. After describing his funeral in some detail, Brás mentions for the first time a "magnificent and useful idea" (8) that came to him in his final days. This idea, it transpires, "was nothing less than the invention of a sublime remedy, an antihypochondriacal poultice, destined to alleviate our melancholy humanity" (9). Now, one might imagine that such an invention would occupy a privileged place within the narrative—particularly in a chapter teasingly entitled "The Poultice." But no, in the first of many such arabesques, many such swerves from the predictable and the linear, we are given everything but what *ought* to be the subject of the discourse. Brás begins by exploring his motivation for inventing this mysterious poultice ("a thirst for fame . . . [a] love of glory"). He then introduces us to two of his uncles, one of whom "liked to say that love of temporal glory was the perdition of souls," while the other would "retort that love of glory was the most truly human thing there was in a man and, consequently, his most genuine attribute" (9). After this divergence, Brás promises to return to the subject of the poultice, yet in the following chapter, he decides, rather suddenly, to provide us with a genealogical outline of his family instead ("The founder of my family was a certain Damião Cubas, who flourished in the first half of the eighteenth century"). He then concludes the chapter with another pledge to return to the subject at hand: "Let's finish with our poultice once and for all" (10). But Chapter 4 arrives, and with it, yet another distraction, yet another digressive swerve into irrelevance. This time, ironically enough, he is elaborating on the subject of the *idée fixe*. Only he does so in the most unfocused and dilatory manner possible—by way of barely connected, barely lucid references to Cavour, the Risorgimento, Suetonius, Seneca, Claudius, Titus, Madame Lucrezia (the "flower of the Borgias" [11]), Gregorovius, the Battle of Salamina, the Augsburg Confession, and the antiquities of Egypt, among many other things. At this point, realizing somewhat belatedly that he is in danger of alienating the reader, Brás addresses us directly: "Let the reader find the comparison that fits best, let him find it and not stand there with his nose out of joint just because we haven't got to the narrative part of these memoirs. We'll get there . . . [L]et's get on

with it . . . Let's go. Straighten out your nose and let's get back to the poultice" (11). By now, however, we no longer believe such promises, and it comes as no great surprise when another digression surfaces to disrupt the narrative's linear trajectory. In fact, as it turns out, we never really "get back to the poultice." Instead, Brás begins describing the illness that killed him, and before we know it, the subject of the poultice itself is forgotten, lost in this welter of peripheral irrelevancies.

And so it goes. Time and again, whenever the opportunity arises, Brás moves the narrative sideways rather than forward, finding interest and amusement in almost everything but the story he is telling. Or perhaps more precisely, he wants to have it both ways, finding interest and amusement in both the story he is telling *and* everything else—simultaneously, indiscriminately, with no regard whatsoever for the rules of relevance and continuity. Several pages later, for instance, he decides to provide a lengthy description of the hallucinatory delirium he suffered on his deathbed, and here, too, he begs our indulgence: "If the reader isn't given to the contemplation of these mental phenomena, he may skip this chapter and go straight to the narrative. But if he has the slightest bit of curiosity, I can tell him now that it's interesting to know what went on in my head for some twenty or thirty minutes" (15). That may very well be so: it may be interesting, but is it *relevant*? Do we really need to know what went on in his head for those twenty or thirty minutes? Do we need to know that he "felt [himself] transformed into Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, printed in one volume and morocco-bound" (16)? Or that he conducted a strange dialogue with an animal that turned out to be—or at least turned into—his cat, Sultão? The answer, as Brás himself acknowledges more than once, would seem to be no. And the same distracted logic applies elsewhere, too, causing him to "lose the thread of [his] reflections" (48) on almost every page. In Chapter 31, to cite another key episode, he becomes strangely preoccupied with a butterfly he has just killed:

> I let myself contemplate the corpse with a certain sympathy, I must confess. I imagined that it had come out of the woods, having had breakfast, and that it was happy. The morning was beautiful . . . It came through my window and found me. I suppose it had never seen a man before. It didn't know, therefore, what a man was. It executed infinite turns around my body and saw that I moved, that I had eyes, arms, legs, a divine look, colossal stature. Then it said to itself, "This is probably the inventor of butterflies." The idea subjugated it, terrified it, but fear,

> which is also suggestive, hinted to it that the best way to please its creator was to kiss him on the forehead, and it kissed me on the forehead. When I drove it away it went to land on the counterpane. There it saw my father's picture and it's quite possible that it discovered a half-truth there, to wit, that this was the father of the inventor of butterflies, and flew over to beg his mercy. Then the blow of a towel put an end to the adventure. (62)

This passage is supremely, sublimely, inconsequential. It contributes almost nothing of value to the narrative and is only connected to the unfolding story in the most tenuous and arbitrary way. Of course, at some level, as Roland Barthes argues, it is possible to recuperate any narrative detail—to ascribe functionality, however limited, to even the most inconsequential of utterances.[5] In this case, for example, one could argue that the episode is designed to emphasize our narrator's digressive tendencies, his aversion to "direct and continuous narration" (Machado 111). Indeed, at one stage he even confesses to "rambl[ing] from idea to idea . . . like a vagrant or hungry butterfly" (53). Or we could conceivably ascribe symbolic meaning to the passage, drawing a connection between Brás's killing of the butterfly and his rejection of the crippled Eugênia (whose eyes, we are told, sparkle "as if inside her brain a little butterfly with golden wings and diamond eyes were flying" [60]). Yet as Barthes also observes, it is always necessary to distinguish between plot nuclei (those narrative functions that "constitute real hinge points of [a] narrative") and catalyzers (those that "merely 'fill in' the narrative space separating the hinge functions") ("Introduction" 265).[6] Here, one very quickly realizes, Brás has gathered together, for "the pleasure of [our] eyes" (62), a collection of beautifully colored but barely functional catalyzers, and no matter how hard one tries, it is impossible (or certainly implausible) to convert them into anything else. Passages of this kind are what they are: a direct challenge to the rule that every piece of a narrative must in some way contribute to the whole and that whatever moves must go forward.

Needless to say, this is what makes the *Posthumous Memoirs* a particularly fine example of a "loiterly" narrative—the fact that it, too, refuses to follow a straight line, preferring to move laterally, from topic to topic, without settling on any one subject for longer than a page or two. According to Ross Chambers, the typical loiterly narrative is governed by what he calls the "*et cetera* principle." "No narrative construction can be so cohesive," he writes, "as to be totally closed to the possibility of supplementarity (no story is the whole story), and it

is on this fact that digressive practices depend." More specifically, the *et cetera* principle recognizes that although "contextuality is a condition of all discourse, no context is ever the whole context: there is consequently no message that does not admit of there being a second or other message, and indeed, by continued application of the rule, a third, fourth, and fifth, to infinity" (85–86). The passage cited above gives us a clear sense of how this principle of (potentially infinite) supplementarity functions in Machado's novel. For Brás, the narrative would not be complete without at least considering things from the perspective of a butterfly, without accommodating the "second message" that the butterfly carries. But of course, by this logic, the novel will never be complete, for this is just one of many different possibilities, many different perspectives, many different "butterflies," and he cannot possibly hope to accommodate them all within the same narrative structure. The only thing he can do is gesture toward this infinite series of alternatives by employing the *et cetera* principle. As Chambers notes, the term *et cetera* serves two discursive purposes: it "has the function of conferring formal exhaustiveness and closure on any inventory," but it also indicates that "the inventory, as it stands, is in need of supplementation precisely because it is not complete." And it is this double function that makes it such a useful narrative strategy—going some way toward resolving the tension between "the closed structure of [a] story, marked by the cohesive linking of a beginning and an end" (86), and the proclivity to digression that is a feature of all discourse.[7]

In the *Posthumous Memoirs*, the narrator frequently gestures toward everything he is unable to accommodate within the story he is telling, everything that can't be said. "I'm not going to say what I went through [traveling] from there to Lisbon," he declares in one typical passage, "or what I did in Lisbon, on the Peninsula, or in other places in Europe . . . No, I'm not going to say that I was present at the dawn of Romanticism, that I, too, went off to write poetry to that effect in the bosom of Italy. I'm not going to say a thing" (49). As suggested earlier, it is clear that Brás wants to have it both ways, finding interest and amusement in the story he is telling *and* in everything else; and by employing the *et cetera* principle, by gesturing so frequently toward what lies beyond the parameters of the narrative, he is able to collapse one category (at least partially) into the other. It is an elementary principle of physics that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time, and this principle also applies to literary discourse, where two stories cannot occupy precisely the same narrative space at precisely

the same time. But this is yet another rule that our narrator does his best to violate. By virtue of the *et cetera* principle, he is able to integrate traces of alterity into the very substance of the narrative, thus invoking all the other stories, the "nonstories," it has obscured or repressed by taking on this particular shape (rather than any other). In this way, we could argue, Brás ensures that the story he is telling and those stories he *could* be telling are forced to share identical coordinates within the narrative, in clear defiance of the laws of literary physics. One may be reminded here of Italo Calvino's notion of the hypernovel—a "novel in negative" ("Count" 151) that somehow manages to retain a sense of all the other possibilities it eliminated by coming into being. "Writing," Calvino says, "no less than throwing things away, involves dispossession, involves pushing away from myself a heap of crumpled-up paper and a pile of paper written all over, neither of the two being any longer mine, but deposited, expelled" (*Road* 125). In the hypernovel, though, traces of the rejected material are left embedded within the novel itself, allowing the reader to "sample the potential multiplicity of what may be narrated"—to have some intimation, however attenuated, of the narrative's "infinite possibilities" (Calvino, *Six Memos* 120). Take the final chapter of Machado's novel, for instance, the one entitled "On Negatives." Here, Brás gives us a condensed summary of the "novel in negative," listing everything that might have been but wasn't. He didn't attain "the fame of the poultice"; he wasn't a government minister; and he "didn't get to know marriage." Yet if the reader imagines that things were all bad, "he imagines wrong." On arriving at "the other side of this mystery," Brás found himself with "a small balance, which is the final negative in this chapter of negatives": "I had no children, I haven't transmitted the legacy of our misery to any creature" (203).

Simply put, things could easily have been otherwise, and it is in the very nature of the digressive narrative to acknowledge as many of these alternative plot lines, these "negative" realities, as possible. Such compulsive supplementarity, moreover, is what gives narratives of this kind their strongly subversive quality. As Chambers writes,

> Any digression enacts (although it may not intend) a criticism because, once one has digressed, the position from which one departed becomes available to a more dispassionate or ironic analysis: it must have been in some sense inadequate or one would not have moved away from it . . . To demonstrate, by a shift of perspective, that certain things are the case (certain propositions hold true, certain perspectives are valid) only

> within a limited context, and that they're dependent on a certain "forgetfulness" with respect to the other-sidedness of a given situation, is to show, on the one hand, that the claims of authority are not universally valid and, on the other, that the condition of intellectual comprehension is a certain failure of comprehensiveness. (15)

In the *Posthumous Memoirs*, Brás Cubas offers precisely this kind of critique. Over the course of the novel, he repeatedly interrupts the "story" part of the discourse in order to explore other, largely peripheral issues, in order to look at things from different angles or perspectives. And more often than not, these digressive passages contribute almost nothing to the unfolding of the narrative itself. Thus we find chapters dedicated to noses (Chapter 49), legs (Chapter 66), lunatics (Chapter 69), imaginary bibliomaniacs (Chapter 72), idiomatic phrases (Chapter 132), epitaphs (Chapter 151), and so on. As I have indicated, however, the very uselessness of these passages carries its own significance, offering an implicit critique of those aesthetic or generic imperatives that demand complete obeisance to "story" and of those modes of thought that "regard themselves as disciplined, methodical, or systematic" (Chambers 15). This is particularly evident in the chapter entitled "Parenthesis." Here, Brás tells us, he would like to record "half a dozen maxims from the many [he] wrote down around that time. They're yawns of annoyance. They can serve as epigraphs to speeches that have no subject." And the glimpses of profundity we are offered in this aside? "Bear your neighbor's bellyache with patience . . . We kill time; time buries us . . . Believe in yourself, but don't always doubt others . . . It's beyond understanding why a Botocudo Indian pierces his lip to adorn it with a piece of wood. This is the reflection of a jeweller . . . Don't be irritated if you're poorly paid for a service. It's better to fall down from out of the clouds than from a third-story window" (165–66). Once again, these reflections contribute nothing of value to the narrative we are reading. On the contrary, they serve as gratuitous "yawns of annoyance" whose only purpose, it would seem, is to disrupt its linear trajectory and undermine the "good" literary values to which it otherwise adheres (thematic and stylistic unity, coherence, stability of meaning, relevance, etc.). What does a Botocudo Indian or a jeweler have to do with anything? Nothing, of course. But that's precisely the point Machado is making here: that there is always another story to be told and always another way of telling it—or *not* telling it, as the case may be.

Passages of this kind are, then, notable for their uselessness, for their relative lack of functionality within the narrative. As we have seen, they could be said to represent, at a secondary level of meaning, the principle of digressiveness itself and to offer, in so doing, a critique of order, method, and linearity. But for the most part, they are mere "fillers," catalyzers whose value or "profitability" within the economy of the narrative approaches the zero degree. Although this reduced functionality is something Brás himself frequently acknowledges (see pages 112, 113, and 178), he is always careful to prevent the narrative from sliding into complete redundancy—recognizing the need, always, to keep things going, to salvage meaning from nonmeaning, notability and value from mere static. So just when the narrative seems to be in danger of completely losing its way, he always intervenes to save it, teasing us with the possibility of a complete discursive collapse but knowing, always, where to draw the line. This, too, is a typical feature of the so-called loiterly narrative. Such narratives, Chambers writes, "give pleasure by flirting with the potential for transgression that lies in the fact that there is no law without its loophole (in this case the law of good narrative, with the expectation it fosters of a well-constructed story), but they must—as Cocteau put it—know 'jusqu'où on peut aller trop loin' (how far one may overstep the line)." They must respect the "limit beyond which flirtation with the possibility of transgression becomes transgression *tout court* and amusing or titillating manifestations of the force of desire threaten to unleash cultural anarchy or chaos" (90). One of the more obvious examples of this practice comes in Chapter 136, entitled "Uselessness," which I shall quote here in its entirety: "But, I'm either mistaken or I've just written a useless chapter" (181). That's it: the whole thing. It is significant, however, that the next chapter should qualify this claim, retrieving some value from what would otherwise have been a completely redundant utterance. "Not really," it begins, before going on to associate this sense of futility with the protagonist's more general descent "down the fatal slope of melancholy" (181). Another chapter, "The Author Hesitates," is also worth citing in this regard. Here, Brás's father is encouraging his son to pursue a career in politics and to enter into a marriage that would make such a career possible. But suddenly the narrative itself hesitates, drifting off course. "[His father] drank the last drops of his coffee, relaxed, [and] started talking about everything, the senate, the chamber, the Regency, the restoration, Evaristo, a coach he intended to buy, [their] house in Matacavalos"—while Brás, for his part, simply doodles:

> I remained at a corner of the table writing crazily on a piece of paper with the stub of a pencil. I was tracing a word, a phrase, a line of poetry, a nose, a triangle, and I kept repeating them over and over, without any order, at random, like this
>
> *arma virumque cano*
>
> *A*
>
> *Arma virumque cano*
>
> *arma virumque cano*
>
> *arma virumque*
>
> *arma virumque cano*

Eventually this leads him, by a process of association, to create the following pattern on the page:

> Vir Virgil
>
> Virgil Virgil
>
> Virgil
>
> Virgil (56)

At this point, the narrative would appear to be facing the very real possibility of its own demise, but at the last minute it manages to ensure its survival by reestablishing a sense of internal logic and legibility. In order to save itself, it creates an accomplice in the form of Brás's father, whose "freedom" here is clearly "dominated by the discourse's instinct for preservation" (Barthes, *S/Z* 135). "My father," Brás remembers, "a little put off by that indifference, stood up, came over to me, cast his eyes onto the paper . . . 'Virgil!' he exclaimed. 'That's it, my boy. Your bride just happens to be named Virgília'" (Machado 56). And there the chapter concludes, having flirted with the possibility of complete discursive collapse but in the very last line allowed those values we might associate with the "readerly" to reassert themselves, and to do so with considerable aesthetic (and ethical) force.

All of this brings us slightly closer to understanding the nature of the *brincadeira*, the lighthearted joke or game, our narrator is playing with us here. Time and again, he teases the reader with the possibility of discursive "anarchy or chaos" yet always manages to do what is necessary to keep the story going—proceeding with "all of method's advantages but without method's rigidity" (Machado 22). And this is also what makes the *Posthumous Memoirs* so pleasurable to read, so playful and light: the fact that it is transgressive but never too transgressive, offering us a carefully controlled, carefully modulated departure from the values of the readerly. As noted earlier, a transgressive act and the prohibition it violates are ultimately indissociable, and this is something Brás quite clearly recognizes. He crosses and recrosses certain aesthetic or generic boundaries but never allows such playful irreverence to tip into something more threatening or disruptive. The narrative gives him a place in which to test these boundaries, in which to experience a sense of "joyful irresponsibility" (Kundera, *Curtain* 144), but he also realizes that he can never entirely repudiate the basic structural necessities on which such carnivalesque spaces depend. He always knows how far to go, in short, and just where to draw the line.[8]

III

In literature, every digression arises out of, and serves to delineate, a wider set of aesthetic priorities and values. To interrupt what you are saying in order to say something else implies that the second, digressive topic carries more narrative value, at this particular juncture, than whatever it was you were saying in the first place. Thus, in the *Posthumous Memoirs*, every swerve, every zigzag, every playful arabesque, gives us a clearer sense of our narrator's rather eccentric perspective. Throughout the novel, Brás consistently refuses to formulate an "appropriate" literary message, establishing in many places a bewildering disjuncture between story and discourse, between what is told and the way it is told. As any reader knows, it is standard practice to create an equivalence between the significance of the story and the quantity of the discourse. The narrative will therefore tend to accelerate when it reaches episodes of minor consequence, skimming over (if not completely eliding) those sequences that contribute nothing of value to the story we are being told. When it reaches significant passages, on the other hand—what Barthes would call plot nuclei—it decelerates, ensuring that these critical episodes are afforded a share of the overall discourse that is directly proportionate to their "hinge"

value. Consequently, the pacing of any given narrative, the story-discourse ratio, provides the reader with a key indicator of what carries genuine significance within the narrative and what constitutes mere filler—the inessential catalyzers clogging the space between these crucial episodes. In novelistic discourse, as Gérard Genette observes, "the contrast of tempo between detailed scene and summary almost always reflect[s] a contrast of content between dramatic and nondramatic, the strong periods of the action coinciding with the most intense moments of the narrative while the weak periods [are] summed up with large strokes and as if from a great distance." The classic readerly narrative thus typically alternates between "nondramatic summaries, functioning as waiting room and liaison, [and] dramatic scenes whose role in the action is decisive" (*Narrative Discourse* 109–10).[9] But of course, as we have already seen, the *Posthumous Memoirs* is not a classic readerly narrative. Here our narrator simply refuses to maintain an "appropriate" story-discourse ratio (in which the significance of the former would determine the quantity and pace of the latter), doing everything he can to introduce a note of disequilibrium into the message he is transmitting. Where we might reasonably expect to find information, we are instead confronted with silence, the line goes dead; and where we might expect to find silence, we are suddenly overwhelmed by a peculiar kind of volubility (what Barthes, in *S/Z*, refers to as "semantic prattle" [79]). This is another major source of the narrative's playful irreverence: its tendency to jam, or at least distort, the lines of communication between narrator and reader, violating many of the rules that typically govern the successful encoding/decoding of literary discourse. But here, too, I should add, Brás is careful not to go too far, doing just enough to ensure that the essential substance of his message can still be heard above the incidental noise, the static of irrelevance, and the sudden, disconcerting silences.

In a 1967 lecture entitled "Logic and Conversation," the linguist Paul Grice outlined a highly influential theory of conversational exchange that may be of some use to us here. According to Grice, every conversation is governed by a "general principle which participants will be expected . . . to observe." This "cooperative principle" dictates that the speaker should always make his or her "conversational contribution such as is required at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [he or she is] engaged." More specifically, Grice proposes that the cooperative principle can be divided into four separate categories of rules and subrules: (1) Quantity ("Make your contribution as informative as is required [for the current purposes of

the exchange]"; "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required"); (2) Quality ("Try to make your contribution one that is true"); (3) Relation ("Be relevant"); and (4) Manner ("Be perspicuous"; "Avoid obscurity of expression"; "Avoid ambiguity"; "Be brief [avoid unnecessary prolixity]"; "Be orderly") (26–27). Now, it goes without saying that literary discourse is to be carefully distinguished from conversational discourse. In literature, for instance, we may have a higher tolerance for obscurity and ambiguity than we do when it comes to nonliterary utterances. But as Mary Louise Pratt argues, the cooperative principle can still be usefully applied to "representative discourse whose purpose is not or not only informative," for "[i]n the case of literature, the assumption that the writer is trying to communicate *something* is obviously a crucial one" (153).[10] In the *Posthumous Memoirs*, then, Brás repeatedly disobeys those communicative rules that would also seem to govern conventional literary discourse, and by doing so, he manages to violate, simultaneously, both the rules of quantity (1) and the rule of "relation" or relevance (3). On the one hand, he gives us too much information about matters of little or no consequence, while on the other hand, he refuses to provide the information we need in order to understand fully those episodes that could be considered crucial to the story he is telling. Or to put it another way, like a curiously entertaining bore, he consistently "confuses" catalyzers and nuclei, privileging what doesn't matter, what contributes nothing of value to the narrative (or the conversation), over what does.

Accordingly, when a butterfly dies, we are given two pages of dense, detailed prose, yet when Brás's father dies, all we get is a cursory chapter of two sentences, entitled "Notes." And that's precisely what they are. "What looks like a simple inventory here," Brás concludes in the second of these two sentences, "are notes I'd taken for a sad and banal chapter that I won't write" (78). When our narrator's intended later dies, this crucial development is also treated as an irrelevance, as something undeserving of narrative space. Suddenly, out of the blue, as it were, we turn the page to find the following chapter, which I shall reproduce in its entirety:

HERE LIES
DONA EULÁLIA DAMASCENA DE BRITO
DEAD
AT THE AGE OF NINETEEN
PRAY FOR HER!

In the chapter after this one, Brás claims that "[t]he epitaph says everything. It's worth more than my telling you about Nhã-loló's illness, her death, the despair of the family, the burial. Just know that she died" (172). But does it really say everything? Could he not, *should* he not, tell us more? If this were a classic realist narrative, such a crucial episode—coming where it does, in the final pages of the novel—would most likely constitute the centerpiece around which the entire conclusion would be structured. It would be regarded as one of those "dramatic scenes whose role in the action is decisive" and would therefore be afforded an appropriate share of the overall discourse. But not here, not in this discursive universe. In the nineteenth-century novel, as Peter Brooks notes, "the deathbed scene repeatedly stands as a key moment of summing-up and transmission." Among the examples he cites are Goriot's "extended death agony" in *Old Goriot* and the summary of Emma's "passionate aspirations and their failure" during the administration of her last rites in *Madame Bovary*. Whatever their specific content, however, and "whatever their degree of tragic awareness or melodramatic enunciation, all such scenes offer the promise of a significant retrospect, a summing-up, the coming to completion of a fully predicated, and readable, sentence" (Brooks, *Reading* 95–96). In other words, the classic realist narrative recognizes in scenes of this kind a valuable opportunity to communicate—to achieve a heightened state of lucidity, legibility, and meaning. But not this narrative, not the *Posthumous Memoirs*. In fact, as I have suggested, it deliberately violates the rules governing effective (literary) communication: preferring butterflies and doodling to the more conventional deathbed scenes and last rites. So where we have been taught to anticipate eloquence and narrative density, we find instead a fatalistic shrug. "He was to die," Brás says of his father, "and he died" (77). End of story.

In order to achieve this effect, in order to disrupt the lines of communication in the novel, Brás employs a particularly wide range of evasive or "subtractive" strategies. At one end of the scale, he simply lapses into elliptical silence. Consider Chapter 55, for example, in which the dialogue has been replaced by actual ellipses, or Chapter 139, "How I Didn't Get to Be a Minister of State," whose brevity also makes it possible to quote in full:

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

Some things, Brás pronounces on the following page, "are better said in silence" (184). And then, slightly further along the scale, there are those things one can gesture toward paraliptically, without feeling the need to elaborate or fill in the gaps. There are numerous examples of this particular rhetorical strategy scattered throughout the narrative, once again suggesting that what we have here is a "novel in negative," which somehow manages to retain traces of all the rejected material it has cast aside in order to come into existence. After all, no narrative is big enough to say everything: "If I don't mention the caresses, kisses, admiration, and blessings it's because if I did the chapter would never end and I must end it" (Machado 23). In many instances, moreover, Brás teases us by explicitly acknowledging the value and interest of what he *isn't* saying. "God spare me the narration of Quincas Borba's story," he declares at one point, "which I listened to in its entirety on that sad occasion, a long, complicated yet interesting story. And since I won't be telling the story, I'll also dispense with describing his person, quite different from the one that had appeared to me on the Passeio Público" (154). Elsewhere, he recalls a period of time that was "the most brilliant phase of [his] life" but for some reason declines to say anything more on the subject: "I shall be silent, I shan't say anything, I won't talk about my service, what I did for the poor and the infirm, or the recompense I received, nothing, I shall say absolutely nothing" (200). However, the most glaring omission of all comes on the very first page of the novel, when he refuses to discuss what really matters, an issue that is central to our understanding of everything that follows: his precise ontological status in the "other world" and the process by which the narrative itself was composed. "I shall not recount," he says, "the extraordinary process through which I undertook the composition of these memoirs, put together here in the other world. It would have been interesting but excessively long" (5). Finally, still further along the scale, Brás chooses to describe certain episodes or passages of time with such brevity, such disregard for his responsibilities as a narrator, that their claim to significance and space is almost entirely invalidated. In Chapter 13, for instance, he covers eight years (1814–22) in a little over a page, while elsewhere he compresses his education in Portugal into half a page (46) and summarizes his subsequent "years of wandering" (49) around Europe in two (rather unsatisfying) sentences.[11]

Of course, this is also a form of teasing—a playful *brincadeira* in which we are offered tantalizing glimpses of what lies just beyond the boundaries of the narrative we have before us.[12] Brás *could* tell us how he came to write his posthumous memoirs, he *could* describe

"the most brilliant phase of [his] life," but he just doesn't feel like it. Not today, at least. Today he would rather describe dying butterflies and imaginary bibliomaniacs. By creating these radical story-discourse discrepancies, then, by neglecting plot nuclei and clogging the narrative with inessential catalyzers, Brás consistently violates the rules associated with Grice's cooperative principle. Yet here, too, he is careful not to go too far, and he is always comfortably aware of the relative impunity we tend to afford literary discourse under such circumstances. He knows that the reader will do everything he or she can to maintain the assumption that the discourse itself is cooperating even if *he* isn't. So when we encounter a dialogue comprised of nothing but ellipses, say, or a chapter made up of three dotted lines, we rarely assume that such a failure to observe the "rules" is due to ignorance, incompetence, or genuine uncooperativeness. On the contrary, because we are reading a literary narrative, we believe that this utterance must in some way contribute to the "accepted purpose or direction of the [literary] exchange in which [we are] engaged" (Grice 26). In other words, although at one level Brás is clearly violating the rules governing conventional literary discourse, at the level of what is *implied* by such a violation (Grice refers to this secondary level of meaning as "implicature" [24]) we are still confident that the discourse itself is acting in accordance with the cooperative principle. And this is what quite clearly distinguishes literary discourse from conversational discourse: its ability to recuperate, to somehow "functionalize," its own lapses in legibility and significance.[13] If something doesn't make sense at the literal level of a narrative, if it seems to violate the cooperative principle or contribute nothing of value to the discourse, it can still be recuperated by the narrative's own incessant production of meaning—it can still be resolved, that is to say, by implicature. As Pratt writes,

> [I]t is because we know the CP [cooperative principle] to be hyperprotected in the literary speech situation that we can freely and joyfully jeopardize it or even cancel it there and expose ourselves to the chaotic consequences. Authors can mimetically represent all Grice's kinds of nonfulfillment including those kinds which threaten the CP *because* the literary speech situation is nearly immune to cases in which the CP is genuinely in danger. Our knowledge that the CP is hyperprotected in works of literature acts as a guarantee that, should the fictional speaker of the work break the rules and thereby jeopardize the CP, the jeopardy is almost certainly only mimetic. Ultimately, the CP can be restored by implicature. Given such a guarantee, the Audience is free to confront,

> explore, and interpret the communicative breakdown and to enjoy the display of the forbidden. It is this freedom that the "deviant" novels I have been discussing exploit. The game they play is not, or not only, the tellability game of natural narrative but also this other game, which I will call *verbal jeopardy*. (215)

So here, too, Brás is playing a game with us, but a game that is insulated from any serious consequences by its "literariness." When he begins to doodle on the very page we are trying to read, for instance, or suddenly focuses his attention on a dying butterfly, we are confident that he is doing so for a reason—even if that reason is only to reinforce, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the irresponsible, loiterly qualities of his own narrative style. It is this understanding that ultimately gives him the license to do what he does throughout the *Posthumous Memoirs*: to play an ongoing game of "verbal jeopardy" with the discursive imperatives of legibility and meaning. Over the course of the novel, Brás explores what is surely "one of the most problematic and threatening experiences of all, the collapse of communication itself" (Pratt 221). Yet the hyperprotected quality of literary discourse enables him to do so without entirely jamming the lines of communication on which the narrative's survival depends. According to Jurij Lotman, any communication channel (whether it be a telephone line or "the centuries that lie between us and Shakespeare") contains "noise which consumes information," and "[i]f the level of noise is equal to the level of information the message will be zero" (75). But Brás never allows things to go that far. Once more, he always knows just when to reinstate legibility and meaning, just when to "cooperate," and just when to bring the teasing to an end.

