

Re-Valuing Capital:
Nicholson Baker and the Subject of Objects

by

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When you consider the radiance, that it does not withhold
itself but pours its abundance without selection into every
nook and cranny not overhung or hidden; when you consider

that birds' bones make no awful noise against the light but
lie low in the light as in a high testimony; when you consider
the radiance, that it will look into the guiltiest

swervings of the weaving heart and bear itself upon them,
not flinching into disguise or darkening; when you consider
the abundance of such resource as illuminates the glow-blue

bodies and gold-skeined wings of flies swarming the dumped
guts of a natural slaughter or the coil of shit and in no
way winces from its storms of generosity; when you consider

that air or vacuum, snow or shale, squid or wolf, rose or lichen,
each is accepted into as much light as it will take, then
the heart moves roomier, the man stands and looks about, the

leaf does not increase itself above the grass, and the dark
work of the deepest cells is of a tune with May bushes
and fear lit by the breadth of such calmly turns to praise.

A.R. Ammons, "The City Limits"

introduction

“The Subject Matter is Trivial”

The thing about life is that life is an infinite subject matter.

Nicholson Baker, *The Anthologist*

The narratives falter and fall silent; in the stillness, the objects remain.

Peter Schwenger, “Still Life: A User’s Manual”

Wikipedia, one of the ten most heavily trafficked websites on the internet, is built upon a nearly invisible foundation of dialogue and debate, carried out continuously amongst its most energetic contributors. Furtively overseeing every entry in the massive online encyclopedia is a link to the article’s “talk page,” where one can often find Wikipedia’s user base of highly attentive readers and writers engaged in conversation about the style and content of the information provided in the article itself. Exploring these dialogic appendages both demystifies some of the workings of the project and gives a sense of the depth and variety of human enthusiasm. Something similar might be said of an investigation into certain trends in postwar American fiction that have often been termed “postmodern,” in particular the indiscriminate systems of reference upon which these books seem to rely. Such a description evokes the work of canonical writers like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, whose preoccupations begin with mass culture but extend to its most recondite margins; but the tendency also exists in Nicholson Baker, who the critic Arthur Saltzman calls a “Columbus of the near-at-hand” and who rarely strays too far from material culture in its most everyday, commonplace iteration (*Understanding* 1). Indeed, while reading an author like Pynchon might at times necessitate recourse to

the encyclopedia—the success and longevity of PynchonWiki, a website that offers page-by-page annotations of his writing, is no surprise—the effect of reading Baker’s descriptive prose is akin to watching the peregrinations of an avid Wikipedia reader, jumping from one familiar topic to another in a state of perpetual wonder.

What can be found on the “talk page” of Nicholson Baker’s own Wikipedia entry? A brief exchange took place on August 8th, 2011, when a user by the name of Wageless politely requested that certain information be deleted from the article’s introduction:

Hello all. I wonder if the following passage should go from the beginning: “As a novelist, he often focuses on minute inspection of his characters’ and narrators’ stream of consciousness, and has written about such provocative topics as voyeurism and planned assassination. His fiction generally de-emphasizes narrative in favor of careful description and characterization. Baker’s enthusiasts appreciate his ability to candidly explore the human psyche, while critics have charged that his subject matter is trivial.” Last three books were about WWII, the history of poetry, and sex. The “subject matter is trivial” business seems out of date. (“Talk: Nicholson Baker”)

The protestation makes specific reference to three of Baker’s most recent books, *Human Smoke*, *The Anthologist*, and *House of Holes*, but it seems equally apropos of Baker’s whole oeuvre. Behind (or better, *through*) the apparent “triviality” of his writing, and whether he is conscious of it or not, Baker gestures toward a set of concerns that open out to include the status of narrative, subjectivity, and history in the contemporary moment. Wageless is right: the whole business *is* out of date—in fact, it was never right to begin with.

“Wageless” is perhaps more qualified to speak about these things than most. After all, the username belongs to Nicholson Baker himself, who in an essay published in the *New York Review of Books* on “The Charms of Wikipedia” admits to

a short but intense romance with the online platform. For Baker, the appeal of Wikipedia is based on its “effort to build something that made sense apart from one’s own opinion, something that helped the whole human cause roll forward” (*World* 190). Hyperbolic praise, to be sure, but certainly appropriate given its author’s abiding belief in the worth of all lived existence as an object of meditation and appraisal.

Baker’s choice of pseudonym is telling, given the context of his work in an era marked by the continued seepage of advanced capitalism into every facet of the life of the subject. His participation in Wikipedia may be *pro bono*, but as we shall see, his writing casts itself as a kind of analogue to wage labor from the very outset—a fact perhaps most obviously manifested in the type of narrator to whom Baker naturally gravitates: the white-collar employee. In his study of American literature in the immediate postwar period, Andrew Hoberek contends that popular accounts of the corporate middle class in the fifties and sixties, which so often fixate on the threat “organization life” poses to the individuality and agency of the subject, bear traces of a class fear of proletarianization and downward mobility: “[the] discourse of constrained agency is best understood as a product of the transition from small-property ownership to white-collar employment as the basis of middle-class status” (8). In other words, as the middle class increasingly comes to resemble the working class and the novelist is no longer able to distinguish his or her artistic project from a routine type of mental labor, narratives about the threatened status of the individual proliferate.

This is a fear with some basis in reality, for hidden underneath the apparently sweeping income prosperity of the Keynesian national economies that predominated following World War II was an ongoing consolidation of capital in the hands of a few. If one distinguishes between these two forms of “wealth” (i.e. between income and capital), as Hoberk does, then it becomes possible to claim, as he also does, that “[t]he idea that the middle class remains middle class is, in fact, the chief means by which capital has controlled this class for the last fifty years” (129). In this way, the process of capital consolidation cuts across the economic periodization outlined by David Harvey and others that distinguishes between “embedded liberalism” and “neoliberalism” in the latter half of the twentieth century. If anything, neoliberalism, which arose in the late sixties and early seventies in response to a number of fiscal crises as “a project to achieve the restoration of class power” through the systematic liberation of corporate and business interests, simply eliminated the pretense, rendering inequality visible to all (Harvey 16).

Neoliberalization at its apex provides the stage for Baker’s first novel, *The Mezzanine*. Released in 1988, the book comes at the tail end of Ronald Reagan’s eight-year program of deregulation and financialization of the American economy and is, appropriately, the story of a corporate, white-collar employee named Howie, the nature of whose work is never made clear despite its formative influence on his consciousness. Unlike the writers of cautionary tales about subjects stifled by the kind of life forced on them in the archetypically corporate “organization,” Baker and his characters find themselves quite at home as “organization men.”¹ Arguably, the

¹ This is by no means a simple guarantee. After all, the “threatened individuality” narrative which Hoberk identifies in the vestiges of American modernism appearing after the war persists as a

structure of late capitalism inscribes the oppositional narratives that cast corporate work as a kind of mind-numbingly repetitive threat to human individuality, ironically and through its official media channels, as a means of shoring up its own influence. Borrowing from Philip Simmons, we might note that these narratives “[allow] us to feel superior to a situation without allowing us a way out of it” (611).

But Baker never seeks this kind of superficial exit, nor does he privilege any kind of tragically repressed interiority. Rather, he eschews interiority altogether, and embraces the surfaces and objects of corporate life as the thinkable boundaries of individual life. This is especially true in *The Mezzanine*, whose narrator describes from an implied distance of several years a seemingly meaningless lunch break in which he bought shoelaces at a CVS and rode an escalator back to his office. It also applies to a number of other protagonists in his work. Arno, the office temp whose fantastical masturbatory proclivities are at the center of *The Fermata*, relates his supernatural ability to freeze time to his status as a transient employee. Jim and Abby, the characters whose phone-sex dialogue *Vox* purports to be, are just as enraptured by the material presence of pornography as they are by its content. Even the poet Paul Chowder in Baker’s recent book *The Anthologist* finds his theme in daily life’s “untold particulars,” just as the absurd assassination plot in *Checkpoint* is interrupted by constant vocational digressions (*The Anthologist* 125). Baker’s writing in this sense perfectly crystallizes Hoberek’s account of the postmodern turn, wherein the novelist conceives of all “life as unending white-collar work” (125). The