IV

Much of what I have been describing here—the playful irreverence, the joking and teasing, the *brincadeiras*—could be said to fall under the category of the carnivalesque.[14] And needless to say, this description is particularly appropriate for a novel set in Rio de Janeiro, where pre-Lenten festivities have been held since 1723. At first these were based on the *entrudo*, the traditional Iberian carnival activity involving practical jokes and waterplay. By the 1840s, however, public dancing had become an important part of the festivities, and during the 1850s, a second carnival activity, parading, was initiated. Over the following decades, different styles of dancing and parading proliferated, and by 1900, the carnival as we know it today had begun to take shape:

> At the turn of the century, Rio's downtown streets were choked with crowds—and with *cordões* [groups of dancers] that crisscrossed their way through them—and the sound of carnival had become an unremitting polyrhythmic roar. *Sujos* ("dirty ones"), poor males whose costumes consisted (and still consist) mostly of an outlandish raggedness or garishness, were already on the scene . . . and the newspapers warned "families" (meaning middle-class people) to take all precautions if they wished to see the festivities in the main downtown street, Ruo do Ouvidor. The authorities were doing their best, according to *O Journal do Brazil*, but who could police that crowd? . . . Rio's *Gazeta de Notícias* became a particularly energetic booster of [the] carnival, printing large front-page illustrations of the festival, some of which clearly indicate the close contact in street crowds among people of different skin colour, as well as the participation of women in the parading. (Chasteen 42)

Given its rapidly growing significance during the late nineteenth century, it is curious that Machado should have failed to mention the carnival even once in a novel otherwise so deeply grounded in the sociocultural specificities of its setting. But despite this omission, the "unremitting polyrhythmic roar" of the carnival still manages to find its way into the *Posthumous Memoirs*, infiltrating the very structure of the narrative and profoundly influencing its governing aesthetic principles.

At a general level, these influences are clear. For a start, the carnival in Rio is known for its social heterogeneity and dehierarchizing tendencies. According to the anthropologist Roberto DaMatta, it "brings together a little of everything," combining "various symbolic subuniverses of Brazilian society" (*Carnivals* 39). The world of the carnival is a "world of conjunction, license, and joking," and those who enter this world are "not related by a hierarchical principle but by sympathy and by an understanding resulting from the truce that suspends the social rules of the plausible world, the everyday universe" (42). This, of course, perfectly describes the *Posthumous Memoirs*, for here, too, we find a carnivalesque mingling of discourse-types, registers, and styles—and a refusal to respect any of the hierarchies ordinarily imposed by literary realism. Suddenly the (generic) rules of the plausible world, the everyday universe, are suspended, and as they say of the carnival in Rio, "anything goes" (*vale tudo*). We are allowed to have ellipses instead of dialogue, dotted lines instead of chapters, and doodling instead of discourse. Like the everyday world, the typical realist narrative is a space "demarcated by concentric circles of power, influence, and prestige" (DaMatta, "Interpretation" 168). But the *Posthumous Memoirs* simply refuses to recognize these readerly values,

these spatial hierarchies, allowing the periphery of the narrative—the butterflies and bibliomaniacs—to displace the center at every conceivable opportunity. And this is what gives the novel its playful quality, too, transforming it into a carnivalesque *brincadeira*, a game whose central objective is to defy convention and deflate prestige.

Many of the more specific aesthetic principles we have addressed over the course of this chapter also fall under the category of the carnivalesque. These would include, for instance, the narrative's digressive quality—its tendency to wander from the straight line, exploring everything but the story it "should" be telling—as well as its loiterly aversion to discipline, order, and industry. As the anthropologist Victor Turner writes, the carnival in Rio is in fact "the denizen of a place which is no place, and a time which is no time," for the "squares, avenues, and streets of the city become, at carnival, the reverse of their daily selves. Instead of being the sites of offices and the conduits of purposive traffic, they are sealed off from traffic, and the millions who throng them on foot drift idly wherever they please, no longer propelled by the urges of 'getting and spending' in particular places."[15] What we are seeing here, he argues, is "society in its subjunctive mood . . . its mood of feeling, willing and desiring, its mood of fantasizing, its playful mood; not its indicative mood, where it tries to apply reason to human action and systematize the relationship between ends and means in industry and bureaucracy" ("*Carnaval*" 123). For Turner, then, cultural practices, like verbs, would seem to have two "moods": subjunctive and indicative. In ordinary daily life, the indicative dominates, suggesting, as it does grammatically, that "the denoted act or condition is an objective fact" ("Body" 169). But during the four days of Carnival, everything changes. Suddenly a mood of "public subjunctivity" emerges, taboos are lifted, the reality principle is suspended, and all sociocultural activity takes place within a field of "supposition, desire, hypothesis, [and] possibility" ("Rokujo's Jealousy" 101–2). As suggested above, a similar kind of attitude permeates the *Posthumous Memoirs.* The novel is allowed to "drift idly" wherever it pleases, no longer propelled by the urge to acquire meaning and coherence through closure—no longer driven by teleology and the lure of the end, that place of "getting and spending" where the capital accrued over the course of the narrative can be used to "purchase" full and final predication of meaning. Instead, the narrative lapses into the subjunctive mood, gesturing toward all the other ways of moving forward, all the other possibilities it inadvertently generates, and all the alternative plot lines it necessarily eclipses. Here, too, the mood is one of "supposition, desire, hypothesis, [and]

possibility." For a while at least, in places, the indicative values of realism (*this* is the way it was, *this* is what happened) are suspended, and the narrative is allowed to "[wander] off in sweet lazy liberty" (Kundera, *Art* 162), enacting, and clearly enjoying, its own carnivalesque fantasies. During such episodes, as we have seen, the discourse is able to reflect critically on the line from which it has deviated, the position from which it has departed, but also, significantly, on the act of departure itself. How are these digressive swerves possible in the first place? By what impulses are they motivated? How can they be justified—aesthetically, generically, or even ethically? According to Turner, this kind of scrutiny is also a typical feature of carnival activity, for it, too, encourages a certain self-consciousness regarding the "social structures and processes of the time" ("*Carnaval*" 124). During Carnival, he notes, society itself becomes objectified and defamiliarized, the subject of "metasocial" commentary: "[P]eople are allowed to think about how they think, about the terms in which they conduct their thinking, or to feel about how they feel in daily life." Here, in this privileged space where anything goes, "the code rules are themselves the referent of the knowing; the knowledge propositions themselves are the object of knowledge" ("Rokujo's Jealousy" 102).

I have said more than once now that anything goes during Carnival, but this isn't entirely true. Like any kind of transgressive act, the carnival is defined, at a certain level, by the very rules it violates and the very structure it seeks to disrupt. For one thing, the joyful spontaneity of Carnival is only possible if there has been a full year of "organizing, plotting, and planning behind the scenes" (Turner, "*Carnaval*" 130). It is also important to remember that the four days of Carnival are followed by forty days of fasting and penance (Lent), demonstrating yet again that indulgence, irreverence, and irresponsibility are ultimately indissociable from their opposites. And finally, the festivities themselves are clearly governed by certain rules, certain formalities, that cannot be violated or disregarded. The range of acceptable social behavior may be expanded during Carnival, but there are still certain "real-world" boundaries that must be respected. After all, as Daniel Touro Linger quite rightly observes, no one would confuse "the uniformed police with costumed foliões [revelers]"—a distinction that is further underscored by the "permanent ban on disguises that imitate military or clerical dress" (76). So yes, anything goes during Carnival, but only conditionally, only within certain clearly prescribed parameters. One must always know how far to go and where to draw the line. And this is what makes Carnival so fascinating from a semiotic perspective: the fact that it doesn't enact genuine social disorder

but merely *signifies* it, offering us a carefully framed citation of the real thing. Simply put, for a short period of time every year, Carnival creates "a credible simulacrum of the license that 'Anything goes!' promises" (Linger 77); and that, as I have been arguing, is also a good description of what the *Posthumous Memoirs* does.[16] It challenges many of the aesthetic principles governing traditional realist discourse but never completely destroys the "referential illusion" (Barthes, "Reality" 148) on which these principles are based. It teases the reader with the possibility of complete discursive collapse but always manages to do what is necessary to keep the story going. And it violates many of the rules associated with Grice's cooperative principle, disrupting and in places even jamming the lines of communication, but always knows just when to reinstate legibility and meaning.

In this regard, one could plausibly compare our narrator to that classic carnivalesque figure, the *malandro* (or rogue). A *malandro* typically occupies the periphery of society, refusing to conform to "the formal rules that govern the social [or in this case, literary] structure" (DaMatta, *Carnivals* 209). Instead, they assume a kind of parasitic role, loitering in public places, malingering, making a nuisance of themselves, refusing to take our everyday routines seriously, disdaining productive or purposeful activity, bothering "respectable" people and ridiculing their bourgeois values (industry, discipline, propriety, etc.). Of course, every society has its marginal figures, but the *malandro* is a social category of particular significance in Brazil, and Carnival is the one time of year when its loiterly values are allowed to take precedence. In Rio, as DaMatta writes,

> the symbol of Carnival is the *malandro*, the rogue who is almost always out of place. In fact, the *malandro* does not fit either inside or outside the order. He lives in the interstices between order and disorder, using both and finding sustenance from those who are inside the normal, structured world and those who are not . . . Since his world is a world of interstitiality and ambiguity, it is one where reality can always be interpreted and ordered by many different codes . . . These relativizations always tend to link up with song, dance, and joyous merriment, a realm left open for the [*malandro*] and carefully codified by Carnival. (*Carnivals* 131–32)

The crucial point here is that the *malandro* is both a part of Brazilian society and emphatically *not* a part of it. He occupies the "interstices between order and disorder," crossing and recrossing the line that separates conventional society from everything it anathematizes. And

this, too, as we have seen, is a key characteristic of the *Posthumous Memoirs*. Like any good *malandro*, Brás Cubas demonstrates a profound ambivalence regarding the formal rules he violates. On the one hand, he refuses to take such rules seriously, doing everything he can to undermine their validity and limit their sphere of influence. But on the other hand, he also recognizes those basic structural necessities that make such a critique possible in the first place, those generic imperatives and aesthetic principles from which his narrative necessarily derives its "sustenance." Like any good *malandro*, that is to say, Brás teasingly explores the boundaries separating order from disorder, meaning from nonmeaning, discursive legibility from mere static; and in so doing, he makes it possible for us to believe—if only for two hundred pages—that in this protected space, this zone of playful irresponsibility, anything really does go.

Chapter 3

Implausibility
Voltaire's *Candide*

I

The substance of tragedy, the raw material of the tragic, is rarely difficult to identify or describe. Most of us would agree with Arthur Schopenhauer that tragedy focuses our attention on the "terrible side of life"—"[t]he unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent" (252–54). But does such dire subject matter necessarily make a narrative tragic? Over the course of *Candide* (1759), Voltaire's classic *conte philosophique*, the reader is presented with a litany of terrible calamities and "abominable things" (Voltaire 62), the vast majority of which appear to be inflicted on the most innocent and undeserving of its characters. Young girls are "raped until [they can] be raped no more" (10), sold into captivity, infected with the plague, disemboweled by soldiers, and partially cannibalized by starving janissaries. Old men are horribly disfigured by syphilis, hanged by the Inquisition, prematurely dissected, forced to serve as galley slaves, and subjected to a routine "twenty lashes a day" (88). Yet somehow, despite all this, Voltaire's novel demonstrates none of the qualities we would typically associate with the tragic (gravity, profundity, dignity, etc.). Instead, with a kind of perverse glee, it forces these limit cases of human suffering to occupy the generic coordinates normally reserved for comedy or farce. At a certain level, of course, this is still tragedy; but it is tragedy without weight, without substance, tragedy stripped of its tragic qualities. Reading *Candide*, I am always reminded of Jean-Luc Godard's

response when asked why his film *Pierrot le Fou* displayed so much blood onscreen. "It's not blood," he replied. "[I]t's red" (qtd. in Bertelsen and Murphie 138). And as we shall see, the same thing could be said of Voltaire's novel, for here, too, we are offered a semiotic rather than a mimetic construction of suffering, an overabundance of tragic signifiers but no real tragedy—the color red but no blood.

Most narratives tend to demonstrate a certain affinity between story and discourse, between what is told and the way it is told. But this is not the case in *Candide*. Here, Voltaire establishes a profound disparity between the (tragic) story and the (comic) discourse, and it is this sensibility dissonance that ultimately diminishes our capacity to experience strong empathetic feeling for the characters he creates. In what follows, I shall be subjecting this disparity to sustained scrutiny and attempting to gain a better understanding of just how Voltaire has managed to produce, in *Candide*, a "comic analogue" of the tragic—thus removing the affective weight from his subject matter and replacing it with a sense of "exhilarating and primitive vitality" (Calvino, "*Candide*" 103). More specifically, I would like to suggest that he achieves this effect in the following five ways: (1) by "anecdotalizing" misfortune; (2) by depriving his characters of their plausibility as human beings; (3) by condensing the novel's tragic episodes into mere summaries of suffering; (4) by employing a narrative velocity more commonly associated with farce; and (5) by refusing to accept that suffering carries any meaning beyond the immediate, by reducing it to pure surface, pure phenomenality, and nothing else. This last point, I believe, can be related to Voltaire's wider satirical project in *Candide*—the derision he reserves for any attempt to impose doctrinal meaning on the unyielding contingencies that govern our lives—for once suffering is consigned to the same plane of insignificance as everything else in the narrative, it very quickly loses its tragic value, its capacity to edify, purify, and elevate. Together these strategies bring about the attenuation of the novel's tragic dimension, its comprehensive "lightening," and this in turn relieves the characters of their status as tragic figures. Instead of maintaining a secure place within a clearly delineated generic structure, they are forced to occupy the interstices between the tragic and the comic, between story and discourse, between significance and absurdity. In this regard, one might say, they are like refugees from a comedy who have been made to contend, despite their natural (generic) proclivities, with the oppositional forces of tragedy. And in places, moreover, they actually seem to have some intimation of the generic incongruity of their discursive universe; they seem to be aware of the disparity between the tragic nature

of their lives and the farcical quality of the discourse that has brought them into being. This disjuncture deprives the characters of the grandeur of true tragic heroes, yet at the same time it gives them an energy and effervescence that at least partially compensates for their diminished dignity. They may suffer terrible fates, but they do so with an exuberance that ultimately serves to energize the novel itself—making *Candide*, this strange narrative they are obliged to occupy, the most joyful, the most amusing, the most *untragic* of tragedies.

II

In an often-cited passage from the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude . . . through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (10). As suggested, however, Voltaire's novel provokes neither of these two canonical responses to tragedy. Like the characters themselves, we are denied access to the grandeur and profundity of the tragic experience. Where we might have expected the narrative to generate these "serious" Aristotelian feelings, all we encounter are their less prestigious, less dignified, comic analogues: fear and pity in the diminutive. I have derived this notion of the comic analogue from a fascinating reading of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* by R. S. Crane. In this essay, Crane observes that the novel's eponymous hero is "made to undergo an almost continuous series of distressing indignities," yet we as readers feel only the "mildest degree" of fear and pity in the face of such suffering. Instead, the narrative inspires in us "a general feeling of confidence that matters are not really as serious as they appear." And so it proves to be. Fielding's novel may generate "much pain and inner suffering for [its] hero," it may subject him to numerous "troubles and distresses," but at no point do we genuinely fear for Tom's well-being or pity him for the many difficulties he endures. "It is generally the case," Crane writes, "that whatever tends to minimize our fear in a plot that involves threats of undeserved misfortune for the sympathetic characters tends also to minimize our pity when the misfortune occurs and likewise our indignation against the doers of the evil" (125–26). For Crane, this attenuation of fear, pity, and indignation is

> a necessary condition of the peculiar comic pleasure which is the form of the plot in *Tom Jones* . . . We look forward to the probable consequences of [Tom's] indiscretions, therefore, with a certain anticipatory reluctance and apprehension—a kind of faint alarm which is the *comic analogue of*

> *fear* . . . And yet the expectation is never really painful in any positive degree, and it is kept from becoming so by our counter-expectation . . . that, however acute may be Tom's consequent sufferings, his mistakes will not issue in any permanent frustration of our wishes for his good . . . If the anticipatory emotion is a mild shudder of apprehension, the climactic emotion—the *comic analogue of pity*—is a kind of friendly mirth at his expense ("poor Tom," we say to ourselves), which easily modulates, in the happy denouement, into unsentimental rejoicing at his not entirely deserved good fortune. (128–29; italics added)

In *Candide*, I would like to argue, a similar process takes place. By deliberately reducing the tragic dimension of his narrative, Voltaire manages to inspire in the reader nothing more profound or painful than the comic analogues of fear and pity. We may "fear" for Candide's safety when he is brought before the Inquisition and then "pity" him when he is duly flogged, but in neither case do we experience anything even remotely resembling the real thing, and (perhaps more importantly) we are always aware of the abbreviated nature of these feelings, their essential superficiality and insignificance. What we have before us, in other words, might best be described as tragedy-lite—or, to paraphrase Pauline Kael, comic-strip tragedy.[1] For although Voltaire has done everything he can to remove the tragic substance of his narrative, we are still able to detect the two-dimensional images, the vivid monochromatic shapes and finely traced outlines, he has left behind. In the novel's opening pages, Candide, the illegitimate nephew of a German aristocrat, is cast out of the "most beautiful and delightful of possible castles" (5) for kissing his young cousin Cunégonde. As he wanders the world from Lisbon to Buenos Aires, Venice to Constantinople, he and his acquaintances are subjected to a series of terrible misfortunes, yet all the while our hero clings tenaciously to the notion that "everything is linked in a chain of necessity, and arranged for the best" (8–9). Eventually he is reunited with Cunégonde, who in the meantime has become "fearfully ugly" (83), and together with the rest of his long-suffering circle, they settle down to a life of quiet domesticity on the shores of the Bosphorus. The novel concludes, famously, with the injunction that "we must cultivate our garden," but this somewhat banal epiphany ("stupid," Flaubert says, "like life itself" [qtd. in Culler, *Flaubert* 175]) strikes the reader as small recompense indeed for the "dreadful chain of calamities" (Voltaire 83) that has made it possible. As I shall argue in Chapter 4, it is primarily through endings, both anticipated and realized, that we seek to understand beginnings and middles. The conclusion of a

(readerly) narrative traditionally provides a full and final predication of meaning—bestowing retrospective significance on everything that has gone before, resolving many of the hermeneutic and proairetic sequences that have been initiated over the course of the novel, and asserting, finally, the value of everything we have read. But in *Candide* this is all we get: a tragedy without the redeeming qualities of the tragic, suffering without sorrow, and a moral that really serves as no moral at all.

So precisely how does Voltaire manage to remove the weight from such tragic subject matter? How does he succeed in making comedy out of these extremes of human suffering? The short answer is that he does so by establishing, in Roland Barthes's words, a radical disparity between "the pessimism of [the novel's] substance and the jig of [its] form" ("Last Happy" 89). This disparity might usefully be compared to the cinematic technique of anempathetic sound, where the soundtrack of a film, whether intradiegetic or extradiegetic, "seems to exhibit conspicuous indifference to what is going on in the film's plot" (Chion 221). In order to understand the overall sense of lightness the novel generates, however, it is necessary to be more specific about the nature of this disparity and to offer a clearer picture of just how this anempathetic quality has been achieved.

One of the more effective ways in which Voltaire diminishes the tragic mood in *Candide* is by anecdotalizing his characters' misfortunes. Rather than witnessing many of these "tragic" episodes for ourselves, we are forced to rely on secondhand, anecdotal sources—a tendency that gives the narrative a strong sense of belatedness, as though it never quite makes it to the "scene" of its own story on time (having to settle, instead, for the summaries of those who *were* there when it mattered). After Candide leaves the castle in the novel's opening pages, for example, it is overrun by a horde of Bulgar soldiers; however, Voltaire chooses not to represent this scene directly, as to do so would leave the narrative itself in danger of being overrun by the forces of the tragic. Instead, like Candide, we first hear of it some time later from the "great philosopher" (84), Doctor Pangloss. Cunégonde, we are told, "was disembowelled by Bulgar soldiers, after being raped until she could be raped no more; they smashed in the noble Baron's skull as he tried to protect her; [and] the Baroness was chopped to bits." Cunégonde's brother "received exactly the same treatment as his sister," and the castle itself was completely destroyed, yet "we had our revenge," Pangloss concludes happily, "for the Abars have done the very same to the neighbouring estate of a Bulgar lord" (10).[2] As it turns out, of course, Cunégonde is alive and well, and

when Candide is briefly reunited with her in Portugal, she offers her own account of this atrocity. The Bulgars, she says, “cut the throats of my father and brother, and chopped my mother to pieces. A huge Bulgar . . . seeing that I had fainted at the sight of all this, [then] set about raping me.” According to Cunégonde, this outrage eventually brought her to her senses: “I screamed, I struggled, I bit, I scratched, not realizing that what was taking place in my father’s castle was the form on such occasions; the brute stabbed me in my left side, where I still carry the scar” (19). But this version of what happened isn’t entirely accurate, either. Cunégonde’s brother, we later learn, also survived the assault on the castle, and when Candide runs into him in Paraguay, where he has become a commanding officer in the Jesuit army, he, too, has a story to tell. “Never while I live,” he says, “shall I forget the dreadful day when I saw my mother and father killed, and my sister raped” (37). By anecdotalizing suffering in this way, Voltaire relegates it to the periphery of the novel so that it is always (or almost always) situated beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the narrative itself. We are not privy to the immediate reality of these tragedies; they do not unfold gradually before our eyes. We only come to hear of them some time later through intermediaries such as Cunégonde or her brother, who do their best to fill us in on everything we have missed, everything that has taken place in our absence. After all, there are simply too many atrocities occurring in too many different places at once for the narrative to cover every last incident adequately. While someone is being flogged here, under our gaze, other characters are being raped, tortured, mutilated, or murdered elsewhere; and no matter how comprehensive a narrative may be, it cannot possibly hope to compete with such ubiquitous suffering.

The distinction I am making in this instance is really between scene and summary, between mimetic representation and diegetic “reportage.” During the eighteenth century, there was a tendency to privilege the latter, to focus primarily on the *telling* of the story, and it was only with the rise of realism in the early nineteenth century that novelistic discourse came to be structured around a series of carefully delineated scenes. In *The Curtain*, Milan Kundera traces this development using the examples of Fielding and Balzac:

> When they were reading Fielding, his readers became *auditors* fascinated by a brilliant man who held them breathless with what he was telling. Balzac, some eighty years later, turned his readers into *spectators* watching a screen . . . on which his novelist’s magic made them see scenes they could not tear their eyes away from. Fielding was not inventing impossible or

> unbelievable stories; yet the plausibility of what he was recounting was the least of his concerns; he wanted to dazzle his audience not by the illusion of reality but by the enchantment of his storymaking, of his unexpected observations, of the surprising situations he created. But later, when the novel's magic came to lie in the visual and auditory evocation of scenes, *plausibility became the supreme rule*, the condition *sine qua non* for the reader to believe in what he was seeing. (13)

Of course, there are still "scenes" in *Candide*, but much of the novel's tragic material comes to us by way of diegetic or anecdotal discourse. We are transformed into auditors rather than spectators, and as Kundera observes, this inevitably diminishes the plausibility of such doubly mediated sequences. At the most basic narratological level, then, Voltaire manages to distance us from the tragic substance of the story he is telling, carefully limiting the immersive capabilities of the discourse and thus inhibiting our capacity to respond with an "appropriate" degree of empathetic feeling to the representation of human suffering. We hear about Cunégonde's rape—indeed, we hear about it at least three or four times—but as we are not allowed to witness this episode directly, it never quite rises above the level of hearsay, of *narrative*: it never quite manages to shake off its discursive qualities and assume full ontological plausibility.

In this respect, as I have indicated, the construction of character in *Candide* is also of some significance. One of the crucial ways in which Voltaire manages to exclude the tragic from his narrative is by reducing his characters' plausibility as human beings. Like Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the novel features a large cast of two-dimensional caricatures—characters who have been denied interiority, who possess a single defining quality (optimism, say, or misanthropy), and who fail to develop in any significant way over the course of the narrative despite the litany of disasters they are made to endure. Suffering, for Voltaire, is neither ennobling nor enlightening, and it does nothing to move his characters any closer to a state of profundity. As was also the case in Capote's novel, I might add, the characters in *Candide* have no real interest in attaining three-dimensionality. On the contrary, they cling defiantly to their cardboard qualities, refusing to learn anything from this "carousel-round of disasters" (Calvino, "*Candide*" 105), refusing to be "deepened" by their experiences. And to be stripped of the capacity for introspection in this way, to be incapable of real feeling, is also to be relieved of the capacity for genuine human suffering. Consider Pangloss, for instance. At the beginning of the novel, he declares, "[S]ince everything is made to serve an end,

everything is necessarily for the best of ends" (4); and as it concludes, he says to Candide: "All events form a chain in this, the best of all possible worlds. After all, had you not been expelled from a beautiful castle with great kicks to the behind for the love of Mademoiselle Cunégonde, and had you not been turned over to the Inquisition, and had you not roamed America on foot, and had you not run the Baron through with a fine thrust of your sword, and had you not lost all your sheep from the good land of Eldorado, you would not be sitting here now eating candied citron and pistachios" (93–94). Despite everything that has happened to him, then, despite all the evidence that would seem to contradict such a philosophy, Pangloss simply refuses to abandon his position of optimistic theodicy. "Now tell us this, my dear Pangloss," Candide inquires elsewhere. "While you were being hanged, and dissected, and beaten, and made to row in a galley, did you continue to believe that all was for the best?" The good doctor, needless to say, replies in the affirmative. "I hold firmly to my original views," he declares. "I am a philosopher after all: it would not do for me to recant, given that Leibniz is incapable of error, and that pre-established harmony is moreover the finest thing in the world" (88).

It is perhaps worth mentioning at this point that such consistency is only possible because Pangloss has been allowed to occupy a zone of safety within the narrative, emerging relatively unscathed from every one of the aforementioned calamities. This indestructibility, however, is something only the novel's principle characters seem to enjoy; the rest of humanity isn't quite so lucky. In fact, it is one of the peculiarities of *Candide* that the closer a character comes to the foreground of the novel (where this zone of safety would appear to be located), the less "real," the less ontologically convincing, he or she becomes. In the background, we discover "old men riddled with wounds or lead shot look[ing] on as their wives [lie] dying" and "young girls in their last agonies, disembowelled after having satisfied the natural urges of various heroes" (8), but nothing this real ever seems to take place in the foreground. Instead, we find characters whose indestructibility diminishes still further their claim to plausibility, while also reassuring the reader that any misfortunes they do suffer will be without enduring consequences. They may be hanged or raped or disemboweled, but the discourse will never allow them to die, for they must be kept alive, and made to suffer again, in order to support the polemical argument that Voltaire is putting forward here. As soon as they die, the narrative finishes and the argument concludes, making their survival a matter of both structural and rhetorical necessity. And once

this becomes clear, we as readers begin to share something of the indifference (or immunity) to suffering that the characters themselves so frequently display. We begin to understand that these characters are protected by the discourse's own instinct for preservation—by the "double logic" that gives it precedence, where necessary, over the story it has been charged with telling.[3]

As I have suggested, another way in which Voltaire manages to reduce the novel's tragic dimension is by compressing all this suffering into the smallest possible space: in my edition, a mere 94 pages. In order to do so, he has no choice but to offer the reader a greatly condensed précis of each "tragedy," and this in turn generates a narrative velocity more appropriate to farce. Tragedy almost always proceeds at a stately pace, giving the reader all the time in the world to contemplate what Friedrich Nietzsche called "the horror and absurdity of existence" (*Birth* 40). But not in this case. One of *Candide*'s central incongruities, and the source of much of its humor, is the rapidity, the "compressed energy" (Voltaire 76), with which it narrates a succession of terrible misfortunes. Indeed, more often than not, the narrative seems to accelerate at the first sign of suffering—passing as quickly as possible over anything that, under normal circumstances, might elicit an empathetic response.[4] In Chapter 17, for instance, when Candide and Cacambo make the long journey to Cayenne, the discourse immediately dissolves from scene into summary, demonstrating once more its profound aversion to the minutiae of suffering. "Getting to Cayenne was by no means easy," we are told. "[T]hey knew roughly which direction to take, but at every turn there were terrible obstacles in the shape of mountains, rivers, precipices, brigands and savages. Their horses died of fatigue; their provisions ran out; they survived for an entire month on wild fruits, and eventually found themselves by a small river fringed with coconut trees, which kept them alive and sustained their hopes" (42–43). This sudden acceleration creates a radical disparity between story time and discourse time. Where we might expect to find one or more scenes (establishing a temporal equivalence between the story and its telling), we instead find a summary, one that significantly increases the velocity of the discourse.[5] As Gérard Genette notes, the tempo of a summary can vary widely, covering "the entire range between scene and ellipsis" (*Narrative Discourse* 94), but in the case of *Candide*, Voltaire's summaries almost always occupy the upper end of the scale, just short of complete elision. Moreover, it is not unusual for such increases in tempo to be doubled or even tripled at significant junctures in the narrative. In Chapter 8, for example, we are given Cunégonde's story, and in the first telling

it takes little more than two pages to relate her litany of misfortunes. She then goes on to summarize the story she has just narrated, and in this second version her experiences are further compressed into a single sentence of just ten lines (21). The same doubling of velocity takes place halfway through the old woman's story in Chapter 12, and then, later in the novel, it is subject to even greater acceleration when she offers the reader yet another miscellany of suffering. "I should like to know," she says, "which is worse: to be raped a hundred times by negro pirates, and have a buttock cut off, and run the gauntlet of the Bulgars, and be flogged and hanged in an *auto-da-fé*, and be dissected, and have to row in a galley—in short, to undergo all the miseries we have each of us suffered—or simply to sit [around] and do nothing?" (90–91). Here, in fact, almost the entire novel has been summarized for us in a single sentence, and it is this breathless tempo, this doubling and redoubling of narrative velocity, that so effectively diminishes our sense of the tragic.[6] But why should that be the case? Why should the novel's pace inspire in us nothing more than a feeling of "exhilarating and primitive vitality"? Why should speed, here as elsewhere, be the enemy of tragedy?

For one thing, the rapid pace of the novel's "tragic" episodes serves to undermine their status within the hierarchy of the narrative as a whole. As we saw in Chapter 2, it is standard novelistic practice to create an equivalence between the quantity of the discourse and the significance of the story. So the discourse will tend to accelerate when it comes to insignificant episodes (mere filler) and decelerate when it encounters sequences that contribute something of genuine value to the narrative (what we have referred to as plot nuclei). The rhythm of literary discourse, in other words, is typically defined by the alternation of nondramatic summaries and "dramatic scenes whose role in the action is decisive" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 110), and these processes of acceleration and deceleration in turn serve as key indicators of an episode's relative significance within a narrative. In *Candide*, however, this formula is quite clearly inverted. The passages that would seem to be most powerful dramatically—the Bulgar soldier's assault on Cunégonde, the old woman's abduction by Barbary pirates, even Pangloss's farcical hanging—are all passed over with great rapidity, while the less dramatic scenes are allowed to unfold at a comparatively leisurely pace: the Marquise de Parolignac's gossipy soirée, for instance, or Candide's later encounter with Signor Pococuranté in Venice. By reducing the novel's tragic scenes to the status of "mere" summaries, by relieving them of their prestige in this way, Voltaire manages to consign them to the fringes of the discourse,

where they no longer pose any real threat to its dominant structure of (antitragic) feeling. Rather than constituting the core of the narrative, they become secondary notations whose main purpose is to fill the silence between scenes with the background noise, the inescapable elevator music, of human suffering.

Such rapidity also contributes to the overall implausibility of the characters' misfortunes; there are simply too many of these disasters and they take place far too frequently for us to believe fully in what we are seeing (or more often hearing). Because of the manic speed with which it is narrated, the novel's "dreadful chain of calamities" (Voltaire 83) very quickly assumes a hyperbolic quality, making it practically impossible to suspend disbelief. Curiously enough, Peter Brooks has identified a similar tendency in Balzac, whose "acceleration of peripety [and] hyperbolic compression of time" also diminishes the plausibility of his narratives. In works such as *Lost Illusions*, Brooks argues, the narrative "characteristically reaches a nodal point where it 'takes off,' speeds up, elaborates beyond the ordinary, *irrealizes its material*. The language becomes charged and highly colored; time is foreshortened; experience becomes more intensely extreme" (*Melodramatic* 126; italics added). In *Candide* we see the same thing, and here, too, this sudden acceleration, this "hyperbolic compression of time," serves to irrealize the novel's subject matter, elaborating it far beyond the ordinary. Can someone really be reduced to poverty and slavery, raped, infected with the plague, and forced to endure war and famine, all within two or three pages? Are we really supposed to believe that all these terrible things could happen to such a small circle of people, however misfortunate they may be? Probably not, for as Erich Auerbach writes, "[t]he rhythm of the adventures which befall Candide and his companions is to be nowhere observed in the reality of experience. Such a relentless, unrelated torrent of mishaps pouring down from a clear sky on the heads of perfectly innocent and unprepared people whom it involves by mere chance, simply does not exist" (408–9). And even if we did manage to suspend our disbelief regarding this implausible litany, we would surely find ourselves experiencing a kind of affective fatigue in the face of such overdetermined suffering. At first, perhaps, we might respond with the appropriate degree of empathetic feeling (or even fear and pity), but as the disasters continued to proliferate, we would eventually become so satiated by suffering, so deeply immersed in "all the woe of the world," to quote Nietzsche once more, that "even tragedy [would cease] to look tragic" (*Beyond* 42).[7]

I have thus far been discussing the various ways in which Voltaire manages to remove the weight from *Candide's* tragic subject matter—creating, in the process, a subgenre we might describe as comic-strip tragedy. I have suggested that he achieves this effect by anecdotalizing his characters' misfortunes, by reducing their plausibility as human beings, by condensing their suffering into the smallest possible space, and by subjecting his material to the narrative velocity of comedy or farce. There is, however, one more way in which he is able to "lighten" the tragic substance of his narrative, and that is by evacuating it of any semblance of meaning—by representing the plane of suffering as pure surface and nothing else. Indeed, as I shall argue in the following pages, this would appear to be another one of the novel's central objectives: to relieve suffering of the burden of supplementary meaning, to deprive it of all profundity, while ensuring, always, that we as readers feel only a minimal "sense of deprivation or affliction at this absence of meaning" (Robbe-Grillet, "Nature" 71).

III

Throughout *Candide*, Voltaire mercilessly satirizes any attempt to confer meaning on life and the world. "Wherever you look," we are told, "you find only empty systems, and not a single thing of any use" (77). Needless to say, the most enthusiastic purveyor of systematic thought in the novel would have to be Doctor Pangloss, who clings to his doctrine of optimistic theodicy—or "metaphysico-theologico-cosmo-nigology" (4), to employ Voltaire's term for it—with admirable tenacity.[8] When we are first introduced to Pangloss, he is arguing that everything in the world is "necessarily for the best" (4), and despite all his subsequent misfortunes, he steadfastly refuses to abandon this basic principle, further emphasizing the disjuncture between the reality of human suffering and any philosophy that would presume to make sense of it. "Pangloss conceded that he had suffered horribly . . . but having once maintained that everything was going splendidly he would continue to do so, while believing nothing of the kind" (91). By the end of the novel, then, even *he* is having trouble believing what he says, and none of the other characters appear to be taking him too seriously, either. "Let us set to work and stop proving things," Martin begs, "for that is the only way to make life bearable" (93). And Candide, after some vacillating, agrees. "That is well said," he declares in response to another one of his erstwhile mentor's lectures, "but we must cultivate our garden" (94).

This "but" is the last of several that serve an important corrective function in the narrative. As Michael Wood has observed, the use of this particular conjunction in *Candide* often indicates "the existence of a material fact needing immediate attention," something far more important than idle theorizing or philosophizing. "To cultivate [one's] garden," he writes, "is not simply to mind one's own business . . . It is to decide not to seek answers to questions that can have none; to remember the concrete 'buts' that lie in wait for every grand abstraction" (xxiii).[9] This deliberate retreat from the realm of the metaphysical, this disavowal of systematic thought, is of course typical of postmodernism, which also demonstrates an "incredulity" toward metanarratives and totalizing epistemologies (Lyotard xxiv). Roland Barthes, however, gave it another name. According to Barthes, Voltaire "ceaselessly dissociated intelligence and intellectuality, asserting that the world is an order if we do not try too much to order it, that it is a system if only we renounce systematizing it: this conduct of mind has had a great career subsequently: today we call it anti-intellectualism." In short, he argues, "what separates us from Voltaire is that he was a happy writer," the last one of his kind, because he belonged to a bourgeoisie so secure that it could "posit its own thinking, its own good sense as a Nature which any doctrine, any intellectual system would offend" ("Last Happy" 88).

Whether or not we agree with Barthes's charge of anti-intellectualism, Voltaire certainly reserves a great deal of scorn for those who would claim to understand the world "systematically." In *Candide*, any attempt to make sense of existence almost immediately lapses into futility and farce, and this is equally true of our attempt to ascribe meaning to the novel itself—a project that Voltaire both encourages and frustrates, promotes and ridicules. *Candide's* density of allusion, its "multiplicity of reference" (Stewart 130), guarantees that we as readers are inundated by a wide range of potential supplementary meanings. But how many readers, even at the time of the novel's publication in 1759, could be expected to understand every last one of these references? How many of us would immediately recognize, for instance, the references to Garcilaso de la Vega's *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* (1609); Georges-Louis Leclerc's theory regarding the origin of earthquakes; Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755); the Babylonian Captivity of 596 BC; the Neapolitan castrato Farinelli; Charles de Brosses's *History of Navigation* (1756); Voltaire's own tragedy, *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755); or the firing squad faced by Admiral Byng in 1757? Not too many, I imagine. And even those who did manage to make sense of these

references would probably struggle to recall "in what manner death came for Croesus, Astyages, Darius, Dionysius of Syracuse, Pyrrhus, Perseus, Hannibal, Jugurtha, Ariovistus, Caesar, Pompey, Nero, Otho, Vitellius, [and] Domitian" (93). (Indeed, even the endnotes concede defeat at this point, telling us simply that these are "[e]xamples from the history of Greece and Rome" [155].) Everything in the novel seems to mean something, to refer to something, and on every page we feel that we are being encouraged to decipher these meanings, but it is practically impossible to do so without also experiencing a strong sense of hermeneutical inadequacy. In some ways, then, one could argue that *Candide* achieves a kind of nonmeaning similar to that of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, although it approaches this objective from an entirely different angle. As I suggested in Chapter 1, Capote's novel actively discourages critical reading, decoding itself so readily that there is simply no need for further commentary. In *Candide*, on the other hand, the reverse would seem to be the case. Here, the attention of the critical reader is encouraged—but excessively so, to the point of absurdity. How are we supposed to process all these references, and how are we supposed to distinguish, finally, between those that matter and those that are merely incidental to the novel's "global" meaning? Eventually we become satiated by the narrative's indiscriminate production of meaning, just as we had been by its litany of underselected atrocities. And just as too much suffering eventually becomes none at all, so an overabundance of meaning very quickly collapses into its opposite. The novel's deflationary conclusion typifies this process. It is, after all, worth speculating as to why a narrative with so much meaning and so much suffering should end in this manner: by failing to unite the two, by offering the reader almost nothing in the way of compensatory knowledge or understanding. As was also the case in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Voltaire manages to "disappoint" meaning here "precisely when he makes it possible" (Barthes, "Last Word" 200). And in so doing, as we shall see, he both satirizes our need to ascribe meaning to the world and alleviates the tragic burden his narrative might otherwise have been made to carry. The only "meaning" the novel provides, in other words, is that there is no meaning to be had—or perhaps more accurately, the narrative assures us that at the center of all this noise, all the static of endlessly proliferating citations and references and sources, there resides only the supreme banality of pure nonmeaning.[10]

Tragedy gives human suffering form and meaning; it also infuses it with a sense of inevitability, making us believe that it had to be so. For Barthes, however, as for Voltaire, these redemptive tendencies are

to be strongly resisted. Tragedy, the former argues, is "only a way of assembling human misfortune, of subsuming it, and thus of justifying it by putting it into the form of a necessity, of a kind of wisdom, or of a purification." To reject this process, he concludes, "to seek the technical means of not succumbing perfidiously . . . is today a necessary undertaking" (qtd. in Robbe-Grillet, "Nature" 65). What Barthes is objecting to here, essentially, is the value tragedy attaches to "human misfortune"—the notion that suffering purifies, dignifies, elevates, and in some obscure way, edifies. Voltaire would no doubt agree, and in *Candide* he quite clearly satirizes our need to attribute both meaning and value to our misfortunes, as if by doing so we might retrieve something positive from every negative. As we have already noted, the long-suffering Doctor Pangloss is forever struggling to assert the pedagogical function of the various calamities he is made to endure. Yet neither he nor any of the other characters in the novel ever seem to learn anything of enduring value from their suffering. Like the characters who populate the picaresque narratives of Fielding and Daniel Defoe, they are compelled to "move episodically through a set of chance encounters which have force but not necessarily meaning" (Eagleton 192), until finally they arrive, still none the wiser, at the famous antiepiphany with which the novel concludes. By depriving suffering of value in this way—by transforming it into an empty, floating signifier—Voltaire is able to relieve the narrative of much of its tragic weight and semiotic density. Yes, people suffer, but their suffering carries no supplementary meaning, no higher purpose, no metaphysical significance; and although this absence of meaning may be made to bear considerable weight elsewhere, in *Candide* we are simply not given the time to dwell on such profundities.[11] Instead, we are immersed from beginning to end in the sheer phenomenality of suffering. The plagues, earthquakes, massacres, and rapes—all of it comes so rapidly that we can do little more than register the surface detail, the terrible *particularity*, of each new calamity, before another one arrives to take its place.

As part of this project to deprive suffering of meaning, Voltaire also does his best to undermine the principle of causality in the narrative. For Aristotle, causality was an essential component of the tragic, and he was particularly dismissive of those narratives that seem to privilege contingency over determinism. "Of all the plots and actions," he tells us,

> the episodic are the worst. I call a plot "episodic" in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence . . . But again, tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of

> events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect. The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design. (18–19)

In *Candide*, however, we are given no sense of tragic necessity; everything that takes place could just as easily have been otherwise. The "tragic" episodes "succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence," and the narrative itself immediately delegitimizes any attempt to offer a more agreeable, deterministic reading of these misfortunes. When Candide is reunited with a grotesquely disfigured Pangloss in Chapter 4, for example, he inquires "as to the cause, the effect and the sufficient reason that [has] reduced [him] to so pitiable a state." Love, the metaphysician replies, "love, consoler of humankind, preserver of the universe, soul of sentient beings, sweet love." Confused by this response, Candide asks Pangloss to explain just how "so beautiful a cause [could] have produced so abominable an effect in [his] case." The answer is simple. "You remember Paquette," he says,

> the pretty lady's maid to our august Baroness; well, in her arms I tasted the delights of paradise, which in turn provoked the torments of hell by which you see me devoured; she was herself infected, and may now be dead. Paquette received this present from a very learned Franciscan, who could trace it back to its source: for he had been given it by an old countess, who in turn had it from a cavalry captain, who was indebted for it to a marquise, who caught it from a page-boy, who contracted it from a Jesuit, who, while a novice, had inherited it in a direct line from one of the shipmates of Christopher Columbus. (11)

Hearing this "strange genealogy," Candide naturally assumes that the "devil [must be] its source." But no, "[n]ot in the least," Pangloss replies. "It is an indispensable feature of the best of all possible worlds, a necessary ingredient: for if Columbus, on an island off the Americas, had not contracted this disease . . . we would have neither chocolate nor cochineal" (11). This bizarre logic is obviously intended to satirize those who would ascribe to human suffering a teleological trajectory (and here, too, Voltaire anticipates postmodernism by several centuries). "There is no effect without cause," Candide dutifully declares, "for everything is linked in a chain of necessity, and arranged for the best" (8). But this is clearly not the case in the narrative we

have before us. Here, the principle of causality is either completely eliminated (why, for instance, does the King of the Bulgars suddenly decide to declare war on the Abars at the end of Chapter 2?) or forced to surrender much of its explanatory power. In the latter case, the narrative frequently establishes a profound disparity between cause and effect, between the triviality of one category and the magnitude of the other, in order to emphasize the logical disjuncture between the two and the stupidity of anyone who would argue otherwise.

One may be reminded here of Camus's *The Stranger*, another philosophical novel in which the thematic content infiltrates the structure of the narrative itself, severely disrupting its representational procedures. As Jean-Paul Sartre observes, *The Stranger* is written in a style that is "transparent to things [but] opaque to meanings" (36). We are able to see everything quite clearly, but none of what we see can be integrated into an overarching structure of significance: nothing converges, nothing coheres. For Sartre, this resistance to meaning explains Camus's use of short, paratactic sentences that substitute chronological sequence for the order of causality. "Each sentence," he writes, "refuses to exploit the momentum accumulated by preceding ones. Each is a new beginning. Each is like a snapshot of a gesture or object. For each new gesture . . . there is a new and corresponding sentence" (35). Instead of "acting as a bridge between past and future," that is to say, each one of Camus's sentences becomes "a small, isolated, self-sufficient substance" (39)—a single entry in a disconnected series of micro-occurrences. In *Candide*, similarly, the principle of causality dissolves into the "logic" of pure succession. One thing follows another, but the connection between these particles of meaning, these pulses of significance, is either falsified or subjected to complete erasure. There is no (plausible) trajectory of meaning or causality unifying these disparate gestures, episodes, and entities—just the mad babble of those who would draw a line between syphilitic sores and the discovery of chocolate.

In this respect, one should also be attentive to Voltaire's strategic use of the word *for* at various junctures throughout the narrative. It is often deployed quite arbitrarily to string together logical or deductive fallacies, as though the use of the word itself is all that is required to establish a causal connection between two otherwise unrelated utterances. We see this in the example given earlier, but it is a strategy Pangloss employs elsewhere in the novel, too. "It is demonstrable," he says, "that things cannot be other than as they are: for, since everything is made to serve an end, everything is necessarily for the best of ends" (4). Then, several pages later, he uses the same rhetorical

strategy to argue that the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, in which up to 100,000 people may have died, was really not such a bad thing after all. "This is all for the best," he assures everyone. "For if there is a volcano beneath Lisbon, then it cannot be anywhere else; for it is impossible for things to be elsewhere than where they are. For all is well" (15). Not surprisingly, the structure of causality in the novel eventually collapses under the weight of such circular and fallacious reasoning—and this, of course, was Voltaire's objective all along. In the *Poetics*, as we have seen, Aristotle declares that genuine tragedy is always motivated by probable or necessary cause. "It makes all the difference," he writes, "whether any given event is a case of *propter hoc* [because of something] or *post hoc* [after something]" (19). But in *Candide*, such distinctions are either eliminated or deliberately blurred; and by challenging the principle of causality in this manner, Voltaire is able to remove the very *structure* of tragedy from his narrative, transforming what is left into a mere simulacrum, a faded copy, of the real thing.

Another way in which Voltaire undermines the narrative's principle of causality is through the profligate (and entirely implausible) use of coincidence. The simulation of causality is one of the key strategies by which realist narratives have traditionally sought to authenticate themselves. In order to generate a sense of the "real," in order to reinforce the "referential illusion" (Barthes, "Reality" 148), these narratives must replicate as closely as possible the causal logic that governs our understanding of the world in which we live. As Hilary Dannenberg has pointed out, however, causality is not the only "explanatory system" to be found in realist narratives: "[O]ther explanations assert the *absence* of causality, the ultimate randomness of life, and construct a world ruled by chance in which anything can happen" ("Poetics" 424). To a large (indeed excessive) degree, this is also true of *Candide*, where the narrator makes no attempt whatsoever to "justify" or authenticate the narrative's many coincidences by situating them within realistic causal sequences. In Chapter 3, for instance, when Candide discovers his old philosophy teacher begging on a street corner in Holland, we are given no explanation as to why both characters should have found their way to this particular place at this particular time. Nor, in Chapter 12, when the old woman remembers meeting her mother's erstwhile employee, the frustrated castrato, beneath an orange tree in Morocco, are we offered an explanation that would serve to authenticate this highly unlikely encounter. In places, moreover, Voltaire actually manages to multiply such implausibilities, layering one on top of the other until they achieve a disproportionate

salience within the narrative as a whole. I am thinking, in particular, of the dinner of deposed kings in Chapter 26 and the scene in the following chapter where Candide learns that two of the slaves on the galley taking him to Constantinople are in fact his old friend Doctor Pangloss and Cunégonde's brother, the "wretched Jesuit" (84) whom he believed he had killed in Paraguay. In this last case, we are offered not one coincidence but two, occurring simultaneously, and together they invoke a number of earlier coincidences that have combined to make this one possible (creating, if you like, a coincidence of coincidences). As I have suggested, the conspicuous absence of causal explanation in such episodes serves to reduce, still further, the narrative's overall sense of tragic necessity. Confronted by these radical and inexplicable contingencies, we are forced to conclude that whatever transpired here did not, after all, have to be so—it could just as easily have been otherwise. Cunégonde did not have to be raped and disemboweled; the old woman did not have to be abducted by pirates and infected with the plague. They were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

To be sure, coincidences do occasionally occur in reality, and had the narrative produced no more than one or two of these, it may well have retained a degree of verisimilitude. But as was the case with the excessive litany of tragedies we discussed earlier, it is the hyperbolic reiteration of coincidence throughout the novel—along with Voltaire's steadfast refusal to mitigate the irreality of these encounters—that finally deprives it of all plausibility. As Dannenberg observes, realistic narratives typically attempt to camouflage the "ultimate causal-manipulative level of the author" by constructing a fictional universe that demonstrates its own "intradiegetic causal processes" (*Coincidence* 27). If these processes are sufficiently persuasive, the reader will be "encouraged to believe in the internal logic and autonomy of that world and take it as 'real'" (Dannenberg, "Poetics" 425). In *Candide*, however, such intradiegetic causal processes are either attenuated to the point where they are no longer capable of supporting the weight of so many coincidences or simply eliminated altogether, and when this happens, the reader is forced to look elsewhere for a plausible "explanatory system." As noted, the principle of chance goes some way toward explaining the novel's coincidental encounters, but at a certain point, it, too, begins to lose its explanatory power. Although the contingencies of life may explain a couple of these encounters, when the same two or three characters keep running into each other all over the world, it is clear that we are no longer being asked to believe fully in what we are reading. In another novel,

perhaps, one might resort to what Dannenberg calls the "causal-manipulative explanation of divine providence" ("Poetics" 424), but not here. In *Candide*, the authenticating and explanatory force of a deity is no longer available to the reader (or, indeed, to the characters themselves). And so, when every last intradiegetic causal process—including providence and destiny—has failed, we are left with no choice but to trace these coincidences back to the extradiegetic causal level of the author, Voltaire himself, who must take ultimate responsibility for his narrative's outrages against plausibility. Here, as Dannenberg writes of Tobias Smollett, "the extradiegetic level of the manipulating author glimmers, or rather glares, through the diegetic construct" ("Poetics" 426) so that even the characters themselves sometimes struggle to accept the plausibility of the narrative they occupy. When Candide encounters Cunégonde's brother (the "commanding officer") in Paraguay, for instance, the following exchange takes place: "'Merciful heavens! Can it be possible?' cried out the commanding officer.—'What miracle is this!' exclaimed Candide.—'Can it really be you?' said the commanding officer.—'Can this really be happening?' said Candide. They both drew backwards in amazement, they embraced, they wept rivers of tears. 'What! Can it really be you, Reverend Father? You, the brother of the lovely Cunégonde? You, who were killed by the Bulgars! . . . You, a Jesuit in Paraguay! This world is indeed a strange place'" (Voltaire 36). This world, the discursive universe these characters have been made to inhabit, is indeed a strange place, and so it is not particularly surprising that they should have some difficulty believing the evidence of their eyes. Later in the novel, when Candide finally encounters his two old acquaintances on the Turkish galley, he expresses a similar kind of incredulity. "Am I awake!" he cries. "Am I really on this galley? Can this be Monsieur the Baron whom I killed? Can that be Maitre Pangloss, whom I saw hanged?" (84). These questions, like the ones posed above, are not entirely rhetorical, either. One could argue, in fact, that they are being directed at a quite specific personage: the author himself, Voltaire, whose refusal to take causality seriously has left his characters no choice but to confront (and marvel over) their own fictionality and the disconcerting salience of their creator's signifying practices.

By foregrounding the fictionality of the novel in this way, Voltaire is able to reduce still further his characters' referential qualities—their plenitude as human beings. Every literary character is, as Brooks argues, "first of all, and literally, a linguistic structure, a set of signs that we imaginatively decipher and construct as 'a character'" (*Realist* 66). But in *Candide* this process is consistently impeded so that the

characters we construct never quite achieve a state of full ontological plausibility. Time and again, the sheer improbability of the narrative forces us to acknowledge their status as "mere" signifiers, and this in turn diminishes our capacity to respond emotionally to their tales of suffering and woe. After all, it's not easy to feel pity for a linguistic structure, however many indignities and atrocities it may have suffered. And this implausibility, I believe, is what ultimately enables Voltaire to transform *Candide* into a comic analogue of the tragic. For Aristotle, remember, plausibility (the representation of "what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity" [17]) is essential to tragic mimesis. Only a bad writer would "stretch the plot beyond its capacity," thereby disrupting its "natural continuity" (Aristotle 18) and destroying its verisimilitude. But of course this is precisely what Voltaire does—and quite deliberately, too—for only thus is he able to reject the tragic, to relieve his narrative of the affective weight that might otherwise have been generated by all the "abominable things" (Voltaire 62) it describes.

IV

In a lecture delivered at the Sorbonne in 1933, Antonin Artaud famously compared theater to the plague, using as his primary example the bloody Jacobean tragedy *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633). Tragedies of this kind, he claimed, "collectively [reveal] their dark powers and hidden strength to men, urging them to take a nobler, more heroic stance in the face of destiny than they would have assumed without it" (131). This may well be so, but as we have seen in the preceding pages, *Candide* consistently refuses to adopt or enable such dignified postures. Although the substance of the narrative is undeniably tragic, the anempathetic disparity between form and content fatally undermines its tragic atmosphere, provoking in the reader nothing more profound or affecting than the comic analogues of fear and pity. More specifically, I have argued, Voltaire achieves this objective by anecdotalizing misfortune, by denying his characters interiority, by compressing his material into the smallest possible space, by subjecting it to the narrative velocity of farce, and by representing the plane of suffering as pure surface—bringing it as close as possible to the degree zero of meaning, coherence, and plausibility. Furthermore, as a consequence of these strategies, Voltaire also manages to deprive his characters of the tragic dignity and grandeur so eloquently described by Artaud in the lecture cited above. Pangloss, to take just one example, never even comes close to assuming "a nobler, more heroic stance in the face of

[his] destiny." He is and always will be an absurd caricature: a being created for no other purpose than to suffer greatly, and to look ridiculous while doing so. In short, one quickly realizes that the epic stature associated with the heroes of classical or even Renaissance tragedy is no longer available to Voltaire's characters, for by depriving suffering of meaning and plausibility, he also deprives it of its ennobling or aggrandizing qualities.[12] Instead, they become comic figures, characters imported from a *commedia dell'arte* or one of Molière's farces, who are nonetheless obliged to contend with the forces of high tragedy. And in places they actually seem to register, however intuitively, this shift in their generic coordinates, appearing genuinely surprised to find themselves in the middle of a tragedy, and stranger still, one that continues to demonstrate many of the characteristics of a farce. At certain critical junctures, that is to say, the characters experience what we might describe as a kind of generic disorientation—a deep sense of uncertainty regarding the generic allegiance of the narrative they have been made to occupy.