Generation X-inflected trope in mainstream nineties films like *Slacker*, *Office Space*, and *Fight Club*, and remains to the present day a viable novelistic premise—recently taken up, for example, by Jennifer Egan in her authenticity-obsessed (and Pulitzer Prize-winning) 2011 work *A Visit From the Goon Squad*.

paradigmatic representation of this movement exists in *The Mezzanine*, which provides the material for my first chapter; but, as I argue in chapters two and three, even as Baker turns to other topics, his fascination with the material culture of middle-class employment never really disappears. Instead, it suffuses his understanding of things like sexuality and history—and, increasingly, in a move that seems to be the natural extension of his deeply reflexive style, the labor of writing and the literary project itself.

While Fredric Jameson contends that all of this focus on surfaces in postmodernity betrays a greater sense of depthlessness, this account does not seem adequate when considering Baker's body of work. For Baker's surfaces are objects suitable to "deep" and prolonged reflection because of their very status *as* surface; ultimately, this means that "the conventional distinction between 'surface' and 'depth' no longer holds" (Simmons 610). The everyday becomes unfathomably "deep" precisely because of its iterative and non-narrative quality. It is possible in this respect to read Baker's writing as a peculiar expansion of the postwar minimalist tendency. Arthur Saltzman does so when he suggests that "we may re-energize the visible field of minimalist writing by increasing it to include works whose secular devotion, if not the austerity of their diction, parallels that of the minimalist 'canon'" ("Expanding Literary Minimalism" 424). Baker retains minimalism's focus on the minutiae of lived existence, but he moves beyond its self-denying factuality and instead writes with enthusiasm and vivacious stylistic and syntactic complexity. To tweak slightly an argument made by Mark McGurl in *The Program Era*, it is almost as if Baker's minimalism terminates in a new literary maximalism, in which each

banal, everyday object and interaction contains *too much* to ever write about completely.

There may be political stakes in this evolution. McGurl rechristens the brand of minimalism out of which Baker's joyous prose originates "lower-middle-class modernism," as both a nod to the class status of some of its high-profile practitioners (i.e. Raymond Carver) and as a way of foregrounding "the degree to which the independent bourgeois of yore has been downgraded to a condition of insecurity and dependency akin to proletarians of the past" (64). While descriptive minimalism intimates a sense of anomie and shame vis-à-vis "lower forms of cultural consumption" that are associated with its class, Baker's descriptive maximalism revels in those forms (McGurl 67). Indeed, as I endeavor to show in chapter two, Baker's enthusiasm extends even to the realm of pornography, a "low" form of cultural consumption that has historically been deemed *by definition* incompatible with the ends of a properly artistic enterprise. Thus McGurl's label, "lower-middle-class modernism," which is politically provocative when used as a lens for Baker's work, and whose "modernist" designation is meant to imply continuity between the minimalists and the prewar bourgeois modernists who also sought to define themselves in contradistinction to their class background, begins to fray. Perhaps it is correct to say, then, that Baker borrows from his aesthetic forebears an interest in class but abandons their hopes of upward mobility, instead wholly embracing the new status of the middle class as employee and the new status of the writer as middle class. What we have, then, is not "lower-middle-class modernism," but "*lowered*

middle-class *postmodernism*”—a neologism which I hope captures the shift from ambition to amazement embodied in Baker’s writing.

It should also register some of Baker’s ironic reversal of the maxim of program era creative writing: “write what you know.” McGurl convincingly links the popularity of creative writing programs in higher education to the “experience economy” (elsewhere called “cultural capitalism”), in which personal experience becomes a saleable commodity. “Instead of reifying the social relations of production in the form of a thing, as Marx had it,” this advanced form of capitalism “[flips] those relations over, trans-coding labor into leisure” and “production into consumption” (McGurl 14). This new labor of the middle class is predicated on a form of experience in which institutions like the university and the corporation trade. The creative writing program is an “experiment...in subjectivity” insofar as its gatekeepers, the writing teachers, are “making [their] name, doing [their jobs], owning the product of [their] labor of ‘self-expression’” as the “purest [versions] of the kind of worker, the white-collar professional, that so many college students are preparing to be” (McGurl 405, 408).