Consider the scene in which Candide is told by the two recruiting officers in the tavern that he is to be "the hero of the Bulgars," that his "fortune is made and [his] glory is assured" (Voltaire 6). At this moment, the discourse seems to be gesturing toward everything it *could* become—invoking a specific plot trajectory with quite secure generic coordinates—but such congenial fantasies do not last long. Candide is promptly abducted, forced to serve in the army, and whipped on a daily basis, leaving him "completely bewildered" and unable to "[figure] out quite what was meant by his being a hero" (6). He is obviously contemplating his role in the Bulgar army here, but he is considering something else, too: his role in the novel itself. What kind of hero is he destined to be? A picaresque hero, a tragic hero, or the farcical hero of a comedy? As it turns out, he will be all three, and over the course of the novel, the characters will continue to express their surprise at such an unlikely collision of genres. At times, for instance, they find it particularly difficult to reconcile the tragic orientation of the narrative with its farcical accumulation of misfortunes. In Chapter 9, Candide is surprised by one of Cunégonde's suitors, Don Issacar, and despite his "gentle disposition," he quickly draws his sword and "lays the Israelite out, stone dead at the feet of the lovely Cunégonde." Another suitor, the Grand Inquisitor, then arrives, and he is dispatched in a similar fashion. Amazed by this sudden development, Cunégonde turns to Candide and asks, "What on earth has got into you, who were born so gentle, to do away with a Jew and a prelate in the space of two minutes?" (22). What has gotten

into Candide, in fact, is the strange conjunction of tragedy and farce that the novel will pursue to the very end, giving none of its characters the opportunity to settle definitively, happily, in one category or the other. Instead, they will be constantly reminded of the compromised quality of the narrative they occupy, and of the compromised quality of their lives, as tragedy and farce gradually dissolve into some indefinable, intermediate category of being.

It is this generic ambivalence, I would argue, that constitutes the characters' final indignity, denying them even the consolation of having achieved, through their suffering, a state of tragic eminence or sublimity. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer identifies such "genre blurring" as one of life's central ironies. "As if fate wished to add mockery to the misery of our existence," he writes, "our life must contain all the woes of tragedy, and yet we cannot even assert the dignity of tragic characters, but, in the broad detail of life, are inevitably the foolish characters of a comedy" (322). Voltaire would surely have agreed, although in *Candide*, of course, there is no fate. There is only Voltaire himself, the author as God, gleefully subjecting his characters to an endless litany of atrocities and misfortunes—and having the audacity to take it all so lightly, too, as if there really was something funny about being disemboweled or flogged or dissected. This quality of lightness, moreover, is what ultimately distinguishes Voltaire's narrative from the tragicomedies of Samuel Beckett, say, or Eugène Ionesco. In Beckett's plays, we also find characters whose grief, as Terry Eagleton notes, "springs from knowing that [they] can no longer even bestow a dignified title on [their] wretchedness, view it as part of some predestined order, or discern in its very terror the shadow of transcendence." And there, too, we encounter "ontologically famished figures" who are incapable of "ris[ing] to significance, let alone sublimity" (67). Yet despite its hard satirical edge, there is an underlying nonchalance in *Candide*—a refusal to take such weighty matters altogether seriously—that we simply don't find in Beckett, for all his farcical tendencies. In the lightest and most amusing way possible, Voltaire creates for his reader a "climate of dryness" (Starobinski 85), a universe devoid of sentimentality or tragic pathos, in which one is forced to confront the ubiquity and ultimate nonmeaning of human suffering. And in this regard, too, the insubstantiality of the novel's final sentence is perfectly judged. Offering no real meaning, no sense of tragedy or transcendence, the narrative simply discharges one last banality ("stupid like life itself") and then lapses into silence.

CHAPTER 4

READABILITY

P. G. WODEHOUSE'S *THE CODE OF THE WOOSTERS*

I

In this chapter, I shall be discussing one of the qualities most commonly associated with light literature: readability. Despite the fundamental relevance of this quality to the very process and experience of reading, there has been a general critical tendency to undervalue, disparage, or simply ignore it.[1] As Peter Brooks writes of plot, readability has traditionally "been disdained as the element of narrative that least sets off and defines high art—indeed, [readability] is that which especially characterizes popular mass-consumption literature: [it] is why we read *Jaws*, but not Henry James" (*Reading* 4). Take Roland Barthes's highly influential distinction between readerly and writerly discourse, for instance. According to Barthes, intelligibility, linearity, and structural coherence (i.e., readability) are all typical features of a readerly or "classic" narrative. Such narratives, he argues, also operate within a severely limited semantic range, saturating the discourse with a predetermined meaning that makes it all the more easily (and passively) consumed. By contrast, those narratives in which writerly qualities are dominant require the reader to produce textual meaning for themselves. They resist intelligibility, defy stereotypes, ignore generic boundaries, challenge ideological and literary complacency, and refuse to constitute a "singular, theological meaning" (Barthes, *S/Z* 11). Of the two categories, Barthes makes no secret of his preference for the latter. "Why is the writerly our value?" he inquires in *S/Z*. "Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4). By privileging

the writerly in this way, Barthes quite clearly attaches a labor theory of value to the act of reading. The writerly is to be valued, from this perspective, because it gives the reader work to do—forcing us to experience something of the authorial labor that went into the original composition of the narrative.[2] For Barthes, reading should not be a "parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority." Rather, it should be a "labor of language" (*S/Z* 10–11), one that directly involves us in the practice and pleasure of writing.[3]

As ever, Barthes makes a persuasive case here, but at times we may not feel like laboring to construct meaning for ourselves; at times we may prefer to be "plunged into [the] idleness" (*S/Z* 4) of readability. And that is when we come to value more highly the range of aesthetic pleasures provided by a narrative such as P. G. Wodehouse's *The Code of the Woosters* (1938). In what follows, I shall be exploring the "readerly" qualities of Wodehouse's novel in some detail and attempting to achieve a deeper understanding of the pleasures that constitute this particular mode of reading. Why do we find readerly narratives so appealing? Why do we consume them so avidly? What kind of pleasures do they generate, and why do so many of us seem to prefer these idle, "comfortable" pleasures to the hard-won rapture of the writerly?

There are, I believe, three major sources of readerly pleasure in *The Code of the Woosters*: plotting, predictability, and what I would like to call a utopian atemporality. With reference to the first of these, I shall be discussing the narrative's excessive plotting, its overdetermined proairetic code, and suggesting that this heightened degree of narrativity contributes a great deal to its readability and to the production of readerly pleasure. The intricacy of the plot also influences the legibility of the discourse, for it obliges our narrator, Bertie Wooster, to make our reading experience as easy as possible, to do everything he can to prevent the "intrusion of disorder, entropy or disorganization into the sphere of structure and information" (Lotman 75). This discussion of legibility will inevitably lead us to the second of our readerly pleasures: the pleasure of predictability. Wodehouse's narratives are particularly notable for their formulaic structures and recursive features, and like many serial narratives, they operate within a field of reference they have created themselves, building on an "experiential repertoire" already established by the previous entries in the series. In this instance, then, the readerly pleasure we experience emerges out of the dialectical interplay between the narrative's stereotypical and

nonstereotypical features—between the redundancy of the message and its discursive or informational value. Finally, I shall turn to the pleasure of utopian atemporality. The serial nature of Wodehouse's narratives, I would like to suggest, creates a sense of "untimeliness," and this, too, contributes to our pleasure as readers, allowing us to immerse ourselves in a world that contains no trace of the tragic, a world almost entirely free of history and politics, a world in which nothing changes and no one dies. "I always ignore real-life time," Wodehouse wrote in 1961. "After all, Jeeves—first heard of at the age presumably of about thirty-five in 1916—would now be around eighty-five, counting the real years" (qtd. in Hall 16). But Wodehouse doesn't count the real years, and so Jeeves will always remain 35—just as Bertie, his scatterbrained employer, will forever enjoy his idyllic, prelapsarian twenties.

As we shall see, this suspension of temporality brings to light a strange contradiction at the heart of such heavily plotted serial narratives. According to Jonathan Culler, a reader is required "to organize [and understand] the plot as a passage from one state to another . . . The end must be made a transformation of the beginning so that meaning can be drawn from the perception of resemblance and difference" (*Structuralist* 259). Yet this is not the case in Wodehouse. Here, despite everything that transpires over the course of the narrative—despite all the frenetic activity, the toings and froings, the complicated schemes and dramatic peripeties—we eventually find ourselves, on reaching the end, right back at the beginning, where we started. Nothing has changed, nothing irrevocable has occurred, and nothing of any consequence has been allowed to disturb the narrative's carefree equanimity. Had he actually existed, as George Orwell points out, Bertie would most probably have died in the trenches in 1915 (296). But of course this will never happen, for the serial nature of the diegetic universe he occupies, its refusal to follow an ongoing temporal trajectory, guarantees his immortality. At the end of every novel, Bertie reverts to his original, unchanging state, and this final quiescence is what makes possible the subsequent revival of the action, the initiation of yet another episode in the series. In other words, the end in Wodehouse is also, always, a kind of beginning—one that liberates the discourse from what Brooks calls the "inescapable linearity of the linguistic signifier" (*Reading* 20) and, by extension, from the inescapable linearity of life. And that may ultimately prove to be the most intense, the most gratifying, pleasure of them all.

II

It is only toward the end of *The Code of the Woosters* that the significance of the novel's title becomes clear. Stiffy Byng, quite possibly the "fizziest" (Usborne 65) of all Wodehouse's female characters, is pleading with Bertie to take responsibility for stealing a local policeman's helmet in order to protect her guilty fiancé. "Didn't you tell me once," she says, "that the Code of the Woosters was 'Never let a pal down'?" Bertie, unable to defy this guiding principle, finally agrees to take the blame. "She had found the talking point," he concedes. "People who appeal to the Code of the Woosters rarely fail to touch a chord in Bertram" (Wodehouse, *Code* 254). This may well be so, but there is, I would contend, another code that also determines much of what transpires in the novel, another code by which Bertie lives his life, and that is the proairetic code: the *real* code of the Woosters.

In *S/Z*, Barthes uses the term *proairetic* to describe the logical sequences of action and behavior that structure literary narratives (18–20). According to Barthes, the proairetic code is responsible (along with the hermeneutic code) for sustaining our interest in a narrative—for creating a kind of readerly curiosity, a desire to know what the outcome of any narrative sequence will be. If a character does something (writes a letter, say, or goes on a journey), the proairetic code determines that this action will have consequences of some kind, and one of the reasons we continue reading is to find out what these consequences might be, to find out just how the narrative sequence initiated by this action will ultimately be resolved. For Barthes, such proairetic sequences "constitute the strongest armature of the readerly" (*S/Z* 204), and it is no coincidence that the narratives we tend to value for their readability (the thriller, for instance, or the picaresque) are also those narratives with the most highly developed proairetic codes—those narratives that afford absolute "precedence to the happening" (Brooks, *Reading* 18).

As mentioned above, *The Code of the Woosters* provides us with the perfect example of a heavily plotted narrative, and this heightened degree of narrativity, this overdeveloped proairesis, contributes a great deal to the readerly pleasure it generates. In fact, the novel's plot is so complicated, so intricately constructed and finely tuned, that it almost defies summary. Within the first few pages, a reluctant Bertie is cajoled into traveling to Totleigh Towers, the country manor of Sir Watkyn Bassett CBE, in order to "repossess" a silver cow creamer for his Aunt Dahlia and reconcile two estranged lovers, Gussie Fink-Nottle and Madeline Bassett. Not long after he arrives,

however, various complications arise. Gussie, it turns out, has mislaid a notebook full of damning "character studies" (86) of his future father-in-law, and Stiffy Byng, Sir Watkyn's young ward, has become secretly engaged to the village curate, a "clerical beetroot" (171) by the name of Harold "Stinker" Pinker. And that's just the beginning. Over the following two hundred pages, Bertie, with the help of Jeeves, will somehow have to orchestrate "happy endings" (228) for the two young couples, locate the missing notebook, return the cow creamer to its rightful owner, extricate himself from an engagement to the dreaded Madeline Bassett, and avoid being beaten to a "jelly" (106) by the visiting fascist, Roderick Spode. It is, as Bertie himself soon recognizes, "an imbroglio that [will] test the Wooster soul as it [has] seldom been tested before" (10). Indeed, scarcely a page passes without Wodehouse initiating another proairetic sequence or weaving together two previously unrelated sequences—until eventually even the characters themselves feel obliged to comment on the complexity of the narrative they occupy. "Jeeves," Bertie says on page 104, "stand by to counsel and advise. The plot has thickened." And then, a mere thirty pages later, he observes that it has "thickened again" (139). Elsewhere, speaking to Stiffy Byng, he confesses that his "affairs have become somewhat entangled" (117), and as the novel concludes, he refers, rather despairingly, to "the routine of one damn thing after another which constitute[s] life at Totleigh Towers" (249).

What Bertie is sensing here is the subordination of his own needs to those of the plot he has been charged with enacting—the fact that he has been made to serve the proairetic code rather than the reverse. In many ways, as Barthes notes, all literary characters could be regarded as willing accomplices of the discourse by which they have been constituted. If the discourse "creates characters, it is not to make them play among themselves before us but to play with them, to obtain from them a complicity which assures the uninterrupted exchange of codes" (*S/Z* 178–79). In the case of Wodehouse, however, such complicity almost immediately lapses into complete servitude. Here, the discourse creates characters whose sole responsibility, whose sole reason for being, is to ensure the continuity and coherence of one code in particular: the proairetic. Everything they do is determined—quite obviously, quite shamelessly—by the exigencies of plotting. In *The Poetics of Prose*, Tzvetan Todorov describes narratives of this kind as apsychological or predicative. "It is difficult to ignore," he writes,

> a whole tendency in literature, in which the actions are not there to "illustrate" character but in which, on the contrary, the characters are

> subservient to the action: where, moreover, the word "character" signifies something altogether different from psychological coherence or the description of idiosyncrasy . . . Psychological narrative regards each action as a means of access to the personality in question, as an expression if not a symptom. Action is not considered in itself, it is *transitive* with regard to its subject. Apsychological narrative, on the contrary, is characterized by intransitive actions: action is important in itself and not as an indication of this or that character trait. The *Arabian Nights* derive, we might say, from a *predicative* literature: the emphasis will always fall on the predicate and not on the subject of the proposition. (66–67)

As I have indicated, this is also true of *The Code of the Woosters*, where the action very quickly assumes an intransitive quality—the proairetic code becoming an end in itself, a transcendental value that determines and dominates every other aspect of the novel.[4]

Consider Jeeves, for instance, the character whose complicity with the discourse carries the most wide-ranging influence. It is Jeeves, after all, who is partially responsible for setting the entire machinery of the plot in motion ("I think it best to proceed to Totleigh Towers, sir" [Wodehouse, *Code* 29]; "I think that we should start at once, sir" [31]; "The bags are packed, sir" [38]). It is Jeeves who gives Gussie the advice that inspires him to jot down his "scornful" (72) critique of Sir Watkyn Bassett. It is Jeeves who discovers the secret that ultimately neutralizes the threat presented by Roderick Spode. (In his spare time, it transpires, the fascist leader is also a successful designer of women's underclothing: "He has a considerable talent in that direction," we are told, "and has indulged it secretly for some years" [284].) It is Jeeves who then advises Bertie to use this knowledge to force Spode to take responsibility for the theft of Constable Oates's helmet. And it is Jeeves, finally, who brings the whole thing to a satisfactory conclusion by suggesting that Bertie accuse Sir Watkyn of "wrongful arrest and defamation of character" (281), thus ensuring that he give his blessing to the two proposed marriages. As these examples indicate, Jeeves functions as a kind of "motivating force" (228) within the narrative. Whenever the unfolding proairetic code requires additional energy or some form of logistical assistance, he is there to provide it. In the novel's closing pages, we learn that his motto is "Service" (246). But who or what is he actually serving here? At the most superficial level, of course, he serves Bertie, yet his ultimate loyalties could be said to lie elsewhere. As the novel progresses, Jeeves seems to find his way into the structure of the narrative itself, taking on the role of a freely circulating principle of

causality, moving invisibly from place to place, and always surfacing (materializing?) where his services are most urgently required. "Presently," Bertie says at one point, "I was aware that Jeeves was with me. I hadn't heard him come in, but you often don't with Jeeves. He just streams silently from spot A to spot B, like some gas" (136).[5] This privileged mobility within the narrative enables him to do whatever is necessary to ensure the survival of the proairetic code, to keep it moving forward (and steadily expanding) until it reaches the end, at which point he emerges once more to ensure its satisfactory termination. That is simply what Jeeves does; that is his purpose on the page. At times he demonstrates a vague, "feudal" impulse to "save the young master in his hour of peril" (246), but otherwise he is utterly free of motive. And despite his tendency to approach "matter[s] from the psychological angle" (182), he himself seems to possess very little in the way of psychology. He is entirely empty. Like the characters in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, he is ultimately a void, the degree zero of personality—a character whose "freedom is dominated by the discourse's instinct for preservation" (Barthes, *S/Z* 135) and whose only function is to serve the proairetic code for as long as he is required to do so.

But why, precisely, does this heightened degree of narrativity generate so much readerly pleasure in *The Code of the Woosters*? Why do we find the (over)development of the proairetic code in the novel so entertaining, so profoundly gratifying? For a start, I would like to suggest, we derive a certain pleasure from the intricacy of the plot and from the evidence of authorial virtuosity that it provides. By affording such precedence to the proairetic, the discourse inevitably exposes its own narrativity, drawing attention to its underlying structure in a way that distinguishes it from many other readerly narratives (such as *Jaws*, for instance). On almost every page, we are presented with flagrantly artificial plot devices: improbable peripeties, unlikely coincidences, implausible symmetries, and other salient instances of narrative patterning. And of course the "artificiality" of these devices is quite deliberate, for we are being encouraged here to admire their ingenuity, not their verisimilitude. We are being invited to enjoy these peripeties, coincidences, and symmetries in the same way that we might enjoy inspecting the individual pieces, the cylinders and valves, of some perfectly constructed machine.[6] At times such intricacy brings the novel perilously close to complete implausibility and even raises the specter of a logical collapse, but this, too, is deliberate, and ultimately provides us with an additional charge of readerly pleasure. According to Barthes, the readerly

narrative is controlled by a "principle of noncontradiction." This principle obliges the discourse to do everything in its power to avoid the "scandal of illogicality," and it does so, he argues, by "multiplying solidarities, by stressing at every opportunity the *compatible* nature of circumstances, by attaching narrated events together with a kind of logical 'paste'" (*S/Z* 156). As one might imagine, *The Code of the Woosters* obeys the same "law of solidarity," but at certain junctures it chooses to live dangerously—flirting with illogicality and implausibility, "multiplying solidarities" to the edge of incoherence, toying with metafictionality and the "laying bare of the device"—before finally reconfirming its commitment to the principle of noncontradiction, before bringing everything together again in a triumphant, deeply satisfying reassertion of readerly logic, coherence, and plausibility.[7]

It is this conclusion, this moment of transcendent "compatibility," that ultimately generates much of our readerly interest in the narrative. For Peter Brooks, as for Barthes, the process of reading is motivated by a particular kind of desire: the desire for meaning. And only once we reach the end of a narrative are we able to satisfy this desire—to achieve the full and final predication of meaning that traditionally accompanies narrative closure. What animates us as readers of narrative, Brooks argues, citing Barthes, is "*la passion du sens*, which I would want to translate as both the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning: the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle" (*Reading* 19).[8] Simply put, the desire for meaning is, above all, desire for the end, for the sense of unity and plenitude that the termination of (readerly) discourse provides. If this conclusion were to be achieved too rapidly, however, it would destroy the narrative: the beginning would simply collapse into the end, leaving no room for intervening pleasures of any kind. "Plot," Brooks writes, "is a kind of arabesque or squiggle toward the end. It is like that arabesque from *Tristram Shandy*, retraced by Balzac [see Figures 1 and 2], that suggests the arbitrary, transgressive, gratuitous line of narrative, its deviance from the straight line, the shortest distance between beginning and end—which would be the [premature] collapse of one into the other." It is necessary, then, both for the survival of the discourse and for our pleasure as readers, that the end should be delayed, reached only by way of the "detour, the intentional deviance . . . which is the plot of narrative" (*Reading* 104). Moreover, as Brooks quite rightly observes, the greater the

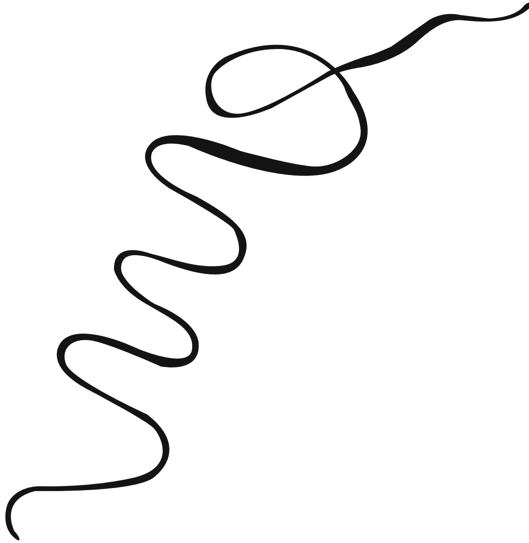

Figure 1 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760–67).

Figure 2 Honoré de Balzac, *The Wild Ass's Skin* (1831).

detour—the more complicated the deviance, the more convoluted the "arabesque or squiggle"—the deeper the pleasure we ultimately feel when the narrative reaches its conclusion and a final discharge of meaning is achieved.

In *The Code of the Woosters*, as suggested above, this is certainly the case. We derive a great deal of pleasure from the resolution of the various proairetic sequences in the narrative, from the final coalescence of its disparate particles of meaning, and from the authorial ingenuity such complete closure demonstrates. In fact, the final predication of meaning in the novel is so satisfying, so aesthetically and logically pleasing, that Wodehouse decides to bring it to an end not once but three times. The first conclusion comes at the end of Chapter 10. Having secured Sir Watkyn's blessing for the union of Stiffy and Reverend Pinker, and having effected the reconciliation of Gussie and

Madeline, both Bertie and Jeeves seem convinced that the narrative is about to conclude:

> "I shouldn't be surprised if at this very moment [Gussie and Madeline] were locked in a close embrace."
>
> "A consummation devoutly to be wished, sir."
>
> "You said it, Jeeves."
>
> "Then you have nothing to cause you further concern, sir."
>
> "Nothing. The relief is stupendous. I feel as if a great weight has been rolled from my shoulders. I could dance and sing." (218)

Moments later, however, Gussie "trickles" in to tell them that the wedding has been canceled, thus initiating an entirely new proairetic sequence. The reactivated narrative then continues for another thirty-odd pages before a second conclusion arrives at the end of Chapter 12. After lowering Gussie to safety from his bedroom window, Bertie flings himself into a chair, and the following dialogue ensues:

> "So that's that, Jeeves!"
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> "Once again your swift thinking has averted disaster as it loomed."
>
> "It is very kind of you to say so, sir." . . .
>
> "Well, Jeeves, the going has been pretty tough, what?"
>
> "Extremely, sir." . . .
>
> "I can't say I'm sorry it's all over. Enough is always enough. And it is all over, one feels. Even this sinister house can surely have no further shocks to offer."
>
> "I imagine not, sir."
>
> "No, this is the finish. Totleigh Towers has shot its bolt, and at long last we are sitting pretty. Gratifying, Jeeves."
>
> "Most gratifying, sir." (246–47)

Bertie is right about it being gratifying ("I don't think I ever assisted at a ceremony which gave such universal pleasure to all concerned" [246]) but wrong about it being over. On the very next page, Jeeves discovers Constable Oates's missing helmet in Bertie's suitcase, and the narrative's proairetic energies are once more reactivated.

By producing these false resolutions, the discourse is able to multiply the pleasures of closure for the reader. It is also able to keep repeating itself until it manages to get the ending "right," until the compatibility of the narrative is complete. As I have noted, the danger of an improper ending can be felt throughout the novel (the danger that Bertie may not be able to resolve things satisfactorily,

that the discourse may be incapable of achieving a full and final predication of meaning), and at the aforementioned junctures such a threat becomes particularly pronounced. But the possibility of producing multiple *closures* allows the discourse to continue trying until it achieves the "proper" end—the one that will provide the largest degree of readerly pleasure. If, as Brooks argues, "repetition speaks of the death instinct, the finding of the right end, then what is being played out in repetition is necessarily the proper vector of the drive toward the end. That is, once you have determined the right plot, plot is over. Plot itself is working-through" (*Reading* 139–40). In the first two instances of "closure" something is still lacking: a proairetic sequence remains open, unresolved. "You can't be expected to dish out happy endings all round," Bertie says, "one per person, I mean" (Wodehouse, *Code* 228). But that is precisely what the reader of Wodehouse expects, and that is precisely what they know they will be given—eventually. For the end only comes, the end is only *allowed* to come, once "happy endings [have] been distributed in heaping handfuls" (Wodehouse, *Joy* 3). And what an ending it ultimately proves to be.

It is significant that the narrative should both open and close with Bertie sleeping. In the very first sentence, he wakes ("I reached out a hand from under the blankets, and rang the bell for Jeeves" [Wodehouse, *Code* 7]), and one could argue that everything he subsequently does is motivated by his desire to go back to sleep—to make of the end a time before the beginning. This is an objective he finally achieves, much to his relief, in the novel's last sentence: "Presently the eyes closed, the muscles relaxed, the breathing became soft and regular, and sleep, which does something which has slipped my mind to the something sleeve of care, poured over me in a healing wave" (286). In this way, Bertie could be said to resemble the narrative itself, which, like all narratives, is necessarily framed by the quiescence of the unnarratable. As Brooks writes, "[P]lot starts (or must give the illusion of starting) from that moment at which story, or 'life,' is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability . . . The ensuing narrative . . . is maintained in a state of tension, as a prolonged deviance from the quiescence of the 'normal'—which is to say, the unnarratable—until it reaches the terminal quiescence of the end. The development of a narrative shows that the tension is maintained as an ever more complicated postponement or *détour* leading back to the goal of quiescence" (*Reading* 103). What makes this goal achievable in Wodehouse's novel, of course, is that terminal discharge of meaning, that climactic release of narrative energy. Having tried twice already, the discourse

finally gets it right, resolving every last proairetic sequence to perfection. Once more, everything is as it should be. The discourse has managed to fulfill the basic requirement of the readerly—"to end, to join, to fill, to unify" (Barthes, *S/Z* 105)—thus bringing about its own demise and enabling Bertie's return to a state of blissful, unnarratable quiescence.

Before proceeding any further, I would like to discuss, just briefly, the way in which such intricate plotting also influences the legibility of the discourse. One of the characteristic features of this or any Wodehouse novel is the affable register of its narratorial voice. Over the course of the narrative, Bertie does everything he can to make things easy for us—to clarify the entangled plot lines, to summarize particularly dense proairetic sequences, to render the discourse as transparent as possible. In this respect, I am reminded of the "affable key" (72) our narrator assumes in Chapter 9 of *Right Ho, Jeeves*, but also of the comparison Susan Sontag makes between Nietzsche and Barthes. "[W]hereas Nietzsche addresses the reader in many tones," she writes, "mostly aggressive . . . Barthes invariably performs in an affable register. There are no rude or prophetic claims, no pleadings with the reader, and no efforts *not* to be understood" ("Writing" 71).[9] This is also true of Bertie, who always does his very best to be understood, addressing the reader with the utmost candor and informality: "I spoke with strong feeling, and I'll tell you why" (Wodehouse, *Code* 9); "Well, you can see that for yourself, I mean to say" (44); "I don't know what you would have done" (97); "It's an extraordinary thing about names. You've probably noticed it yourself" (144); and so on. Bertie's affability, his good-natured chattiness, is partly a result of the narrative's comedic orientation toward pleasure.[10] But it also serves a narratological function, compensating for any interpretive difficulties that may arise as a consequence of the narrative's overdeveloped proairesis. The intricacy of the plotting, that is to say, obliges our narrator to be particularly solicitous of the reader—to be forever standing by, like Jeeves, in case his assistance should be required. In Chapter 5, for instance, after things have really begun to get complicated, Bertie decides to summarize everything that has transpired in the preceding pages:

> "Take pencil and paper, Jeeves, and we will assemble the facts. Entitle the thing 'Wooster, B.—position of.' Ready?"
>
> "Yes, sir."

> "Right. Now, then. Item One—Aunt Dahlia says that if I don't pinch that cow-creamer and hand it over to her, she will bar me from her table, and no more of Anatole's cooking."
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> "We now come to Item Two—viz., if I do pinch the cow-creamer and hand it over to her, Spode will beat me to a jelly."
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> "Furthermore—Item Three—if I pinch it and hand it over to her and don't pinch it and hand it over to Harold Pinker, not only shall I undergo the jellying process alluded to above, but Stiffy will take that notebook of Gussie's and hand it over to Sir Watkyn Bassett. And you know and I know what the result of that will be. Well, there you are. That's the set-up. You've got it?" (106)

This is clearly done as much for our benefit as for Jeeves's. That's the set-up, we are told. Have you got it? And although, for the moment, the answer may be yes, we will be requiring a good deal more assistance as the novel progresses.

I would like to take my cue from Bertie himself here and refer to passages of this kind, passages whose primary function is to assist in our understanding and interpretation of plot, as proairetic footnotes. In *The Code of the Woosters*, such "footnotes" are necessary to support the rapidly expanding proairetic code ("I saw that I had been too abrupt," Bertie says at one point, "and that footnotes would be required" [156]). Their primary responsibility is to facilitate, and in some cases make possible, our sense-making (or decoding) procedures. They are there, in short, to make our lives easier, to reinforce the readerly qualities of the narrative, to ensure that what complicates does not also confuse. And we are not the only ones who require such assistance. From time to time, even the characters themselves need help deciphering the narrative's elaborate proairetic sequences. Near the end of Chapter 4, Stiffy confesses that she is struggling to "straighten it all out in [her] mind" (101), and on several occasions Bertie suggests that Jeeves has not "got the whole scenario clear in [his] mind" (105), either. In order to resolve such confusion, Bertie is often forced to reiterate, intradiegetically, what he has already narrated once before at the extradiegetic level: "I informed him briefly of what had occurred" (41); "In a few terse words I outlined for her the events which had taken place" (100); "I gave him a *précis* of what had happened" (269). In Chapter 10, we find a particularly good example of this proairetic footnoting. Madeline Bassett, like many of the other characters, is having some difficulty following the most recent developments, and so Bertie, with typical affability, does

his best to enlighten her: "Give Bertram Wooster a good, clear story to unfold, and he can narrate it well. Starting at the beginning with Gussie's aghastness at the prospect of having to make a speech at the wedding breakfast, I took her step by step through the subsequent developments, and I may say that I was as limpid as dammit. By the time I had reached the final chapter, I had her a bit squiggle-eyed but definitely wavering on the edge of conviction." When Bertie has finished, Madeline says, "But I never heard such an extraordinary story in my life." And he replies, "Bizarre, yes, but quite capable of being swallowed, don't you think?" (210). Once again Bertie seems to be partially addressing the reader here, expressing a certain anxiety that the story he has been obliged to narrate (both within the narrative and extradiegetically) may be too complicated or too implausible for us to understand or believe. In so doing, he is articulating the greatest fear of the readerly narrative: that it may in some way short-circuit by failing to achieve the "proper" end, by lapsing into illogicality or implausibility. Such a narrative, as Barthes writes, "would be a scandal, the extenuation, by hemorrhage, of readerliness" (*S/Z* 105). But our narrator obviously has nothing to fear—for in this case everything does hold together, everything makes perfect sense, and the narrative's readerly qualities will be preserved to the very end.

III

At this point, I would like to turn to the issue of predictability, another key source of pleasure in Wodehouse's narratives. No matter how formulaic a narrative may be, the precise manner in which a proairetic sequence will be resolved is never entirely predictable. The most that can be said of such sequences is that they operate within a field of probability. In many cases, we are able to predict the *probable* resolution of a sequence; however, the precision with which we are able to do so will vary widely depending on the type of narrative we are reading. According to Barthes, a proairetic sequence is "always nameable" ("Introduction" 273); it gives rise to a descriptive or generic title ("writing a letter," "going on a journey"), and these titles inevitably generate a certain degree of predictability. At the very least, we suddenly become aware of a limited range of likely outcomes. But of course no sequence is ever completely free of uncertainty: a letter can always be mislaid, a journey interrupted. In other words, as Barthes argues, even the most insignificant sequences contain elements of unpredictability or "moments

of risk." If we consider, for example, "the succession of trifling acts which go to make up the offer of a cigarette (*offering*, *accepting*, *lighting*, *smoking*)," we realize that "at every one of these points, an alternative—and hence a freedom of meaning—is possible . . . A sequence is thus, one can say, a *threatened logical unit*" ("Introduction" 273–74). In *The Code of the Woosters*, however, the discourse does everything it can to neutralize this threat. Although there may be a degree of unpredictability at the level of the "microsequence" (those proairetic sequences that form "the finest grain of the narrative tissue" [Barthes, "Introduction" 273]: lighting a cigarette, say, or pouring a brandy), at the level of the macrosequence (becoming engaged or estranged, losing an object of value, being threatened with physical violence), the *overall* outcome is always entirely predictable. When the young lovers become estranged in Chapter 2, for instance, we know with complete certainty that they will have resolved their differences by the time the novel concludes, and we know this for one very simple reason: because we've seen it all many times before.

As suggested earlier, Wodehouse's narratives are particularly notable for their formulaic structures and recursive features. Time and again, we encounter the same plot devices, the same proairetic sequences, the same symmetries and correspondences, the same jokes, the same character-types—and, in many cases, even the same characters.[11] And it is this repetitive quality, this reliance on the "cadence of familiar gestures" (Barthes, *S/Z* 29), that makes our reading experience so "easy." In the introduction to a 1930 collection of Jeeves and Wooster stories, Wodehouse himself wrote:

> It is perfectly possible, no doubt, to read *Very Good, Jeeves* as a detached effort—or, indeed, not to read it at all: but I like to think that this country contains men of spirit who will not rest content till they have dug down into the old oak chest and fetched up the sum necessary for the purchase of its two predecessors—*The Inimitable Jeeves* and *Carry On, Jeeves.* Only so can the best results be obtained. Only so will allusions in the present volume to incidents occurring in the previous volumes become intelligible, instead of mystifying and befogging. (*Very Good* 11–12)

So not only does the discourse itself do everything it can to assist with its own decoding, but the previous entries in the series also prepare us for what follows, generating their own field of reference and ensuring our competence within that field. All that is required

of the reader is a degree of familiarity with the "already-written" (*S/Z* 204), to cite Barthes once more—some knowledge, however limited, of these earlier episodes. For Barthes, the codes that structure literary narratives are merely "quotations, references, [and] echoes" ("From Work" 60) of other narratives and other codes. An author, he argues, "never places 'reality' at the origin of his discourse, but only and always, as far back as can be traced, an already written real, a prospective code, along which we discern, as far as the eye can see, only a succession of copies" (*S/Z* 167). In order to make sense of these interwoven (and ultimately derivative) codes, the reader is forced to rely on his or her knowledge of the "already-written"—the "off-stage voices" (*S/Z* 21) that accompany every literary utterance. This is particularly so in the case of the proairetic code, where such knowledge gives us the ability to recognize and label specific proairetic sequences, providing them with the continuity and coherence they need if they are to be at all legible. As Barthes writes, "The narrative language within us comprises from the start these essential headings: the closing logic which structures a sequence is inextricably linked to its name; any function which initiates a *seduction* prescribes from the moment it appears, in the name to which it gives rise, the entire process of seduction such as we have learned it from all the narratives which have fashioned in us the language of narrative" ("Introduction" 273). In Wodehouse this dependence on the "already-written" is especially pronounced and contributes a great deal to the readability of his narratives. We know how to read *The Code of the Woosters* because, in many ways, we've done it before—with *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923); *Carry On, Jeeves* (1925); *Very Good, Jeeves* (1930); *Thank You, Jeeves* (1934); and *Right Ho, Jeeves* (1934). And even if we haven't read these earlier volumes, we still have some cultural knowledge of the "archetypal" codes they contain, knowledge that will inevitably facilitate our reading of the latest entry in the series. For one thing, this prior knowledge familiarizes us with the key proairetic sequences in the narrative, making it easier to identify those that "matter" and allowing us to recognize (and label) them as soon as they arise. It also gives us a more immediate sense of their final outcome, ensuring that such sequences achieve the highest possible degree of predictability, yet without ever lapsing into complete redundancy. This, too, facilitates our reading experience and perhaps explains why Wodehouse should go to so much trouble to emphasize the seriality of his narratives.

Throughout *The Code of the Woosters* there are repeated references to earlier volumes. *Thank You, Jeeves* is invoked more than once (on

pages 149, 226, and 270), and in Chapter 8 we find an allusion to the short story "Jeeves and the Impending Doom," from *Very Good, Jeeves* (163). But by far the most frequently referenced narrative is *Right Ho, Jeeves*, the novel that immediately precedes *The Code of the Woosters* in the series. Because it took place at Brinkley Court the previous summer and involved many of the same characters, Bertie is often required to provide explicative summaries of this earlier narrative: "I don't know if you were among the gang that followed my earlier adventures" (27); "I became engaged to Madeline, as you know, at Brinkley Court" (69); "[I]n a few terse words I outlined the events which had taken place at Brinkley Court" (100); "In the narrative of my earlier adventures . . . at Brinkley Court" (178); "We had had one of these . . . sessions before, at Brinkley Court" (205); and so on. This heightened narratorial awareness of the "already-written" means that the characters themselves are sometimes obliged to recognize the formulaic nature of the narrative they occupy, for if they can remember what happened previously, then they should also be able to recognize the recursive quality of their (fictional) lives. Strange, isn't it, they are sometimes moved to observe, how the same things keep happening to us in precisely the same way? "[Roderick Spode] withdrew," Bertie tells us at one point, "slamming the door, and I sat musing on the odd way in which history repeats itself. I mean to say, the situation was almost identical with the one which had arisen some few months earlier at Brinkley, when young Tuppy Glossop had come in to my room with a similar end in view. True, Tuppy, if I remembered rightly, had wanted to pull Gussie inside out and make him swallow himself, while Spode had spoken of breaking his neck, but the principle was the same" (130). Indeed, the principle here, as elsewhere, is exactly the same—and entirely predictable, too. But what is it that we actually find pleasurable about such predictability? Why do we keep returning to these serial narratives despite their unchanging, formulaic qualities? What gives us this "hunger for redundance" (Eco, *Role* 120)?

Part of the answer, I believe, lies in the ability of the serial narrative to replicate itself—to generate a "succession of copies" that stretches "as far as the eye can see." At the end of each episode, as noted above, these narratives lapse into a deeply satisfying state of quiescence. But there is also an implied *et cetera* here, a "to be continued" that anticipates the reactivation of the proairetic code in subsequent episodes. The end, in other words, is just the beginning (or at least the prelude to another beginning), and this is what makes

it possible for serial narratives to ensure the posthumous continuity of their own proairetic sequences. In an essay on narrative repetition, Umberto Eco describes the "eternal" story we are offered in Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe detective series. "To make it palatable," he writes, "the author must invent every time a 'new' crime and 'new' secondary characters, but these details only serve to reconfirm the permanence of a fixed repertoire of *topoi*" ("Innovation" 164). This is also the case in Wodehouse, where the proairetic code is always resolved at the end of a narrative yet somehow never quite terminated, surviving in an ongoing series of "quotations, references, [and] echoes" (Barthes, "From Work" 60). Just as *The Code of the Woosters* carries within it traces of *Right Ho, Jeeves*, for example, so *Joy in the Morning* (1946), the subsequent volume in the series, invokes a number of key episodes in *The Code of the Woosters*. And it is the continuity of these narratives that allows us to have it both ways, as it were, when reading Wodehouse. While we are able to experience the satisfaction of complete closure and the sense of plenitude it provides, we are also assured that such closure is only ever temporary and that whatever pleasure we feel will almost certainly survive the termination of the discourse. All we need to do in order to revive these pleasures, in order to feel the same sense of satisfaction, is turn to the next installment in the series, whether it be *The Mating Season* (1949), *Jeeves in the Offing* (1960), or *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves* (1963).

One could argue, in a word, that the pleasure we derive from such serial narratives is not the pleasure of reading but of *rereading*—a return to the "already-read" in a form that is at once different and the same, original and derivative, unanticipated and entirely predictable. This process of "rereading" allows us to trace, quite easily, the dialectical interplay between the stereotypical and nonstereotypical features of these narratives, and in so doing, provides us with yet another source of readerly pleasure. Jurij Lotman's distinction between an aesthetics of identity and one of opposition may give us a clearer sense of what this dialectic involves. According to Lotman, it is possible to divide literary narratives into two distinct categories. The first of these categories includes narratives whose "structures are given beforehand" and whose aesthetic value lies in their "observation of certain rules." Narratives of this type, he writes, are "based on a sum of principles which may be defined as the aesthetics of identity" (289–90). The second category described by Lotman includes those narratives whose codes are "unknown to the audience before the act of artistic perception begins." Such narratives are grounded

in an aesthetics of "opposition rather than identity," for in this case, the "author sets his own, original resolution, which he believes to be the truer one, in opposition to methods of modeling reality that are familiar to the reader" (292). Needless to say, *The Code of the Woosters* belongs to the first of these categories, granting clear precedence to an aesthetics of identity. Like the *commedia dell'arte*, it, too, is "based on the total identification of depicted phenomena of life with model-clichés that are known beforehand to the audience and operate according to a system of 'rules.'" However, Lotman is also careful to acknowledge the fact that even the most conventional narratives require a certain degree of originality if they are to avoid lapsing into complete redundancy. If "we dealt only with a rigid system of rules," he argues, "each new work of art would be only a copy of its predecessor . . . and [it] would lose its informational value" (290), becoming, in the process, little more than a facsimile of the original—a purely iterative "nonstory."

In many ways, then, narratives such as *The Code of the Woosters* produce a "high-redundance message" (Eco, *Role* 120), telling us things we already know, repeating long-established stereotypes, and conforming to a severely limited range of generic imperatives. As Eco observes, a narrative of this kind is "a message which informs us [of] very little and which, on the contrary, thanks to the use of redundant elements, keeps hammering away at the same meaning which we have peacefully acquired upon reading the first work of the series" (*Role* 120). But of course if such narratives were entirely redundant they would lose all discursive value, and so, in order to justify their very existence (their so-called tellability), they must achieve a balance between stereotype and innovation, citation and originality, predictability and surprise.[12] On the one hand, the narrative is required to reproduce certain predetermined structures, to revive certain generic stereotypes, so that it might meet the aesthetic criteria by which it is to be judged. Yet on the other hand, it is also obliged to introduce an element of originality and unpredictability into this system so as to distinguish itself from the earlier episodes in the series and thus avoid complete redundancy. And it is the sustained tension between these two imperatives, I would like to suggest, that generates much of the interest and pleasure we feel when reading Wodehouse. How will the narrative achieve this balance between stereotype and innovation? How will resemblance interact with difference? How will Wodehouse meet our generic expectations while still maintaining the informational value of the narrative? Immersed, as Eco writes, in a game of which we know

the pieces, the rules, and the eventual outcome, we derive "pleasure simply from following the minimal variations by which the victor [in this case, Bertie Wooster] realizes his objective [in this case, the satisfactory resolution of the narrative's multiple proairetic sequences]" (*Role* 160).

The dialectical interplay I have been describing here also contributes to the metafictional quality of the narrative, encouraging us to admire the virtuosity with which Wodehouse negotiates these opposing imperatives and tendencies. In the essay cited above, Eco uses the example of the television series *Columbo* to make this point: "It is worth noticing that in this series the authors spell out from the beginning who the murderer is. The spectator is not so much invited to play the naive game of guessing (whodunit?) as (1) to enjoy Columbo's detection technique . . . and (2) to discover in what way the author will succeed in winning his bet, which consists in having Columbo do what he always does, but nevertheless in a way that is not banally repetitive" ("Innovation" 175). The same thing could be said of *The Code of the Woosters*, for here, too, we know from the very beginning how the narrative's various proairetic codes will resolve themselves. We know, for instance, that the silver cow creamer will eventually be recovered and that the young lovers will eventually be reconciled. But what we do not know is the precise method by which these outcomes will be achieved, and this is where our interest in the narrative ultimately lies. With what unpredictability, we ask ourselves, will Wodehouse be able to achieve the predictable? How will these various contingencies eventually give rise to the inevitable? Or to put it another way, in a formulaic narrative of this kind, where suspense at the level of probability has been almost entirely eradicated, the discourse is obliged to shift our interest to the level of *methodology*, focusing our readerly curiosity on just how (and how ingeniously) a particular outcome will be achieved.[13]

At various junctures, moreover, Wodehouse deliberately emphasizes the difficulty of the challenge he faces. "I have been in some tough spots in my time," Bertie declares in the novel's opening pages, "but this one wins the mottled oyster" (38). And it is largely due to characters like Roderick Spode that this should be the case. If Bertie and Jeeves act as the "accomplices" of the discourse, doing everything they can to ensure the most appropriate and satisfying resolution of its diverse proairetic sequences, then Spode would appear to function as one of its principle adversaries. Along with Sir Watkyn, he is there to complicate this process, to impose arabesques and squiggles on the

linear trajectory of the plot, and to delay, for as long as possible, its inevitable outcome. "[W]hat I came to tell you," he says at the end of Chapter 4,

> was that you are being watched—watched closely. And if you are caught stealing that cow-creamer, I can assure you that you will go to prison . . . Now, what you are saying to yourself, no doubt, is that you will not be caught. You imagine that you and this precious aunt of yours will be clever enough between you to steal the cow-creamer without being detected. It will do you no good, Wooster. If the thing disappears, however cunningly you and your female accomplice may have covered your traces, I shall know where it has gone, and I shall immediately beat you to a jelly. To a jelly . . . Have you got that clear? (103)

By imposing these delays, however, by postponing the resolution of the various proairetic sequences, Spode also does his bit to ensure the survival of the narrative—creating the kind of dilatory space that makes plotting possible in the first place and gives the reader the chance to enjoy these arabesques and squiggles while they are still active. Furthermore, by complicating proceedings in this way, he ensures that the end, when it does arrive, is all the more aesthetically satisfying and structurally impressive. He is there, in short, to create the detour, the "intentional deviance" (Brooks, *Reading* 104), that constitutes the very substance of narrative plotting. And once more, the pleasure that we derive from this wandering is dependent on the seriality of the narrative, on our knowledge that such a delay is only ever temporary and will not prevent the discourse from achieving its "proper" end. Quite the opposite. Having read this type of narrative before, we know that such delays actually serve as a guarantee that the best possible conclusion will (eventually) be forthcoming. In serial narratives such as *The Code of the Woosters*, then, even the adversaries of the discourse turn out to be its covert accomplices, for the delays they impose, the complications they create, never genuinely threaten the integrity of the discourse but instead ensure that the discharge of energy that accompanies narrative closure should be all the more pleasurable, all the more complete, when it finally arrives.

I have been arguing, thus far, that the readability of *The Code of the Woosters* can be largely attributed to its heightened narrativity, its tendency to privilege the proairetic above all other codes. Indeed, I have even suggested that the proairetic code could be considered the *real* code of the Woosters: the guiding principle by which Bertie

lives his life, the moral and aesthetic imperative that determines everything he does. I have also claimed that a great deal of the pleasure we derive from Wodehouse is related to the predictability of his narratives, their formulaic structures and recursive features. However, this predictability is never complete, and what we actually enjoy in such narratives, I believe, is the dialectical interplay between their stereotypical and nonstereotypical features—a dialectic that serves to increase our sense of authorial virtuosity and intensify our readerly pleasure. In conclusion, I would like to address the last of the three major pleasures generated by Wodehouse's novel: that of utopian atemporality. I have left this particular pleasure until last because in many ways it emerges out of the combinatorial play of the previous two. As we shall see, both of these pleasures (plotting and predictability) have a strong influence on the temporality of the discourse, creating a kind of circularity that betrays, in Edward Said's words, a deep "indifference to chronology" (*Late* 28). And it is this atemporal quality that ultimately serves to protect the narrative from any unpalatable realities—from what Bertie would call, with some distaste, "anything in the nature of real mashed potatoes" (Wodehouse, *Right Ho* 95).[14]

IV

The Code of the Woosters was published in London on October 7, 1938. Europe was on the verge of war, and only two days previously, in the House of Commons, Winston Churchill had warned that England was facing "a disaster of the first magnitude" (qtd. in Perry, Berg, and Krukones 208)—not that you would know it from reading Wodehouse. While Churchill was describing the "pitiless brutality" and "murderous force" of Nazi Germany and warning that the safety and equilibrium of Europe had been "fatally endangered" (209), Bertie Wooster was somewhere in Gloucestershire, attempting to recover an eighteenth-century *objet d'art*. Here, as elsewhere in his writing, Wodehouse demonstrates a profound reluctance to engage with contemporary reality, creating, instead, a world that has been almost entirely evacuated of history and politics. Although certain topical references make it clear that the novel is set during the 1930s ("[W]hen it came to self-confidence, Mussolini could have taken his correspondence course" [62]), it is a thirties deprived of historical density and verisimilitude, one that bears almost no resemblance to the real thing.[15] In order to achieve this degree of insularity, the narrative is required to delineate a carefully circumscribed field of play

governed by two fundamental principles: (1) everything that takes place within these boundaries must contribute in some way to our readerly pleasure; and (2) nothing can be allowed to moderate the "fizziness" (Wodehouse, *Code* 26) of the discourse, its irrepressible ludic energy. Granted, from time to time certain external realities do infiltrate the field of play that constitutes *The Code of the Woosters*, but they, too, are ultimately made to conform to the strict discursive rules governing this "pure space" (Caillois 7).[16] So even when we do encounter a fascist in Wodehouse, it is necessary that he should be an absurd, implausible figure ("Roderick Spode? Big chap with a small moustache and the sort of eye that can open an oyster at sixty paces" [43]) whose threat to beat our hero to a jelly is easily neutralized. And if the affective consequences of modernity are to be felt at all, they must also be displaced and sublimated, subject to a therapeutic transference that greatly diminishes their significance. At one point, for example, Bertie is deeply "stirred" (18), but only by the possibility that his aunt's chef Anatole might be giving in his notice. Elsewhere, Sir Watkyn Bassett suffers an "agony of [the] spirit" (24), but only when the authenticity of his cow creamer is challenged. And some time later, Gussie confesses to being "overcome by [a] stark horror" (66), but only at the prospect of delivering a speech on his wedding day. In Wodehouse's world, these eventualities all qualify as disasters of the first magnitude, for the narrative simply refuses to engage with anything more serious, anything of genuine historical significance, anything—like war or genocide—that might compromise our readerly pleasure.

One may be reminded here of Richard Strauss, who later in his life also demonstrated a profound aversion to contemporary social and political realities. During the late thirties and early forties, as Edward Said observes, Strauss's work became increasingly anachronistic, demonstrating a "strangely recapitulatory and even backward-looking and abstracted quality" (*Late* 25). As an example of this tendency, Said cites Strauss's decision to set *Capriccio*, his final opera, completed only three years after *The Code of the Woosters*, in the eighteenth century. "There is something very disconcerting," he writes, "about the fact that the opera was staged at a time and in a place where a stone's throw away the extermination of Europe's Jews was being planned" (30).[17] Indeed, rather than engaging—even obliquely—with these pressing historical realities, Strauss chooses to imagine a world of "overpowering wealth and privilege," a world that is truly "prehistorical in its freedom from daily pressures and cares, and in its seemingly limitless capacity for

self-indulgence, amusement, and luxury" (39). Such escapist tendencies, as Said notes, also carry an aesthetic significance for Strauss, creating a kind of protected space in which certain values, certain aesthetic principles, might be allowed to survive, untouched by the "prevailing cultural barbarism" (29) of Nazi Germany. A piece of music like *Capriccio* thus represents both a thematic and a stylistic retreat from contemporary reality, supporting through its anachronistic setting a range of equally untimely aesthetic values. It is, Said writes, "a concentrated epitome of the traditional composer's art, polished to a high degree of perfection; its characters, theme, and motivic structure are almost perversely circumscribed, as if to make the point overly plain that the composer is interested only in these relatively small-scale matters, not in anything more significant . . . [I]t is smoothly polished, technically perfect . . . and at ease *as music* in an entirely musical world" (45–46). Everything that Said has to say of *Capriccio* in this essay could be applied with equal justice to *The Code of the Woosters.* For it, too, is "mellifluous, elegiac, and highly idiomatic"; it, too, demonstrates a "distilled and rarefied technical mastery" (45–46); and it, too, delineates a world that is completely free of "daily pressures and cares"—a world with a "seemingly limitless capacity for self-indulgence, amusement, and luxury" (39). Like Strauss, Wodehouse has managed to create a space just slightly removed from history, where his aesthetic values (linearity, readability, legibility) can be protected from the formal and "thematic" incursions of modernity.[18] In this world, Bertie will always be in his twenties, unmarried and carefree; Jeeves will always be Jeeves; and the narratives they generate together will always be perfectly plotted, perfectly lucid, and perfectly predictable.

As suggested earlier, it is the seriality of Wodehouse's narratives that makes this utopian atemporality possible, allowing us to immerse ourselves in an idealized Edwardian world in which the year 1914 never arrives. All narratives conclude by lapsing into the quiescence of the unnarratable, but in the case of serial narratives, this state of final quiescence is only ever temporary. Here, as we have seen, the end is also a kind of beginning: a necessary interlude between episodes, "a time *after* which is [also] an image of the time *before*" (Brooks, *Reading* 139; italics added). And it is this narrative circularity that ultimately underwrites the atemporality of Wodehouse's diegetic universe, preventing the narrative from moving beyond the closed circle of eternal recurrence. In Umberto Eco's essay on narrative repetition, he makes a similar point with regard to Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre's *Fantômas* series. Each episode of this series,

Eco observes, "closes with a kind of 'unsuccessful catharsis'; [his pursuers] Juve and Fandor finally come to get their hands on the elusive one when he, with an unforeseeable move, foils the arrest" ("Innovation" 165). In *Fantômas*, then, what concludes, what closes, never quite finishes ("[C]urse him! Fantômas has escaped! Fantômas has gotten away! . . . I tell you, Fantômas is alive!" [Allain and Souvestre 295]), and here, too, as in Wodehouse, we have an ending that also constitutes a kind of beginning, returning the narrative once more to its inaugural state, its default setting. In the opening pages of each novel, Fantômas, who has been "responsible for blackmail and sensational kidnappings" in the previous episodes, finds himself "inexplicably poor and in need of money and, therefore, also of new 'action.'" Thus, Eco concludes, "the cycle is kept going" ("Innovation" 165), and we as readers are able to enjoy the same story, the same plotting and predictability, for as long as it pleases us to do so.

Such circularity guarantees, among other things, that none of Wodehouse's characters will ever be allowed to grow old and die. Like the characters in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, they are what they are, and they will always be that way. At no point are the particles of meaning that serve to delineate their "personalities" drawn into anything like "an evolving (biographical) tense" (Barthes, *S/Z* 67–68), for they, too, are prevented from moving beyond the closed circle of the narratives they occupy. And that is why the Bertie we meet in 1938 at the beginning of *The Code of the Woosters* is exactly the same as the Bertie we meet in 1963 at the beginning of *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*. Twenty-five years may have passed, but nothing has changed in his life. He is still worrying about his aged female relatives, still reverently misquoting Jeeves, and still enjoying a late breakfast of toast, sausages, "eggs and b." (*Stiff* 7). In his discussion of the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov argues that "[a]ll narrative is a movement between two equilibriums which are similar but not identical." "Let us say," he writes by way of example, "that a child lives with his family," participating in a "microsociety which has its own laws," but then "something occurs which introduces a disequilibrium [and] thus for one reason or another the child leaves his house." At the end of this story, "after having overcome many obstacles, the child—who has grown up in the meantime—returns to the family house. The equilibrium is then re-established, but it is no longer that of the beginning: the child is no longer a child, but has become an adult among the others" (*Fantastic* 163). Although this trajectory may be typical of many readerly narratives, what

Todorov has to say here doesn't quite apply to Wodehouse. As we have noted, the state of equilibrium with which Wodehouse's narratives conclude are identical to those with which they begin—the characters being perfectly symmetrical mirror images of their original selves. So even though Bertie's reservoir of experience is always expanding, growing larger with every episode, he himself never changes, never moves forward, never *learns* from the obstacles he overcomes. And it is this immutability at the level of character that makes possible the "eternal" continuity of the series itself, for nothing of Bertie's past will ever influence or change the "mythological present" (Eco, "Innovation" 169) in which he has been situated from the very beginning.

The circularity of narratives such as *The Code of the Woosters* also serves to complicate, in an intriguing way, some of their more conventional aesthetic values. For a start, it is one of the ironies of serial narratives that their hyperactivity, their overdeveloped proairesis, should ultimately lead us nowhere—that such elaborate arabesques and squiggles should end up doing little more than closing a rather futile circle. All this, we may be inclined to ask ourselves, so that Bertie could simply go back to sleep? It is also somewhat surprising that narratives with such deliberately linear trajectories, such a strong sense of teleology, should ultimately turn out to be tracing circles in the air, doubling back on themselves as if their real goal had been behind them all along. At the beginning of this chapter, I cited Jonathan Culler's observation that a reader is required to organize and understand plot as "a passage from one state to another." The end, according to Culler, "must be made a transformation of the beginning so that meaning can be drawn from the perception of resemblance and difference" (*Structuralist* 259). But what are we to make of an ending that is also a beginning? How are we to derive meaning from a narrative in which there is simply no difference between the first and last pages? By ensuring that the proairetic code achieves nothing, that closure uncloses and linearity gives rise to circularity, such narratives inevitably complicate our sense of what constitutes the readerly, thus demonstrating a remarkable ability to challenge the very aesthetic principles to which they "officially" adhere. Yet even here they manage to transform these writerly ambiguities into a source of readerly pleasure. For by liberating the discourse from the "inescapable linearity of the linguistic signifier" (Brooks, *Reading* 20), narratives such as *The Code of the Woosters* also liberate the reader, albeit temporarily, from the inescapable linearity of life. In a world of this kind, one in

which closure uncloses and linearity gives rise to circularity, there can be no tragedy—no 1914, no Sarajevo, no Somme. Here, in this idyllic universe, this zone of utopian atemporality, Bertie Wooster will always be "the gay and insouciant *boulevardier* of Bond Street and Piccadilly" (Wodehouse, *Right Ho* 247). And Jeeves, needless to say, will always be Jeeves.

Chapter 5

Triviality

Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*

I

During the Heian age (794–1186), a period of Japanese history characterized by a remarkable cultural efflorescence, two widely recognized masterpieces of world literature were produced: Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* (*Makura no soshi*) and Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*). Although my focus in this chapter will be on the first of these, I would like to begin by comparing the two, for the contrast between their dominant affective qualities—between the joyful inconsequentiality of the former and the melancholic profundity of the latter—could hardly be more pronounced. And here, too, we can detect a clear conflict of aesthetic values, reminding us once more of the opposing tendencies that have competed in literature throughout the centuries. If *Genji* privileges qualities such as density, linearity, and stability of meaning, then Sei's narrative does everything it can to achieve the opposite effect, transforming language into a "weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses" (Calvino, *Six Memos* 15).

According to Motoori Norinaga, writing in 1796, the fact that *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1001–13) refuses to uphold a morality based on imported Buddhist and Confucian principles makes it one of the first narratives to articulate a uniquely Japanese sensibility. In Murasaki's novel, he argues, "those who know the meaning of the sorrow of human existence . . . are regarded as good; and those who are not aware of the poignancy of human existence . . . are regarded as

bad."[1] Thus Genji himself, the philandering protagonist, is regarded as a good man despite the "extraordinary iniquity and immorality" of his behavior. "The purpose of *The Tale of Genji*," Norinaga concludes, "may be likened to the man who, loving the lotus flower, must collect and store muddy and foul water in order to plant and cultivate [it]. The impure mud of illicit love affairs described in the *Tale* is there not for the purpose of being admired but for the purpose of nurturing the flower of the awareness of the sorrow of human existence" (533–34). More specifically, Norinaga is referring here to an aesthetic quality known in Japanese as *mono no aware*, the "pathos of things," which describes an appreciative sensitivity to the fragility and evanescence of the phenomenal world—a sense of beauty grounded in the ephemerality of all living things. The spirit of *aware*, we learn elsewhere, "pervades all Heian literature. It is discovered in the feelings inspired by a bright spring morning and also in the sense of sadness that overcomes us on an autumn evening. Its primary mood, however, is one of gentle melancholy" (Hisamatsu Senichi qtd. in I. Morris, *World* 208). As Norinaga quite rightly observes, this sense of melancholy, this "awareness of the sorrow of human existence," dominates *The Tale of Genji*, giving rise to "a thousand miseries" and ensuring that none of the characters are ever very "far from weeping" (Murasaki, *Tale* 204, 209). Consider, for instance, the scene anticipating the death of Genji's young lover, Lady Murasaki. "[H]er beauty," we are told,

> really was sublime, and her pensive air—for she knew that her time was nearly over—was more sorrowful and more profoundly moving than anything in the world . . . With a pang she saw how happy her little reprieve had made [Genji], and she grieved to imagine him soon in despair.
>
> *"Alas, not for long will you see what you do now: any breath of wind may spill from a* hagi *frond the last trembling drop of dew."*
>
> It was true, her image fitted all too well . . . The thought was unbearable. He answered while he gazed out into the garden,
>
> *"When all life is dew and at any touch may go, one drop then the next, how I pray that you and I may leave nearly together."*
>
> He wiped the tears from his eyes . . . They made a perfect picture as they talked, one well worth seeing, but the moment could not last, as Genji well knew, though he wished it might endure a thousand years. He mourned that nothing could detain someone destined to go. (759)

And go she does, the very next morning, initiating another round of lachrymose brooding from our hero: "Waking or sleeping, Genji's tears never dried, and he spent his days and nights swathed in fog" (762).

The word *aware* appears over a thousand times in *The Tale of Genji*, and if we turn to Murasaki's diary, we discover the same lugubrious tendencies—"[a]ny *joie de vivre*," as Richard Bowring writes, being "carefully balanced by a pervasive melancholy" (xxxvi). At one point, for example, she confesses to feeling "depressed and confused," suffering "unbearable" loneliness, and "tasting the bitterness of life to the very full" (33–34). Elsewhere she offers this rather depressing vignette: "I am not the kind of person to abandon herself completely to despair. And yet, by the same token, I cannot entirely rid myself of such feelings . . . [Even] when I play my *koto* rather badly to myself in the cool breeze of the evening, I worry lest someone might hear me and recognize how I am just 'adding to the sadness of it all'" (55). And finally, in the diary's concluding pages, we are not particularly surprised to learn that "[e]verything conspires to make [her] unhappy," for the world is, above all, a "prattling [and] tiresome" place (58–59).

As I have suggested, these melancholic tendencies also find their way into *The Tale of Genji*, distinguishing it quite emphatically from that other Heian masterpiece, Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* (c. 996–1000). Of course, *The Pillow Book* is a different kind of "narrative" altogether: a jumbled miscellany of anecdotes, descriptive passages, reminiscences, essays, eclectic catalogues, and diary entries. But the main difference between the two lies in their respective narratorial sensibilities and the dominant structures of feeling out of which they emerge. If we agree with Sianne Ngai that "every literary work has an organizing quality of feeling akin to an 'atmosphere'" (174), then the emotion that most clearly dominates *The Tale of Genji* would have to be the aestheticized melancholy invoked on almost every page. In *The Pillow Book*, by contrast, a sense of delight dominates, as well as an inveterate reluctance to acknowledge tragedy or misfortune. Whereas for Murasaki the sound of rain provokes a mood of "indefinable sadness" or, at best, a "vague, lingering malaise" (*Tale* 489, 755), for Sei it is something to enjoy, just one of the many simple pleasures that punctuate her day. "In the seventh month," she writes, "when the wind blows hard and the rain is beating down, and your fan lies forgotten because of the sudden coolness of the air, it's delightful to take a midday nap snuggled up under a lightly padded kimono that gives off a faint whiff of perspiration" (47). Indeed, as we shall see, the governing aesthetic principle in Sei's narrative is not *mono no aware* but *okashi*—an adjective that is most often translated as "amusing," "delightful," or "charming." This is not a deep and sustained response to the

tragic ephemerality of the phenomenal world, but a superficial and fleeting charge of pleasure inspired by the smallest and most inconsequential things: the lingering traces of incense (183), say, or "[t]he transparent light in water as you pour it into something" (148). As one critic has pointed out, "in its making light of the tragic," *okashi* was "just the opposite of the attitude of *aware* which sought to impart to the otherwise meaningless cries of a bird or the fall of a flower a profound and moving meaning" (de Bary 45). For Sei, more often than not, rain is something to be celebrated (if it isn't just plain boring), a fallen flower is "still lovely" (71), and the cry of a bird inspires nothing but joyful elatives.

Needless to say, it is this superficiality, this enthusiasm for "the simplest trifles" (212), that has traditionally disqualified *The Pillow Book* as a serious work of literature—or at least diminished its literary value when compared to the austere grandeur of classics such as *The Tale of Genji*. In fact, Murasaki herself was probably the first to offer a critique of this kind:

> Sei Shonagon . . . was dreadfully conceited. She thought herself so clever and littered her writings with Chinese characters; but if you examined them closely, they left a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else in this way will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end, and people who have become so precious that they go out of their way to try and be sensitive in the most unpromising situations, trying to capture every moment of interest, however slight, are bound to look ridiculous and superficial. How can the future turn out well for them? (*Diary* 54)

Indeed. And Murasaki has not been the only one, over the years, to disapprove of such frivolity. According to Meredith McKinney, her most recent translator, Sei continues to occupy a rather ambivalent place within the Japanese canon: "While *The Pillow Book* is always mentioned in any list of the great Heian period classics, attention more often moves on to *The Tale of Genji*, or to the more pensive and melancholy diaries." What critics seem to find particularly troubling, even irritating, are the very attributes that from our perspective make the narrative most appealing—its "'shallow' aesthetic and 'erratic' spontaneity" (xxvii).[2] (But perhaps I am revealing something of myself here, for I see that it is common in Japan to contrast Sei with Murasaki, and "those who side with [the former] in this perceived rivalry are often characterized as vacuous and frivolous" [McKinney xxviii].) In a fascinating article on Sei's use of poetic

catalogues, Mark Morris also compares *The Tale of Genji* to *The Pillow Book*. "While Murasaki's gift," he writes, "was an ability to infuse a scene or landscape with so much mood as to produce a sort of force-field permeating the boundaries of setting and character," Sei's world is "noticeably one of exteriors." And he, too, registers the critical tendency to favor one narrative over the other, making the point that for "*Genji* devotees this dwelling on the surface of things" (40) has tended to deprive *The Pillow Book* of "high seriousness" and literary value. Generally speaking, then, those readers or critics looking for evidence in Sei's writing of the values we tend to associate with "high" literature—stability and density of meaning, unity of style, a certain moral gravity—are bound to be disappointed. The discourse simply doesn't have the patience to engage with life's more serious or "weighty" issues or to sustain for any length of time a single narrative trajectory. In places we sense it might, and in other places it actually initiates a project of this kind (see, for instance, Section 294), but it quickly tires of such drudgery and moves on to something else—something more amusing, more delightful, more charming.[3]

In this final chapter, I would like to subject Sei's "'shallow' aesthetic and 'erratic' spontaneity" to closer scrutiny. Precisely how does she manage to achieve this degree of superficiality? How does the "trivial" function as an organizing principle within *The Pillow Book*, and what impact does it have on the narrative's production of meaning? Although the circumstances surrounding its composition were undeniably tragic, Sei's narrative observes a kind of "directional taboo" that forces it to move always toward the "trivial little thing[s]" (Sei 27) and away from anything of real historical or political significance. Over the course of the chapter, I will be exploring some of the key strategies by which the discourse is able to maintain and protect this taboo. I shall begin by discussing *The Pillow Book's* commitment to inconsequentiality and its enthusiasm for a diverse range of aesthetic pleasures, all of which fall under the category of the *okashi*. In the first case, I shall argue, these tendencies reduce the narrative's capacity to generate deeper layers of meaning, while in the second they reduce the specificity of the discourse, further contributing to its lack of historical referentiality. I shall then address in greater detail the disjunctive or "erratic" quality of Sei's writing. This style of composition, I would like to suggest, serves to disrupt the chronological trajectory of history and suspend teleology, while also generating a liberating sense of spontaneity and nonchalance. Finally, I will turn my attention to the justly celebrated catalogues,

for it is here that a picture of Sei herself most clearly emerges. But of course the kind of autobiography we are offered in these enumerative passages is entirely consistent with the narrative's governing aesthetic principles, dissolving the totality of Sei's life into trivial and "insignificant" particles of meaning. In *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, Roland Barthes has used the term *biographeme* to describe the smallest possible unit of biographical discourse—an anecdote, say, or a metonymic signifier that reduces the grand narrative of a life to a few "novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities" (8). And this, I shall argue, is precisely what we find embedded within these highly personalized catalogues of likes and dislikes, preferences and prejudices: the residual traces of a unique sensibility, the (auto)biographemes of a writer who lived over a thousand years ago but whose "inimitable delight in being" (Kundera, *Testaments* 86) survives to this day.

II

In the spring or autumn of 993, Sei Shonagon entered the service of the Empress Teishi, the eldest daughter of Fujiwara no Michitaka, who at that time held the prestigious post of chancellor within the imperial court at Kyoto. For more than a century, the Fujiwara family had ensured its political dominance by marrying its daughters into the imperial family; and so although Teishi appears to have been the preferred consort of Emperor Ichijo, her elevated position at court was largely contingent on her father's continued power and prestige. In 995, however, Michitaka died, and his rival, Fujiwara no Michinaga, became chancellor in his place. For some time it seemed Teishi might retain a degree of political influence through her brother, Korechika, but in 996 he was involved in an intrigue at court and exiled, along with a younger sibling, to the provinces. Teishi's failure to provide the emperor with a male heir for almost a decade contributed to her steady decline in status, and in 1000 Michinaga was able to consolidate his position by establishing his own daughter as the first empress. Later that same year, at the age of 24, Teishi died giving birth to another girl, and with the death of her patron, Sei's service at court also came to an unceremonious end. The last reference to Sei is dated 1017, after which she vanishes from the historical record.

Although *The Pillow Book* was composed during the period immediately following Michitaka's death in 995, the consequences of this tragedy are only ever referred to obliquely, in the form of

elliptical asides.[4] In Section 136, we learn that "[a]fter the Regent had departed this life, certain events were set in train in the world. There was considerable upheaval and commotion, and Her Majesty left the palace and moved to the Konijo mansion" (143). But that is all we are told, and more often than not, Sei prefers to ignore such distressing matters altogether. The events in Section 78, for instance, take place only a month after Teishi's brothers have been exiled and while she and her immediate circle are still in mourning for her father, yet Sei chooses to focus her attention on the beauty of plum trees and the "dazzling" (70) robes of a senior courtier. Similarly, Section 73 narrates an episode that occurred in the summer of 997, by which time Teishi had been obliged to leave the imperial palace, yet it occupies itself with lively poetic exchanges and the pleasures of "moon-viewing" (64). And despite being set in the final year of Teishi's life, when she is already pregnant with the child she will die bearing, Section 222 concentrates on festive wheat cakes and more "splendid" (196) poetry. From time to time, of course, Sei does offer fleeting glimpses of the tragedies unfolding around her, as well as proleptic auguries of those yet to take place. In one passage, for example, the emperor praises the young son of a courtier, reminding "us all uneasily of the fact that [Teishi] had yet to produce a son" (111), while in another Sei herself praises Fujiwara no Michinaga, prompting the reflection that if the empress "could have lived to witness the greatness he later attained, she would have realized how right I was to find him so impressive" (129). But such glimpses are rare, and for the most part, Sei does everything she can to deprivilege these tragic episodes—consigning anything that might compromise the vivacious, carefree quality of her writing to the periphery of the narrative or beyond.[5]

As I have indicated, this refusal to engage with history or politics, however pressing the circumstances might be, constitutes a kind of directional taboo within *The Pillow Book*. The directional taboo (*kataimi*) was part of yin-yang lore and widely observed by members of the Heian aristocracy. The most common type of taboo was based on the position of certain moving deities who, having descended to Earth, would circle the compass in periodic cycles. Whenever they paused at a particular point, that direction would become temporarily "blocked" (*futagaru*), leaving travelers with two possibilities. Either they could wait until the taboo no longer pertained, or they could take a circuitous route (*katatagae*), thus avoiding the precise direction that was forbidden at the time.[6] In *The Pillow Book* we find evidence of both practices (see, for instance, pages 23 and 70), but this

directional taboo also operates, I would like to suggest, at the level of the discourse itself. Whenever something of consequence threatens to impose itself on the narrative, the direction in which that threat lies immediately becomes blocked, obliging the discourse to find some other way of proceeding, some other way of ensuring its continuity. In such places, then, one could argue that the narrative observes a self-imposed directional taboo, turning away from anything too serious, too sad, too tragic, and focusing instead on the trivial—plum trees, dazzling robes, wheat cakes—until the threat has passed and it can continue on its way.

Despite appearances, however, there *is* a story unfolding here; something is happening in *The Pillow Book*, only it's happening just around the corner, just beyond the representational range of the narrative, where the reader can't quite see it. Instead, we are offered inconsequentialities and nonoccurrences, a story with a minimal degree of substance and significance. In his classic essay, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Roland Barthes distinguishes between those narrative functions that "constitute real hinge points of [a] narrative" and those that "merely 'fill in' the narrative space separating the hinge functions." The former he describes as nuclei; the latter, as catalyzers. For a function to qualify as a nucleus, Barthes writes, "it is enough that the action to which it refers open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story, in short that it inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty . . . Between two [nuclei] however, it is always possible to set out subsidiary notations which cluster around one or other nucleus without modifying its alternative nature . . . These catalyzers are still functional, insofar as they enter into correlation with a nucleus, but their functionality is attenuated, unilateral, parasitic" (265–66). According to Barthes, nuclei are "the risky moments of a narrative. Between these points of alternative, these 'dispatchers,' the catalyzers lay out areas of safety, rests, luxuries" (266). And this, I believe, is precisely what *The Pillow Book* does—immersing the reader in the luxury of the inconsequential, while scrupulously avoiding anything that lies outside this zone of safety. As we have seen, what really "matters" to the story takes place offstage: the death of Fujiwara no Michitaka, the disgrace and exile of Teishi's brothers, her departure from the palace, even the pregnancy that will eventually kill her. These are the occurrences on which the narrative hinges, and yet what *doesn't* matter, what should merely fill the narrative space between these critical nuclei, instead saturates the entire discourse, leaving no room for anything

of real consequence. In his essay, Barthes also makes an important point about the relative interchangeability of nuclei and catalyzers. "A nucleus cannot be deleted without altering the story," he writes, "but neither can a catalyst without altering the discourse" (267). Simply put, if we add or delete a nucleus, then we no longer have the same story, whereas if we add or delete a catalyzer, we have the same story told in a different way.[7] This observation is particularly revealing when applied to *The Pillow Book*, for if almost any detail of the narrative were to be replaced—if the "colourful picture of flowering cherries" on page 148, say, became something else altogether, something equally inconsequential—it would make no difference whatsoever to the underlying "story." The discourse, as Barthes suggests, would certainly be different, but the story would remain the same. And this is what ultimately demonstrates the triviality of the narrative: the fact that it *could* be replaced in this way, the fact that it contains no essential qualities, nothing that guarantees or underwrites its specificity (aside from one or two rather starved nuclei and the translator's voluminous endnotes).

Instead of focusing on history and politics, then, *The Pillow Book* assumes a microscopic quality, zeroing in on "every trivial little thing" (27) that catches its eye: "the sight of a string of wild geese in the distant sky, very tiny" (3), the way the falling snow emphasizes the "lovely black curves" (203) of the roof tiles, or "[t]he sight of a dancer's face lit by the glow of a nearby lamp as she dozes" (92). This preference for the microcosmic also underlies the narrative's strong anecdotal tendencies. Take the following story, for instance: "Masahiro once left his shoes on the ledge where the Emperor's food is placed. There was a terrible fuss when they were found, and he innocently joined in the general excitement. The serving women and the others all went around exclaiming, 'Whose shoes can they possibly be?' Then Masahiro suddenly realized they were his, and caused a hilarious uproar by impulsively declaring, 'Good gracious, I do believe the filthy things are mine!'" (54). This is all very well; however, the reader may be forgiven for wondering whether Masahiro leaving his shoes on the ledge was really the most important thing that happened that day. Probably not, but the narrative simply doesn't care about anything else. Instead of tracing the grand trajectory of history—and she was ideally placed, remember, to do just that—Sei would prefer to regale us with inconsequential and anticlimactic anecdotes. When she goes on a pilgrimage in Section 109, to cite another example, we expect something to happen, something that will provide a justification for the story we are being told, but

no: “[A]s we crossed the river we noticed what looked like quite short stems of sweet flag and reeds growing in the water nearby, but when we had them picked they turned out to be extremely long” (118). That, believe it or not, is the point of the story; nothing else really transpires, nothing else really matters. What at first appeared to be a nucleus, something of “direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story” (Barthes, “Introduction” 265), turns out, after all, to be just another catalyzer—a “subsidiary notation” filling empty space.

In the introduction to *Marvelous Possessions*, Stephen Greenblatt acknowledges the heavy reliance on anecdote in New World travel narratives:

> As is appropriate for voyagers who thought they knew where they were going and ended up in a place whose existence they had never imagined, the discourse of travel in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance is rarely if ever interesting at the level of sustained narrative and teleological design, but gripping at the level of the anecdote. The sense of overarching scheme is certainly present in this discourse . . . but compared to the luminous universal histories of the early Middle Ages, the chronicles of exploration seem uncertain of their bearings, disorganized, fragmentary. Their strength lies not in a vision of the Holy Spirit’s gradual expansion through the world but in the shock of the unfamiliar, the provocation of an intense curiosity, the local excitement of discontinuous wonders. Hence they present the world not in a stately and harmonious order but in a succession of brief encounters, random experiences, isolated anecdotes of the unanticipated. (2)

Although such anecdotes are, for Greenblatt, “registers of the singularity of the contingent,” they are “at the same time recorded as *representative* anecdotes, that is, as significant in terms of a larger progress or pattern that is the proper subject of a history perennially deferred in the traveler’s relation of further anecdotes.” In other words, anecdotes may be “seized in passing from the swirl of experiences” (3), but they also gesture toward a larger and more coherent historical structure to which they could—if properly shaped, arranged, and interpreted—eventually contribute. It is difficult to imagine, however, a historical narrative that would benefit from many of the anecdotes on offer in *The Pillow Book*. What would “history” make of the fact that Masahiro once left his shoes on the ledge where the emperor’s food was placed? What kind of enduring historical value could a detail of this kind possibly carry? Here, too, the emphasis is on what doesn’t matter, what doesn’t transpire,

what refuses significance. And here, too, we register the narrative's reluctance to contribute anything of substance to the historical archive—to "the *grand récit* of [a] totalizing, integrated, progressive history, a history that knows where it is going" (Greenblatt, *Marvelous* 2).

At times this commitment to inconsequentiality severely impedes the narrative's capacity to generate meaning. There is, of course, always the literal or denotative meaning—and in some cases, a secondary level of meaning that signifies the principle of triviality itself—but almost nothing in the way of deeper symbolic meaning. In this respect, certain passages of *The Pillow Book* could be said to assume a haiku-like quality, generating images of great simplicity and transparence: whether it be the sound, early one morning, of the wind "rustling the bamboo" (120); the leaves lodged in "all the little spaces of [a] lattice weave [fence]" (180) the day after a typhoon; or "the lovely moment when some wormwood gets crushed by [a] carriage wheel, whose turning then carries it round and up, right to where you're sitting" (190). According to Barthes, the haiku "diminishes to the point of pure and sole designation. *It's that*, *it's thus*, says the haiku, *it's so*" (*Empire* 83). And this in turn liberates literature from its commitment to more "weighty" structures of significance: "You are entitled," the haiku says, "to be trivial, short, ordinary; enclose what you see, what you feel, in a slender horizon of words, and you will be interesting" (70).[8] In Section 100 of *The Pillow Book*, this authorization is delivered with particular clarity. "A branch of plum from which the blossoms [have] fallen arrive[s] one day from the Privy Chamber, with the message: 'What do you make of this?'" Sei's response is simple: "The flowers have already scattered" (113). The message she receives here is the message the narrative itself carries: What do you make of this? What do you make of the sound of the wind rustling the bamboo or the leaves lodged in the lattice weave fence? Indeed, what *can* we make of it? In many cases, nothing at all. We can only respond by noticing, by acceding to Sei's request that we notice, and by acknowledging the "factuality" of what she has brought to our attention. Yes, the bamboo does rustle, the leaves are lodged in the lattice weave, the wormwood does cling to the carriage wheel—yes, the flowers have already scattered. It is undeniably so.

Undeniably so, and undeniably charming, for more often than not, the narrative obliges us to notice something by labeling it *okashi*, by assigning it to this particular aesthetic category and thus justifying its presence on the page. As mentioned earlier, the adjective *okashi*

bears an antonymic relation to *mono no aware*, describing an aesthetic response based on pleasure and joy rather than their opposites. It is employed over four hundred times in *The Pillow Book* and in the translation I am using here has been most frequently rendered as "delightful," "charming," "lovely," "amusing," "entertaining," "interesting," "marvellous," and "intriguing" (Midorikawa 153).[9] A typical passage, for instance, reads as follows:

> In summer . . . it's beautiful when fireflies are dancing everywhere . . . And it's delightful [*okashi*] too to see just one or two fly through the darkness, glowing softly. Rain falling on a summer night is also lovely [*okashi*].
>
> In autumn . . . the crows, in threes and fours or twos and threes, hurrying to their roost, are a moving sight. Still more enchanting [*okashi*] is the sight of a string of wild geese in the distant sky, very tiny. (3)

The constant reiteration of this particular adjective (what Naomi Fukumori refers to as the "*okashi* effect" [20]) would appear to be a deliberate strategy on Sei's part, serving to reinforce the narrative's antitragic qualities and direct our attention away from anything that could be said to belong, more properly, to the category of *aware*.[10] It has been noted by several Japanese critics that the activity most commonly associated with *aware* is weeping, while *okashi* is typically combined with laughter. In one particularly revealing analysis of the narrative, Haraoka Fumiko has identified those diary-like passages in which the words *okashi*, *warau* ("to laugh"), and *emu* ("to smile") can be found. After dividing these passages according to whether or not they predate the death of Fujiwara no Michitaka in 995, she compiles the following table:

	okashi	warau	emu
Before (16 passages)	46	33	6
After (35 passages)	77	84	4

What becomes obvious from these statistics is that Sei has actually intensified the *okashi* effect in the episodes that take place after the sudden demise of Teishi's father. This is the event, you may recall, that initiates the series of tragedies and misfortunes that will eventually bring about the destruction of everything she values. Yet as we can see, the narrative assumes an inverse relation to its background

circumstances, becoming lighter and more carefree as the combined fortunes of Sei and her patron steadily decline. Instead of acknowledging this downward trajectory, then, Sei does everything she can to ensure the narrative's aesthetic and affective continuity—foregrounding only that which amuses, provokes laughter, and gives pleasure.

And here, too, *The Pillow Book* deliberately abjures meaning. Repeated several hundred times over 250-odd pages, the adjective *okashi* becomes a floating signifier, distributed with such profligacy throughout the narrative and applied to so many disparate experiences that it very quickly loses much of its significatory force. It's wonderful, delightful, and charming. Why? How so? In what way? It just is, that's all. In *The World of the Shining Prince*, Ivan Morris attributes the repetitive quality of Heian literature to the "poverty of the vocabulary" that writers such as Murasaki and Sei had at their disposal. "Like many languages in an early stage of development," he observes, "tenth-century Japanese was endowed with an extremely rich grammatical apparatus but a relatively limited choice of words. This applies especially to abstract adjectives. The result is that certain words tend to be greatly overworked and to lose all precision of meaning." Indeed, he goes on to say, Heian writers "almost seem to revel in the repetition of the same emotive words, whose range of meaning is so widely and thinly spread as to make accurate communication impossible" (290–91). The particularly significant point here, for our purposes, is the last one. Sei may very well have had a limited vocabulary at her disposal, yet her reliance on the term *okashi* strikes the reader as unnecessarily excessive—reducing her entire (adjectival) vocabulary to a single word, a single referential gesture. And as I have suggested, it is completely consistent with her overall aesthetic project that this should be the case, for it allows her, once more, to jettison the deeper structures of meaning that would otherwise undermine the narrative's commitment to inconsequentiality. Thus, even in the translation I am using, almost everything is described in the same way, employing the same narrow range of abstract adjectives: "enchanting" (3), "deeply moving" (44), "very touching" (47), "indescribably lovely" (93), "charming" (109), "absolutely wonderful" (218), "glorious" (225), "quite marvellous" (228), "incomparably splendid" (234), "utterly delightful" (240), and so on. In places this effect is also doubled, as when Sei characterizes Teishi's younger sister as "utterly splendid and wonderful" (109). What, we may ask ourselves, does the second adjective add to the first? And what,

for that matter, does the adverb contribute to the two adjectives it prefaces?[11] Nothing in particular, of course, but that is precisely the point: to amplify this sense of nonmeaning and nonspecificity, of excess and redundancy, by placing empty signifiers one on top of the other, like the carefully layered sleeves Sei describes "spilling out on display" (18) from passing carriages.

But I am overstating my case just slightly here, for as I observed in Chapter 1, every signifier signifies something, and in this instance the constant reiteration of the adjective *okashi* does carry some meaning. For a start, it offers another way of repudiating larger historical and political realities, while constructing an idealized, prelapsarian image of Teishi's court—a place where everything, so we are led to believe, was always delightful and charming. On a more immediate level, however, the dominance of this particular affective/aesthetic quality also serves to convey a certain kind of narratorial sensibility, a way of regarding the world that makes it possible, as Susan Sontag writes, "to be pleased with the largest number of things" ("Writing" 79) and to derive aesthetic pleasure from a virtually infinite range of sources.[12] "Whether it be plants, trees, birds or insects," Sei confesses, "I can never be insensible to anything that on some occasion or other I have heard about and remembered because it moved or fascinated me" (44). One doesn't need to look very far to find evidence of this panegyric impulse ("[e]verything that cries in the night is wonderful" [46]; "absolutely anything that's tiny is endearing" [149]; "[a]ll moonlight is moving, wherever it may be" [254]), and even those negatives the discourse does generate are almost immediately transformed into positives. The melia may be an "ugly tree," we are told, "but its flowers are lovely" (41). Ants may be "rather horrible, but they're wonderfully light creatures, and it's intriguing to see one running about over the surface of the water" (47). And sleet may be "unpleasant, but it's lovely when it falls mingled with white snowflakes" (203).

Roland Barthes has argued—quite persuasively, I believe—that literary characters are essentially composed of semes (or units of meaning) clustered around a single proper name. According to Barthes, "[w]hen identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created . . . The proper name acts as a magnetic field for the semes; referring in fact to a body, it draws the semic configuration into an evolving (biographical) tense" (*S/Z* 67–68). A similar kind of process occurs in *The Pillow Book*, only in this case the semes are really just different manifestations of the *okashi* effect, different episodes of aesthetic pleasure,

that gradually coalesce around a figure (or "magnetic field") labeled *Sei*. This configuration of eclectic preferences, in other words, generates our sense of character in the narrative, delineating a quite distinct sensibility—yet without being drawn into anything like an "evolving" or biographical tense. We come to know Sei through all the "trivial little thing[s]" (27) that give her pleasure, and this is what ultimately survives on the page: not the historical or political circumstances surrounding her life, but the simple fact that she liked drinking water at night (30) or hearing someone she loved being praised (211). This is a subject we will return to in due course, but before doing so, I would like to say a little bit more about the disjunctive or "erratic" quality of Sei's writing, for this technique also contributes a great deal to the narrative's overall sense of carefree inconsequentiality.

III

According to Ivan Morris, the "structural confusion" of *The Pillow Book* is "generally regarded as its main stylistic weakness." Those anecdotes that can be dated are "not in chronological order," the catalogues have been "placed with little attempt at logical sequence," and the arrangement of individual episodes is "unsystematic and disordered" (Introduction 12–13). However, as Morris himself observes, this undisciplined quality is precisely what makes the narrative so appealing, and over time it would give rise to a literary genre known in Japanese as *zuihitsu*. In the *zuihitsu* tradition, the writer is free to address a wide range of topics, from the poetic to the paltry, in whatever (abbreviated) form he or she chooses: anecdotes, descriptive passages, catalogues, or short essays.[13] Such fragmentary jottings, Donald Keene writes, may "be no more than an intriguing sentence or two, or [they may] extend over several pages." Yet "[i]n the end, after reading a series of seemingly unrelated anecdotes and impressions, we may nevertheless feel a great sense of intimacy with the writer, much as if we had read his [or her] diary" (9). In a similar way, *The Pillow Book* obliges us to follow every last deviation of the narratorial consciousness as it moves rapidly, impulsively, between different topics, registers, styles, and genres.[14] Thus, in the space of just 12 pages, we are offered a list of things that create the appearance of deep emotion ("plucking your eyebrows" [75], for one); an episode describing Sei's return to court after a brief absence in 997; an anecdote about a visiting beggar in "horrible grimy clothes" (76); several poetic exchanges on a diverse range of topics; an attempt, in the winter of 998, to estimate

just how long a pile of snow would last before melting (ten days? a week or two?); a list of splendid things (Chinese brocade, tinted Buddhist images, the color violet "wherever it's found" [87]); and another catalogue listing things of elegant beauty (a letter "tied to a sprig of willow," for instance, or a "charming cat with a white tag on her red collar" [87]).

This tendency to wander from topic to topic makes *The Pillow Book* another good example of "loiterature," the "leisurely mode of writing" (Chambers 28) we discussed in some detail in Chapter 2. As a reminder, here's how Ross Chambers characterizes the typical loiterly narrative:

> These texts . . . resist contextualization—being penned into a single category as either this or that—because they are themselves all the time shifting context, now this, then that. They're sites of endless *intersection*, and consequently their narrator's attention is always divided between one thing and some other thing, always ready and willing to be distracted. But that's how they give pleasure: they enact a relaxation of the constraints by which one's attention is held and one's nose kept to some grindstone or other; they figure the mobility and freedom of the libido, attacking all possible objects of attention without attaching itself to any. And that's why such pleasure is subversive: it incorporates and enacts—in a way that *may* be quite unintended—a criticism of the disciplined and the orderly, the hierarchical and the stable, the methodical and the systematic, showing them to be unpleasurable, that is, alienating. (9–10)

This perfectly describes *The Pillow Book*, for it, too, has no particular place to go and takes its time getting there. It, too, defies categorization, changing genres and styles whenever it pleases. And it, too, demonstrates a reluctance (or inability) to focus on one particular subject for any length of time. After reading all 1,120 pages of *The Tale of Genji*, we are left with an overwhelming sense of industry: the sustained labor that went into composing the story and (quite frankly) the labor that goes into reading it. But Sei's narrative carries itself rather differently. In this case, we come away with a strong sense of the leisurely (or as Chambers would put it, the loiterly): the leisure that made its composition possible in the first place (how else could such unmitigated frivolity be justified or even possible?), the leisurely nature in which it was written, and the leisurely way in which we are encouraged to consume it—drifting, along with the narrator, from one trivial little thing to another, always ready to be distracted, always looking for new sources of

aesthetic pleasure. And in this respect, too, Chambers is quite right; pleasure of this kind does take on a subversive quality, refusing to endorse all the "good" literary values that we are supposed to look for in a narrative: significance, linearity, consistency, order, closure, stability of meaning, and a clear distinction between what matters (plot nuclei) and what does not (descriptive detail and other "inessential" catalyzers). In *The Pillow Book*, notably, the narrative is free to do whatever it likes, and we are free to tag along, enjoying the many dilatory pleasures to which this form of "literary wandering" (Washburn 13) gives rise.

It is inevitable that the use of the *zuihitsu* method should also have a particularly disruptive influence on the narrative's chronological trajectory. According to Peter Brooks, there is an internal energy that drives all narratives forward, "connecting beginning and end across the middle and making of that middle—what we read *through*—a field of force" (*Reading* 47). This energy, he argues, is ultimately generated by a "dynamic of desire" (38): "the desire to wrest beginnings and ends from the uninterrupted flow of middles, from temporality itself; the search for that significant closure that would illuminate the sense of an existence, the meaning of life" (140). What is especially interesting about *The Pillow Book*, however, is the way in which it resists these traditional narratological imperatives. It dissipates its energies on insignificant fripperies (catalyzers); it refuses to provide "significant closure," demonstrating no interest whatsoever in achieving a full and final predication of meaning; and it deliberately suppresses its own beginning and ending so that in fact it becomes *all* middle and nothing else—or perhaps more precisely, it offers a multitude of beginnings and endings, beginnings and endings on every page, but none that would seem to qualify as the *real* beginning or the *real* ending.[15] Of course, *The Pillow Book* does eventually come to an end (on page 256 of my edition), but because of the narrative's disjunctive and fragmentary quality, this ending doesn't conclude the story; it merely terminates the discourse. And because the termination of the story precedes the termination of the discourse, when it does arrive, this real ending, somewhere in the middle of the narrative, the reader passes over it without noticing—as does the discourse itself, which is simply too preoccupied with cherry trees, roof tiles, and misplaced shoes to have any intimation of what it is missing.

But why should Sei want to disrupt the chronology of her narrative in this way? Why should she be so averse to the possibility of a genuine ending, one in which termination coincides with closure?

For the very simple reason, I would argue, that history failed to supply her with the ending she wanted. If she were to adhere to a strict chronology, Sei would be obliged to conclude the narrative with everything it has tried so assiduously to avoid: the epidemic of 995 that killed Fujiwara no Michitaka, the exile of Teishi's brothers in 996, and the death of the empress herself in 1000. So instead she does her best to disrupt this trajectory by employing strategies of antichronicity (in which episodes are "dated in erratic and contradictory ways" [Prince, "Postcolonial" 378]) and achronicity (in which episodes are liberated from all "dependence, even inverse dependence, on the chronological sequence of the story" [Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 84]). Such strategies serve to deprive the narrative of the ending that history itself would ultimately supply—or at least to bury it as deeply as possible within the discourse, to conceal it among 326 different beginnings and 326 different endings, so that we are never quite sure which one is the real thing and which one the decoy. In fact, it soon becomes clear that the digressive, antilinear qualities of *The Pillow Book* don't simply retard the progress of history but freeze it altogether, suspending the narrative in an eternal present tense. "Seeing her splendour," Sei writes at one point, "we [longed] for Her Majesty to continue just like this for a thousand years" (18). And the narrative itself does everything it can to ensure that this will indeed be the case—guaranteeing that even if the discourse must necessarily come to an end (as it does on page 256), the glory days of the court, the perfect world Sei has constructed, will last forever.[16]

As noted earlier, these digressive tendencies also give *The Pillow Book* a strong sense of spontaneity, further contributing to the narrative's light, loiterly tone. Time and again, we are privy to Sei's thought processes as she writes: qualifying what she has said, editing and reediting her utterances, correcting and even contradicting what has gone before. The following passage, from Section 22, demonstrates this quite plainly: "I can't bear men who consider women who serve at court to be frivolous and unseemly," she declares. "Though mind you, one can see why they would . . . And have you ever heard tell of a lady who served at court shyly hiding herself [away]? A gentleman wouldn't come across as many people as we gentlewomen do—though probably they do while they're at court, it's true" (22). Here we are offered two declarative sentences, but each is subjected to further "editing" in the form of additional qualifying clauses. No, the narrative is constantly saying, that's not quite right; let me put it another way, let me rephrase. And so it does, repeatedly. "I never

intended this book to be seen by others," Sei tells us in an aside, "so I've written whatever came into my mind" (140). But the crucial point, really, is that she has written whatever comes into her mind *as it comes into her mind*, thus calling attention to the narrative's leisurely compositional procedures and generating its second major affective quality: nonchalance.

When Sei first arrived at court in 993, she was particularly impressed by the casual confidence with which the other gentlewomen performed their duties. "Beyond the pillars," she remembers, "a crowd of ladies was sitting packed close together round a long brazier, their Chinese jackets informally slipped back from their shoulders, and I was filled with envy to witness their easy nonchalance. I watched as they carried messages to and fro, stood or sat, came and went, without a trace of diffidence, chatting and smiling and laughing together" (170). Over time, of course, she would learn to carry herself with the same kind of "easy nonchalance," but more significantly, this courtly virtue would also find its way into the narrative she was writing.[17] Indeed, in several cases, it does so quite explicitly. At one point, for example, Sei describes a pair of sleeves that have been "overscrupulously" arranged—"so much so that someone of taste might find the effect if anything a bit repellent" (97). This aesthetic preference also applies to the poetry she discusses. When composing poetry, we are told, one should never be "too constrained by wanting to create something pedantically correct" (100–1); and even a good poem can be ruined if it is recited with a "ridiculous amount of poetic feeling" (36). But above all, it is the discourse itself that internalizes this particular courtly virtue, for like the gentlewomen Sei describes, it, too, carries its messages to and fro without diffidence, "chatting and smiling and laughing" with the reader as it does so. Consider the following passage, for instance. "The *shinobu* fern is very touching," Sei writes. "I also like wayside grasses and blady grass, and I particularly like wormwood. Mountain sedge, creeping fern, mountain indigo, beach mulberry, kudzu vine, bamboo grass, woody vine, shepherd's purse and rice seedlings. The *asaji* reed is also charming" (57). This kind of writing very quickly takes on a phatic quality, communicating to the reader the affability of the discourse, its desire to pass the time of day, and very little else. Rather than striving to achieve a "commanding structure of significance" (Bersani 53), that is to say, rather than trying to make of these trivial preferences something *worth narrating* (as "good" literature should), *The Pillow Book* is perfectly content to keep on chatting, plying the reader with whatever amiable banalities may come to mind: "[T]he *kamatsuka*, though it doesn't look important

enough to be worthy of particular attention, is very sweet . . . It's written with characters meaning 'wild geese arriving'" (58); "I love it when you open the lattice shutters . . . at daybreak, and a sudden gust of stormy wind stings your face" (180); "Some people wear gloss-yellow robes, but I . . . much prefer white" (231); and so on.

More than anything, though, it is the sheer simplicity of such passages that generates their air of "easy nonchalance." And this brings us back, once more, to the notion of leisure, for there is no sense of industry attached to discourse of this type, no evidence of the "atrocious labor" that Flaubert associated with the process of writing (qtd. in Barthes, "Flaubert" 297).[18] Nor is this the "intensely elaborated kind of simplicity" (Morley 201) that over time takes on a certain semiotic density and carries within it the fossilized traces of hard labor. On the contrary, the simplicity of *The Pillow Book* seems to have been achieved without any effort whatsoever on Sei's part—almost every line being designed to convey, at a secondary level of meaning, the "ease" with which it was originally put together. Unlike Flaubert, in other words, who applied a labor theory of value to literature, Sei attaches aesthetic value to the *absence* of labor, to compositional facility and pleasure.[19] Moreover, such implied effortlessness ultimately influences the way in which we as readers relate to the narrative, persuading us that we, too, might have been capable of producing these (rather ordinary) sentences had we been so inclined, jotting them down as casually and spontaneously as Sei herself once did. After all, anyone can write a list, can't they? I have already mentioned some of the similarities between Sei's prose style and the traditional Japanese haiku, and here, too, the correspondence is striking. According to Barthes, "[t]he haiku has this rather fantasmagorical property: that we always suppose that we ourselves can write such things easily. We tell ourselves: what could be more accessible to spontaneous writing than this . . . *It is evening, in autumn / All I can think of / Is my parents*" (*Empire* 69). Indeed; and what could be more accessible to spontaneous writing than this:

> [241] *Things that just keep passing by*—A boat with its sail up.
> People's age.
> Spring. Summer. Autumn. Winter.

Or this:

> [242] *Things that no one notices*—All the inauspicious days.
> The ageing of people's mothers. (Sei 205)

This is writing that quite clearly distances itself from authorial industry, from the notion of style as suffering, and instead generates an air of "lazy elegance" (Berger 298)—assuring the reader, yet again, that nothing could have been easier, more leisurely, more loiterly, than the composition of these simple lines.[20]

I have thus far been proposing that *The Pillow Book* observes a kind of directional taboo that forces it to retreat from history and politics. Instead of addressing these "worldly" matters, it focuses on two intersecting categories: (1) whatever is inessential to the narrative, carrying a minimal degree of meaning or significance; and (2) whatever could be described as *okashi*, whether it be a dancing firefly, a fragment of Chinese verse, or a cherry tree. In the first case, I have argued, these strategies reduce the narrative's capacity to produce broader connotative meaning, while in the second they reduce the specificity of the discourse, further contributing to its lack of historical referentiality. I have also discussed in some detail the narrative's disjunctive quality—its tendency to move rapidly between different topics, genres, and styles. This rejection of linearity, I have suggested, serves to disrupt the chronological trajectory of history while also emphasizing Sei's leisurely compositional procedures. As we shall see, however, all of these strategies are most effectively realized in the narrative's use of catalogues—in the enumerative passages, the eclectic inventories of likes and dislikes, that delineate with such clarity their author's unique sensibility.

IV

The use of catalogues in *The Pillow Book* constitutes one of its most striking formal features. Essentially, there are two different types of catalogue embedded within the narrative. The first simply provides examples of famous ferry crossings, bodies of water, residences, villages, bridges, and so on. The second enumerates different "things" that have inspired in Sei some kind of aesthetic or affective response: "refined and elegant things," "dispiriting things," "things that make you feel nostalgic," "startling and disconcerting things," "things that give you pleasure,"[21] and so on. As suggested above, these catalogues serve to reinforce many of the narrative's underlying aesthetic strategies. For a start, they almost always privilege the trivial by compiling inventories of free-floating catalyzers liberated from their servitude to nuclei. They also tend to focus our attention on the *okashi*—the charming and amusing—and even when this is not the case (e.g., "infuriating things"), the triviality of what is said ultimately mitigates

the core grievance: “A guest who arrives when you have something urgent to do, and stays talking for ages” (26). And finally, the use of catalogues greatly contributes to the disjunctive or “erratic” quality of the narrative—disrupting its chronological trajectory and forcing it to enter a kind of loiterly or dilatory space where teleological progress is suspended, causal logic collapses, and “thought wanders off in sweet lazy liberty” (Kundera, *Art* 162). Just the one example, at this stage, should suffice:

> [39] *Refined and elegant things*—A girl’s over-robe of white on white over pale violet-grey. The eggs of the spot-billed duck. Shaved ice with a sweet syrup, served in a shiny new metal bowl. A crystal rosary. Wisteria flowers. Snow on plum blossoms. An adorable little child eating strawberries. (46)

In an essay on Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag describes an aesthetic stance that makes it “possible to be pleased with the largest number of things” and argues that the literary device that “best projects this attitude is the list”—the “whimsical aesthete polyphony that juxtaposes things and experiences of a starkly different, often incongruous nature, turning them all, by this technique, into artifacts, aesthetic objects.” Here, Sontag concludes, “elegance equals the wittiest acceptances” (“Writing” 79). And this is precisely what the catalogue offers Sei: an opportunity to be “pleased with the largest number of things,” to derive aesthetic pleasure from an extraordinarily diverse range of sources, and to derive *additional* pleasure from the process of cataloguing itself, from the sheer hedonistic joy of bringing all these images together on the same page.[22] Like the haiku, once more, this kind of classificatory listing also requires us to acknowledge the simple *thingness* of things, so that every utterance becomes a distinct narratorial gesture, directing the reader’s attention toward each individual object in turn: an egg, a bowl of shaved ice, a crystal rosary. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes himself discusses the appeal of the catalogue—the pleasure we derive from the ineluctable “persistence of the thing.” Having just finished reading a passage from Stendhal in which there “occurs a naming of foods: milk, buttered bread, cream cheese, preserves, Maltese oranges, [and] sugared strawberries,” he tries to identify the precise source of the readerly pleasure such a list produces:

> Is [the pleasure of this list] another pleasure of pure representation (experienced therefore solely by the greedy reader)? But I have no

> fondness for milk or so many sweets, and I do not project much of myself into the detail of these dishes. Something else occurs, doubtless having to do with another meaning of the word "representation." When, in an argument, someone *represents* something to his interlocutor, he is only allegating the *final state* of reality, its intractability. Similarly, perhaps, the novelist, by citing, naming, *noticing* food (by treating it as notable), imposes on the reader the final state of matter, what cannot be transcended, withdrawn . . . *That's it!* This cry is not to be understood as an illumination of the intelligence, but as the very limit of nomination, of the imagination. In short, there are two realisms: the first deciphers the "real" (what is demonstrated but not seen); the second speaks "reality" (what is seen but not demonstrated); the novel, which can mix these two realisms, adds to the intelligible of the "real" the hallucinatory tail of "reality": astonishment that in 1791 one could eat "a salad of oranges and rum," as one does in restaurants today: the onset of historical intelligibility and the persistence of the thing (orange, rum) in *being there*. (45–46)

Here, as was also the case in his analysis of the haiku, Barthes is celebrating (or simply enjoying) a representation of reality based on designation rather than interpretation, metaphor, or metonymy. ("*It's that*, *it's thus*, says the haiku, *it's so*" [Barthes, *Empire* 83].) In *The Pillow Book*, similarly, Sei's classificatory listing forces us to notice these disparate entities (by treating them as notable) and to acknowledge their factuality, the "persistence of the thing [an egg, a bowl of shaved ice, a crystal rosary] in *being there*." Only thus is she able to preserve the sublime inconsequentiality of the object: removing what is "essential" from the narrative, leaving only what doesn't matter, what carries minimal meaning, what contributes nothing of significance to the discourse.

But something does remain embedded within these catalogues, something does survive the narrative's systematic retreat from meaning, and that something is Sei herself—or more precisely, perhaps, the semiotic traces of her authorial sensibility. By gathering often disparate entities under a single classificatory rubric, all catalogues impose a semblance of order on the world, and for this reason they tend to privilege the organizing subject responsible for giving the world this particular shape, for establishing this particular "order of things" rather than any other. Think of Jorge Luis Borges's famous (and imaginary) Chinese encyclopedia entry,[23] for instance, or the tireless inventorizing of Georges Perec.[24] Such catalogues create a world, a discursive universe, shaped by a quite specific sensibility, one that leaves residual traces of itself within the categories it

creates. Simply put, catalogues give us the opportunity (however limited or circumscribed) to arrange the world according to our own cognitive categories—accepting one thing, rejecting another, codifying, classifying, and regulating until the list is complete. A project of this kind, as Umberto Eco observes, "confer[s] unity on a set of objects that, no matter how dissimilar among themselves [they may be], comply with a *contextual pressure*, in other words they are related for their being . . . all in the same place" (*Infinity* 113–16). In the case of *The Pillow Book*, this contextual pressure is provided by Sei's unique configuration of proclivities, attitudes, preferences, and prejudices, all of which provide the catalogues with their organizational logic and structural coherence. Although her sensibility could be considered representative of an entire cultural/aesthetic ethos, Sei's status as central focalizing figure within the narrative ensures that her individual perspective, her personal tastes, are afforded particular salience. Granted, her contemporaries may have agreed, with complete unanimity, on the beauty of flowering cherry trees, but would they necessarily have listed a dried sprig of *aoi* under the category of "things that make you feel nostalgic" (30)? Or pine trees and mountain villages under the category of "things that gain by being painted" (119)? These flashes of individuality are what give the narrative its particularly subjective quality, providing stroboscopic glimpses of a genuine authorial presence. And needless to say, this, too, is consistent with the narrative's governing aesthetic principles: resisting the chronological trajectory of the traditional autobiography, its "evolving" (auto)biographical tense, and instead collapsing the totality of Sei's life into particles of disjointed (and largely achronic) meaning.

In *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, as we have already noted, Barthes refers to such particles of meaning as "biographemes." As part of his analysis of these three very different writers, he makes an allowance for the "amicable return of the author," thus revising his earlier position on the subject.[25] However, the authorial figure who makes this return has no historical or biographical unity; "he is a mere plural of 'charms,' the site of a few tenuous details . . . the source of vivid novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities." Consequently, Barthes writes,

> what I get from Sade's life is not the spectacle, albeit grandiose, of a man oppressed by an entire society because of his passion, it is not the solemn contemplation of a fate, it is, *inter alia*, that Provencal way in which Sade says "milli" (mademoiselle) Rousset, or milli Henriette, or

> milli Lépinai, it is his white muff when he accosts Rose Keller, his last games with the Charenton linen seller (in her case, I am enchanted by the linens); what I get from Fourier's life is his liking for *mirlitons* (little Parisian spice cakes), his belated sympathy for lesbians, his death among the flowerpots; what I get from Loyola's life are not the saint's pilgrimages, visions, mortifications, and constitutions, but only his "beautiful eyes, always a little filled with tears." . . . [W]ere I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to "biographemes" whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion. (8–9)

At the end of the book, Barthes provides examples of how this fragmentation of biographical discourse might be put into practice. In a brief section entitled "Lives," he reduces the 74 years of Sade's life to 22 (listed) biographemes. Sade, we are told, liked theater costumes and dogs (entries 5 and 16), "feared and immensely disliked" the sea (entry 13), and was prevented from reading Rousseau's *Confessions*, in the year 1783, by the penitentiary authorities at Vincennes (entry 17) (174–81). The life of Fourier, on the other hand, dwindles to a mere twelve entries, and here we learn that he hated old cities (entry 4), that he survived the Terror "only at the cost of repeated lies" (entry 6), and that in his old age he surrounded himself with cats and flowers (entry 10) (183–84). In these passages, Barthes would appear to be deliberately "trivializing" his subjects' lives, replacing biographical nuclei (those episodes that are supposed to guarantee and justify their place in history) with inessential catalyzers. And by doing so, by reducing the lives of these historical figures to the level of anecdote, he manages to disrupt the teleological trajectory of the traditional biography—refusing, as Sei did previously, to contribute anything of substance to "the *grand récit* of [a] totalizing, integrated, progressive history, a history that knows where it is going." Thus, in Loyola's case, Barthes ignores the "pilgrimages, visions, mortifications, and constitutions" around which a traditional biography would be structured, focusing instead on the saint's "beautiful eyes, always a little filled with tears." And in his account of Sade's life, he bypasses "the spectacle, albeit grandiose, of a man oppressed by an entire society because of his passion" in order to discuss what Sade was wearing on a particular night in 1768. In other words, rather than producing a biographical narrative that offers, in the process of its unfolding, some sense of internal

logic and thematic coherence, Barthes leaves us with nothing more substantial than a series of vaguely evocative images: "Sade's white muff, Fourier's flowerpots, Ignatius's Spanish eyes" (9).

Of course, this is precisely what Sei also does in *The Pillow Book*. Instead of composing a "proper" autobiography, one that traces her life at court in a linear and progressive way, she collapses her identity into a disconnected series of *autobiographemes*: "a few tenuous details," some "vivid novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities." These autobiographemes can be found in various places throughout the narrative, but they emerge most clearly in the catalogues enumerating Sei's likes and dislikes. Here, for example, we learn that she likes ceremonial dances, tiny lotus leaves, good-quality writing paper, the sound of the thirteen-stringed *koto*, and having her poetry praised; or, conversely, that she doesn't like mosquitoes, loud sneezes, the spindle tree ("Nothing need be said on the subject" [43]), spilling things, and people who express themselves poorly in writing. In Barthes's own autobiography, he compiles a similar list of likes (the piano, coffee, Médoc wine, having change, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, etc.) and dislikes (the harpsichord, Miró, tautologies, telephoning, spontaneity, etc.), and here, too, he argues that such biographemes serve to delineate an authorial presence within the narrative. "*I like, I don't like:* this is of no importance to anyone; this, apparently, has no meaning. And yet all this means: *my body is not the same as yours*" (*Roland* 116–17). The catalogues of likes and dislikes that fill *The Pillow Book* would appear to be saying the same thing, delineating the same presence. For in these passages we as readers are also brought into contact with the body of the author, required to familiarize ourselves with her preferences and prejudices, and obliged to respond in some way to her specific tastes—to recognize the places where our respective pleasures converge and diverge, and to acknowledge, ultimately, the persistence of this particular sensibility, this particular body, this particular set of likes and dislikes, in *being there*.

I suggested earlier that Sei's use of catalogues in *The Pillow Book* serves to reinforce many of the narrative's underlying aesthetic strategies: privileging the trivial, foregrounding the "things that give [one] pleasure" (Sei 210), and greatly contributing to the fragmentation of the discourse. But that is only part of the story, for as we make our way through the narrative, it gradually becomes clear that Sei has subjected her authorial identity to the same process of "lightening" that the narrative itself has undergone. For one thing, as we have seen, she deliberately reduces the biographical substance of her

life to a series of trivial catalyzers, ignoring episodes of genuine historical significance (epidemics, political intrigues, fatal pregnancies) in favor of what simply doesn't matter: her enthusiasm for ceremonial dances, say, or her aversion to mosquitoes. Disregarding one of the dominant aesthetic values of her day (*mono no aware*), Sei also consistently stresses the delightful and charming nature of her existence. "Overall," she declares in the narrative's final pages, "I have chosen to write about the things that delight . . . I merely wrote for my personal amusement [*tawabure ni*] things that I myself have thought and felt" (255–56).[26] And finally, by collapsing her identity into a disjointed series of autobiographemes, Sei manages to disrupt the chronological trajectory of her own life, entering the same loiterly or dilatory space as her narrative—a space just slightly removed from history, where teleological progress is suspended and the discourse afforded the luxury to do as it pleases. Here, in this dilatory space, Sei herself becomes something of a floating signifier, a "magnetic field" around which particles of meaning gradually coalesce. Like Holly Golightly, that is to say, whose carefree "hither and yonning" (Capote, *Breakfast* 54) we discussed in Chapter 1, she ultimately dissolves into discourse—into the "sliver of writing, the fragment of code" (Barthes, *Empire* 55). And that is where the residual traces of her sensibility can be found to this day, a thousand years later, embedded within these autobiographical passages, these intimate inventories, like leaves lodged in a lattice weave fence.

Notes

Introduction

1. In this regard, there is a clear parallel between my objective here and Peter Brooks's project in *The Melodramatic Imagination*: "There is not in this study an attempt to 'cover' the field of melodrama even as so defined: no attempt to give a coherent history of the genre or a full conspectus of its varieties. Since my primary interest is in deriving the melodramatic from melodrama, in defining and sharpening the adjective by the substantive, it seemed best to concentrate on a body of material which, under scrutiny, would permit me to disengage the typical structures and ambitions of the genre" (xii).
2. For one fascinating example of this ubiquity, see Herzog.
3. Moretti is referring here to Diderot's dramatic *genre sérieux*; however, the same thing could be said of the realist novel, which by 1864 was already well established as "*la grande forme sérieuse*" (Edmond and Jules de Goncourt qtd. in Moretti 368).
4. In the eighteenth century, as Lionel Trilling observes, art was "closely associated with luxury—with the pleasure or at least the comfort of the consumer" (176). By the early twentieth century, however, Western aesthetics had developed "an antagonism to the principle of pleasure," seeking "gratification in [what Freud called] unpleasure" (179). Great art was no longer "consumer-directed and comfortable" (178), but instead challenging, discomforting, and alienating.
5. Similarly, in his classic study of the cultural significance of play, Johan Huizinga argues that Western culture underwent a "fatal shift towards over-seriousness" (198) at the beginning of the nineteenth century. "Even art and letters," he writes, "once the 'first fine careless rapture' of Romanticism had exhausted itself, seemed to give up their age-old association with play as something not quite respectable. Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism and the rest of that dull catalogue of literary and pictorial coteries were all emptier of the play-spirit than any of the earlier styles had ever been. Never had an age taken itself with more portentous seriousness. Culture ceased to be 'played'" (192).
6. For more on the playful tendencies of this "third period," see Motte.
7. I have found Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* particularly instructive in this regard, and I am also indebted to her for having led me to Dufrenne.

8. I am very grateful to Elizabeth Cowling for her help in identifying this painting.
9. Some years later, incidentally, Williams would characterize the structure of feeling as a "pattern of impulses, restraints, [and] tones, for which the best evidence [is] often the actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing" (*Politics* 159).
10. Of course, lightness as an aesthetic quality surfaces from time to time in critical studies of specific narratives—see, for instance, Gabelman, Soderholm, or Ricciardi—yet for some reason the term itself has never received the sustained scrutiny it so richly deserves.
11. "If eternal return is the heaviest of burdens," Kundera writes, "then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness. But is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid? . . . The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than the air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness? . . . The only certainty is: the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all" (4–5). For more on this subject, see Kundera, *Art* 136–37.
12. "[M]y working method," Calvino says, "has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language" (3).
13. See Ashcroft 8.
14. Indeed, David Damrosch goes so far as to define world literature as writing that *necessarily* gains in translation. "Literary language," he argues, is "language that either gains *or* loses in translation, in contrast to nonliterary language, which typically does neither. The balance of credit and loss remains a distinguishing mark of national versus world literature: literature stays within its national or regional tradition when it usually loses in translation, whereas works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses [being] offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range." It follows from this, Damrosch concludes, that "the study of world literature should embrace translation far more actively than it has usually done to date" (289).
15. "The sensibility of an era," Sontag goes on to say in a footnote, "is not only its most decisive, but also its most perishable, aspect. One may capture the ideas (intellectual history) and the behavior (social history) of an epoch without ever touching upon the sensibility or taste which informed those ideas, that behavior" (276).

Chapter 1

1. In this chapter, I shall be using the term *symbolic code* more loosely than Barthes does in *S/Z*, to designate the entire system of symbolic and connotative meaning generated by literary narratives.
2. The term *literal* here refers to the "zero degree" of meaning that is "authorized by the . . . simplest of the existing dictionaries, the one authorized by the state of a given language in a given historical moment, the one that every member of a community of healthy native speakers cannot deny" (Eco, *Limits* 36).
3. For more on meaninglessness as a "theme" in Camus, see Barthes, "Literature" 272.
4. In this respect, rather surprisingly, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* resembles the *Odyssey* as described by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*. Every aspect of the *Odyssey*, he writes, is narrated with such a "complete externalization of all the elements of the story and of their interconnections as to leave nothing in obscurity" (4). The Homeric style "knows only a foreground" (7); it "conceal[s] nothing," it "contain[s] no teaching and no secret second meaning." And for this reason, Auerbach concludes, "Homer can be analyzed . . . but he cannot be interpreted" (13).
5. Umberto Eco has usefully distinguished between semantic and critical interpretation, observing that "many artistic devices, for instance, stylistic violation of the norm, or defamiliarization, seem to work . . . as self-focusing appeals" (*Limits* 55), thus encouraging the latter.
6. This is not to suggest, of course, that Capote's novel renders *all* criticism redundant—rather that the function of criticism in this particular case should be, as Sontag puts it, "to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*" ("Against" 14).
7. Similarly, there is the question of José Ybarra-Jaegar's identity, a "mystery" (Capote, *Breakfast* 46) resolved over the course of a single weekend—and two pages.
8. Reading this description, one may be reminded of Tintin, whose round, featureless face was aptly described by his creator as "the degree zero of typeage" (Hergé qtd. in McCarthy 33).
9. I am, with this phrase, deliberately inverting Stephen Greenblatt's notion of "strategic opacity"—a term he uses to describe the "technique of radical excision" employed by Shakespeare in his late tragedies. According to Greenblatt, "Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays, that he could provoke in the audience and in himself a peculiarly passionate intensity of response, if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of a strategic opacity" (*Will* 323–24).
10. Of course, it is also important to acknowledge Holly's occasional ambivalence toward this kind of mobility: "[I]t's better to look at the

sky than live there," she later declares. "Such an empty place; so vague. Just a country where the thunder goes and things disappear" (Capote, *Breakfast* 69–70).

11. This apt phrase comes from Byron's description of Lady Adeline in Canto XVI of *Don Juan*: "So well she acted all and every part / By turns with that vivacious versatility, / Which many people take for want of heart. / They err; 'tis merely what is called mobility, / A thing of temperament and not of art, / Though seeming so, from its supposed facility, / And false though true, for surely they're sincerest, / Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest" (515). (The other key phrase Byron uses in this passage, "false through true," may also bring to mind O. J. Berman's description of Holly as a "real phony"—someone who "believes all this crap she believes" [32].)
12. See Barthes, "Lesson."

Chapter 2

1. For more on Machado's relative obscurity outside Brazil, see Sontag, "Afterlives."
2. These earlier novels are *Ressurreição* (1872), *A Mão e a Luva* (1874), *Helena* (1876), and *Iaiá Garcia* (1878).
3. It is worth noting, however, that for Schwarz, "contrary to what a breaking of rules might make one suppose, the spirit of Machado's work was incisively realist, propelled as much by an implacable social logic as by the task of capturing its peculiarly Brazilian character" ("*Posthumous*" 818). More specifically, Schwarz argues that Machado's stylistic irreverence articulates a certain ideological ambivalence on the part of the Brazilian élite: "They wanted to be part of the progressive and cultured West, at that time already openly bourgeois (the norm), without that affecting their being, in practice, and with equal authenticity, members and beneficiaries of the last large slave-owning system in that same West (the infringement). Now, was there a problem in figuring simultaneously as a slave-owner and as an enlightened individual? For anyone concerned about moral coherence, the contradiction could be embarrassing . . . In other words, and always keeping the nature of Machado's humor in mind: the Europeanizing sectors of Brazilian society did participate in bourgeois civilization, though in a peculiar fashion, at somewhat of a distance, which made them invoke the authority of that civilization and refuse to obey it, alternately and indefinitely" (*Master* 24–25).
4. Carnival, as Daniel Touro Linger writes, is "sometimes described as a gigantic *brincadeira* (an entertainment, game, or joke), and what one does . . . during Carnival is to *brincar*" (to play, flirt, joke, or tease) (78).
5. See Barthes, "Reality."

6. I shall be discussing the distinction between these two functions in greater detail in Chapter 5.
7. As we saw in Chapter 1, Barthes also acknowledges the ambivalence of the phrase *et cetera*: “[T]his last attribute, like any *et cetera*, censors what is not named, that is, what must be both concealed and pointed out” (*S/Z* 70).
8. It might be worth noting, at this stage, the restraint that also characterizes the novel’s obviously metafictional tendencies. Like the prerealist eighteenth-century narratives it takes as its model, the *Posthumous Memoirs* does everything it can to foreground its own fictional qualities, to “lay bare” its formal or structural devices. But here, too, Brás is careful not to go too far. He may challenge the referential function of the discourse, he may lay bare the device, but he is careful not to destroy it altogether, for to do so would bring about the destruction of the narrative itself. If he were to remove all vestiges of referentiality, there would simply be nothing left to communicate: no discourse, no message, only static interference or pure silence. And so Brás is obliged to make the compromise that necessarily underwrites every literary utterance. He is forced, in Barthes’s words, to “[give] the imaginary the formal guarantee of the real . . . while preserving in the sign the ambiguity of a double object, at once believable and false” (*Writing* 33).
9. I shall be returning to the subject of fictional pacing and narrative value in greater detail in Chapter 3.
10. Incidentally, Pratt uses Machado’s *Dom Casmurro* (1899) as one of her examples in this study, arguing that the narrator of that novel quite deliberately violates the Gricean rules of quantity and quality.
11. Reading such condensed summaries, one may be reminded of the celebrated passage in *Sentimental Education* where Flaubert compresses the sixteen years between 1851 and 1867 into eight concise sentences: “He travelled the world. He tasted the melancholy of packet ships, the chill of waking under canvas, the boredom of landscapes and monuments, the bitterness of broken friendship. He returned home. He went into society, and he had affairs with other women. They were insipid beside the endless memory of his first love. And then the vehemence of desire, the keen edge of sensation itself, had left him. His intellectual ambitions were fading too. The years went by; and he resigned himself to the stagnation of his mind and the apathy that lived in his heart” (451). But perhaps a more obvious precursor would be the eighteenth-century *conte philosophique*, which, as we shall see in Chapter 3, also made good use of such “subtractive” techniques.
12. This type of teasing has been referred to as the “frustration tease,” and it obviously violates the first of Grice’s two rules of quantity by being “far less informative than the interlocutor requires” (Partington 153).

13. It may be worth recalling here Barthes's assertion that "everything in [a narrative] signifies . . . Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness" ("Introduction" 261).
14. It was, of course, Mikhail Bakhtin who first used the analogy of the carnival to describe a particular kind of "serio-comical" literature. "The carnival sense of the world," he writes, "permeating these genres from top to bottom, determines their basic features and places image and word in a special relationship to reality. In all genres of the serio-comic, to be sure, there is a strong rhetorical element, but in the atmosphere of *joyful relativity* characteristic of a carnival sense of the world this element is fundamentally changed: there is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism. This carnival sense of the world possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality" (107).
15. I am reminded here, incidentally, of Barthes's claim that "the center-city is always experienced as the space in which certain subversive forces act and are encountered, forces of rupture, ludic forces" ("Semiology" 200).
16. "Genuine play," Johan Huizinga writes, "possesses besides its formal characteristics and its joyful mood, at least one further very essential feature, namely, the consciousness, however latent, of 'only pretending'" (22).

Chapter 3

1. "It is difficult to explain what makes any great work great," Kael writes, "and particularly difficult with movies, and maybe more so with *Citizen Kane* than with other great movies, because it isn't a work of special depth or a work of subtle beauty. It is a shallow work, a *shallow* masterpiece . . . *Kane* is closer to comedy than to tragedy, though so overwrought in style as to be almost a Gothic comedy. What might possibly be considered tragic in it has such a Daddy Warbucks quality that if it's tragic at all it's comic-strip tragic. The mystery in *Kane* is largely fake, and the Gothic-thriller atmosphere and the Rosebud gimmickry (though fun) are such obvious penny-dreadful popular theatrics that they're not so very different from the fake mysteries that Hearst's *American Weekly* used to whip up—the haunted castles and the curses fulfilled" (6–7).
2. It is most likely that Voltaire is referring here to the Seven Years' War (1756–63) and to the conflict between Prussian (Bulgar) and French (Abar) forces.
3. See Culler, *Pursuit* 188–208 for more on the double logic that determines the relationship between story and discourse—making possible

the "priority of events" on the one hand and "the determination of event by structures of signification" (200) on the other. It is only natural, he writes, to assume that story precedes (and in many ways determines) discourse, yet this premise is "frequently questioned in narratives themselves, at moments when the hierarchy of narrative is inverted . . . Positing the priority of events to the discourse which reports or presents them, narratology establishes a hierarchy which the functioning of narratives often subverts by presenting events not as givens but as the products of discursive forces or requirements" (191–92).

4. As Nietzsche points out, a similar disparity between style and subject can be identified in Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532): "What is most difficult to render from one language to another is the *tempo* of its style . . . [H]ow could the German language, even in the prose of a Lessing, imitate the *tempo* of Machiavelli, who in his *Principe* lets us breathe the dry, refined air of Florence and cannot help presenting the most serious matters in a boisterous *allegrissimo*, perhaps not without a malicious artistic sense of the contrast he risks—long, difficult, hard, dangerous thoughts and the *tempo* of the gallop and the very best, most capricious humour?" (*Beyond* 40–41).
5. Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* provides another good example of this approach to tragedy. "Once upon a time," it begins, "there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved, was not loved; and his life ended in disaster. This is the whole story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling, and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome" (7). And one may also be reminded here of Humbert's ruthless deployment of parentheses in *Lolita*: "My very photogenic mother," he tells us, "died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 10).
6. In his preface to an Italian edition of *Candide*, Italo Calvino observes that the novel is read today not for the satire, topical references, or philosophy (although these may be appealing in their own ways), but because we derive such great pleasure from its distinctive rhythm. "With rapidity and lightness," he writes, "a succession of mishaps, punishments and massacres races over the page, leaps from chapter to chapter, and ramifies and multiplies without evoking in the reader's emotions anything other than a feeling of an exhilarating and primitive vitality" ("*Candide*" 103).
7. This is the kind of diminished affective response that E. Ann Kaplan has described as "empty empathy." Analyzing images of violence and disaster from a randomly selected issue of the *New York Times*, Kaplan

argues that such empathy is produced by images that occur repetitively (each one "cancel[ing] out or interfer[ing] with the empathic impact of the prior image") or in a fragmentary, decontextualized way ("Empathy" 264). "The empathy I felt for the people in these scenes," she confesses in an earlier version of the same essay, was "empty," and it was empty "because what I was seeing hardly seemed *real*" ("Vicarious" 94).

8. This improbably named philosophy could be seen as an early forerunner to Alfred Jarry's 'pataphysics and the pseudophilosophy Quincas Borba promotes in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas.*
9. Similarly, in Chapter 5, when Candide lies injured under fallen masonry after being caught in the Lisbon earthquake, he calls out to Pangloss for assistance: "Help! Get me some oil and wine; I am dying." Rather than doing so, however, the great metaphysician begins to speculate that the earthquake may have been caused by a seam of sulfur running underground from Peru to Portugal. "Nothing is more likely," Candide replies, "but, for the love of God, some oil and wine!" (Voltaire 14).
10. This, I presume, is why Jean Starobinski describes *Candide* as "a parable whose moral is to beware of all morals" (84).
11. For an example of a narrative that ascribes significance to "meaninglessness," see the brief discussion of Camus's *The Stranger* in Chapter 1.
12. In this respect, as Auerbach observes, he is supremely typical of his age: "[A] lowering of man's position is implied in the attitude prevailing in the writings of the Enlightenment, even when they are not as impertinently witty as Voltaire's. The tragic exaltation of the classical hero loses ground from the beginning of the eighteenth century. Tragedy itself becomes more colorful and clever with Voltaire, but it loses weight" (411).

CHAPTER 4

1. Some notable exceptions to this tendency include Prince, *Narratology*; Herman, *Story Logic*; and Nell.
2. I shall be discussing the labor of writing, and the value that is so often attached to this labor, in greater detail in Chapter 5.
3. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, published three years after *S/Z*, Barthes is more careful to acknowledge the sense of satisfaction that we derive from the readerly. A readerly narrative, he concedes, provides a sense of "euphoria, fulfillment, [and] comfort (the feeling of repletion when culture penetrates freely)" (19). Yet even here it is possible to detect an authorial preference for the writerly and for the rapture or ecstasy (*jouissance*) that this kind of reading/writing generates.
4. Wodehouse himself freely acknowledged this tendency to subordinate character to plotting. "Nobody is more alive than myself," he wrote,

"to the fact that, going by the book of rules, I do everything all wrong. I never have a theme, and I work from plot to characters and not from characters to plot, which as everybody knows is the done thing" (qtd. in Thompson 59).

5. In *Right Ho, Jeeves*, Bertie makes a similar observation: "I hadn't heard the door open, but [Jeeves] was on the spot once more. My private belief, as I think I have mentioned before, is that Jeeves doesn't have to open doors. He's like one of those birds in India who bung their astral bodies about—the chaps, I mean, who having gone into thin air in Bombay, reassemble the parts and appear two minutes later in Calcutta. Only some such theory will account for the fact that he's not there one moment and is there the next. He just seems to float from spot A to spot B like some form of gas" (195).
6. Indeed, one could go so far as to argue that Wodehouse is himself practicing a kind of narratology here by eliciting from the reader, wherever possible, what Gérard Genette calls a "respect for the mechanisms of the text" (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 8; italics removed).
7. For more on the "laying bare of the device," see Shklovsky.
8. See Barthes, "Introduction" 295.
9. Jeeves, incidentally, is also careful to distance himself from this particular philosopher. "You would not enjoy Nietzsche, sir," he says to Bertie in *Carry On, Jeeves.* "He is fundamentally unsound" (24).
10. As Christopher Herbert notes, comedy has always been preoccupied with the charming: "Charm is the peculiarly social dimension of personality; it is personality considered as a function of its capacity for giving pleasure . . . [And] if there is one predominant comic ideal it is that of personal charm" (22).
11. In the preface to *Summer Lightning*, Wodehouse acknowledges this lack of originality quite openly: "A certain critic . . . made the nasty remark about my last novel that it contained 'all the old Wodehouse characters under different names' . . . [However] he will not be able to make a similar charge against *Summer Lightning*. With my superior intelligence, I have outgeneralled the man this time by putting in all the old Wodehouse characters under the same names. Pretty silly it will make him feel, I rather fancy" (7).
12. By "tellability," I mean, very simply, the quality that makes stories worth telling. For a useful summary of this concept, see Ryan, "Tellability."
13. Marie-Laure Ryan uses the term *metasuspense* to describe such "critical involvement [on the part of the reader] with the story as verbal artifact." In these cases, she writes, "the focus of the reader's concern is not to find out what happens next in the textual world but how the author is going to tie all the strands together and give the text proper narrative form" (*Narrative* 145).

14. “I don’t know if you suffer in the same way,” Bertie says, addressing the reader directly in this passage, “but with me the act of talking anything in the nature of real mashed potatoes always induces a sort of prickly sensation and a hideous feeling of shame, together with a marked starting of the pores” (95).
15. Wodehouse himself admitted that he “ignor[ed] real life altogether” in his writing, preferring to make “the thing frankly a fairy story” (qtd. in McCrum 251).
16. This phrase comes from Roger Caillois’s classic study, *Man, Play and Games*, in which he argues that “play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and space . . . Nothing that takes place outside this ideal frontier is relevant . . . In every case, the game’s domain is therefore a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space” (6–7).
17. *Capriccio* was first performed at the Bayerische Staatsoper (Munich) on October 28, 1942.
18. For more on Wodehouse’s rejection of modernist literary values, see Mooneyham.

Chapter 5

1. I use the term *novel* advisedly here, following Borges, who describes *The Tale of Genji* as a “psychological novel” (“Lady Murasaki” 187), and Harold Bloom, who argues that Murasaki “anticipated Cervantes as the first novelist” (3).
2. One may be reminded here of a writer like Laurence Sterne, who, as Milan Kundera argues, could be compared to “the great twentieth-century revolutionaries of the novel form.” Only “no one called him difficult or incomprehensible; if he irritated it was by his lightness, his frivolity, and even more by the shocking *insignificance* of the topics he wrote about” (*Curtain* 11).
3. As we saw in Chapter 2, the narrator of Machado’s *Posthumous Memoirs* is also inclined to “change his mind, his subject and his mode of speech at almost every sentence, and will not hold to the same course for longer than a short paragraph” (Schwarz, “Complex” 87).
4. This is in stark contrast to narratives such as *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* (*Eiga monogatari*, c. 1092) and *The Great Mirror* (*Okagami*, c. 1119), both of which record in considerable detail the decline in Teishi’s political fortunes.
5. Needless to say, it is not the first time this tendency of Sei’s has been the subject of critical scrutiny. In an early thirteenth-century treatise on literature believed to have been written by the daughter of the poet Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114–1204), we are told that “[i]n her writings—in which nothing extremely interesting, moving, impressive,

or elegant is omitted—Sei wrote exhaustively about Empress Teishi's days of glory, embroidering to the point of being alarming. In contrast, she shows great consideration by making no reference to the days of decline which [followed] Regent Michitaka's death and the empress's brother Korechika's exile" (qtd. in Fukumori 8).

6. For more on the directional taboo, see Sei, *Pillow* 273 and Murasaki, *Tale* 36. As Ivan Morris observes, one effect of these taboos was "to put a further brake on the already slow pace of life [during the Heian period]. A provincial governor setting out for his post, a gentleman reporting to his office in a Ministry, an official intending to break ground for the construction of a new government building—all might be inordinately delayed by the fear of violating taboos. At the same time, as we know from *The Tale of Genji*, they provided magnificent excuses for the philanderer" (*World* 139).
7. I am paraphrasing David Herman here (see Introduction 13).
8. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Susan Sontag has described this kind of transparence as "the highest, most liberating value in art," for it "means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are" ("Against" 13).
9. Of course, as we shall see, the narrative is not entirely composed of "things that delight" (Sei 255). In places Sei enumerates all the things she finds irritating and distressing, too, but the very triviality of these displeasures ("A guest who arrives when you have something urgent to do" [26]; "A baby who cries when you're trying to hear something" [28]; "A game of *sugoroku* when you can't manage to get your pieces off the board" [140]) only serves to emphasize the charmed nature of her existence.
10. The rest of this paragraph also relies on information derived from Fukumori's article—particularly those passages citing Haraoka Fumiko.
11. In *The Pillow Book*, as Ivan Morris notes, adjectives such as *okashi* and *medetashi* ("splendid") are "almost invariably accompanied by the ubiquitous and virtually meaningless adverb *ito* ('very')" (Introduction 14).
12. According to Sontag, this determination to "enjoy" everything also typifies the camp sensibility, for "[w]here the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted" ("Notes" 289).
13. The term *zuihitsu* itself literally means "following [the impulses of] the brush" (Keene 1).
14. I am reminded here of the "genre blurring" (19), the "jumbling of varieties of discourse" (20), that Clifford Geertz believes characterizes contemporary literary and academic writing. "[A]t once fluid, plural, uncentered, and ineradicably untidy" (21), Geertz argues, this kind of writing "mixes a strong sense of the formal orderliness of things with an equally strong sense of the radical arbitrariness of that order" (24).

15. "Liking to find, to write *beginnings*, he tends to multiply this pleasure: that is why he writes fragments: so many fragments, so many beginnings, so many pleasures" (Barthes, *Roland* 94).
16. This effect, I believe, is particularly pronounced in the original Japanese—a language that does not oblige one to specify any verb tense at all. As Meredith McKinney writes, "A narration of a past event could make use of a verb inflection indicating personal reminiscence . . . but it could, and often did, dispense with this and simply proceed in a time-neutral verb form. This characteristic of the language is perfect for Sei Shonagon's purposes. Although there are occasions when a sudden past inflection will ground a scene inside personal reminiscence, by and large the world she gives us is, quite literally, timeless" (xxiii–iv).
17. One may be reminded here of the courtly virtue of *sprezzatura*, celebrated most famously in Baldesar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Essentially, the term *sprezzatura* describes "an art that hides art, the cultivated ability to display artful artlessness, to perform any act or gesture with an insouciant or careless mastery" (Berger 295–96).
18. "Long before Flaubert," Barthes argues, "writers had experienced . . . the arduous labor of style, the exhaustion of incessant corrections, the sad necessity of endless hours committed to an infinitesimal output. Yet in Flaubert, the dimension of this agony is altogether different; the labor of style is for him an unspeakable suffering . . . an almost expiatory ordeal" ("Flaubert" 296). See also Barthes, *Preparation* 245.
19. See Culler, *Flaubert* 12–13. "Flaubert the craftsman, the perfectionist, who found creation such an obstinate process and set such standards for himself that writing became sacramental penance: this is certainly the picture he gives in his letters. Flaubert, like his contemporary Marx, developed a labour theory of value but applied it to literature. Henceforth a text must cost its author a great deal of agony" (12).
20. By partially attributing the lightness of Sei's narrative to the "laziness" of its narratorial sensibility, I am contradicting Calvino, who associates the former quality with "precision and determination, not with vagueness and the haphazard" (*Six Memos* 16). But one need only glance at a novel such as Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* to see how an "excess of precision, a kind of maniacal exactitude of language, a descriptive madness" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 26), can add density and weight to a narrative.
21. For a more detailed analysis of these different types of catalogue, see M. Morris.
22. "We are all familiar," Foucault writes, "with the disconcerting effect of the proximity of extremes, or, quite simply, with the sudden vicinity of things that have no relation to each other; the mere act of enumeration that heaps them all together has a power of enchantment all its own" (*Order* xvi).
23. "On these remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those

that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance" (Borges, "Analytical" 103).

24. See, in particular, Perec.
25. See Barthes, "Death."
26. The use of the phrase *tawabure ni* in this passage is particularly revealing, for it is this "spirit of fun" (as it has been translated elsewhere [see Keene 421]) that distinguishes Sei most clearly from her contemporaries—writers such as Murasaki Shikibu, for instance, or the anonymous author of *The Gossamer Years* (*Kagero nikki*, c. 974), whose diary makes for rather depressing reading. "This was for me a melancholy period," the latter writes in one typical passage. "Life seemed pointless, the monotony was unbroken: a listless rising and going to bed, no variation for twenty days on end. What had brought me to this, I wondered. But there was after all nothing to be done about it" (118).

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