This is one element of what many have called “reflexive modernity,” a concept that helps to account for some of the features of the transition in late capitalism from an industrial economy to an information economy. In addition to explaining the reification and valorization of “personal experience” which lies at the heart of both MFA creative writing programs and managerial advancement, “reflexive modernity” can also be applied to

the self-observation of society as a whole in the social sciences, media, and the arts...the “reflexive accumulation” of corporations which pay

more and more attention to their own management practices and organizational structures, [and] the self-monitoring of individuals who understand themselves to be living, not lives simply, but *life stories* of which they are the protagonists. (McGurl 12, emphasis in original)

In other words, the idiom of fiction pedagogy—which is not to even mention the everyday experience of the subject—is of a piece with broader institutional trends in late capitalism. McGurl terms the widespread reflexivity this generates in the arts “autopoetics”: the self-expression of a cultural system in the guise of an inward-looking project of individuation.

But in Baker’s fiction—and here is where I deem his irony to lie—the barrier separating the personal and institutional facets of “reflexive modernity” is torn down, and each transforms into a micro-study of objects. Subjective reflection becomes a kind of off-the-clock corporate observation, since the subject is constituted completely by and through the objects which capitalism produces and forgets. If the guiding principle of the novelist is to “write what you know,” to convey one’s own subjective experience, then Baker’s output demonstrates just how circumscribed that experience can be. What becomes important instead are the *things* that others either pass over in silence or mention only to dismiss: staplers, escalators, telephones, old newspapers, copyright pages, and so on. In fact, these things begin to stand in—not synecdochally, but literally—for the subject. Thus in returning to the anecdote that began this chapter, it might be said that to complain that “the ‘subject matter is trivial’ business seems out of date” is only half true—for while the “subject matter” may not be trivial, in the throes of Baker’s object-obsession, the “subject” matter certainly is.²

² Focusing in this way on Baker’s relationship to capitalism’s objects, I recognize, runs the risk of occluding the labor of the marginalized classes that produces these objects, in both developed nations and the economic periphery on which they rely. Part of this is unavoidable, given the almost total

Baker's closest literary relative in this regard is likely the French Oulipo novelist Georges Perec. Both men are interested in the way that foregrounding objects as the subjects of writerly attention might produce the classical figure of the *mise en abyme*, in which any single thing might expand into the whole of the world of which it forms a single, miniscule part. And both men recognize that in their method things tend to get confused. In Perec's sprawling *Life: A User's Manual*, people are "subjected to the same impassive gaze as objects" or more succinctly, "people [are] treated like objects," just as the intensive narrative focus on the physical world leaves us with "objects treated like people" (Schwenger 146). As I imply in my readings of Baker's fiction in chapters one and two, and which becomes explicit in my account of his nonfiction in chapter three, Baker accepts this leveling of the field not as a grim account of life subordinated under a regime of capital but with eager descriptive joy at the value it imputes onto everything. Suddenly, the writer is overcome with content: the world of capital becomes the world of possibility.

Much of this reading comes out of Baker's first and most critically well-examined novel, *The Mezzanine*. That book is a paean to the eighties and all that it entails—stilted encounters in the corporate bathroom, CVS intimacy, cubicles, and of course undergirding it all, a fabric of *things* in endless procession. As a novel-length rumination on all of these things, the book can only recount a single escalator ride

absence of any characters in Baker's work that do not mirror his own (white-collar, male) subject position. I relate this mystification of the origins of the objects which Baker so admires to Ernest Mandel's suggestion that the distinctive feature of late capitalism is "the phenomenon of *over-capitalization*," wherein "the new mass of capital will penetrate more and more into areas which are non-productive" (387-388). In other words, capital increasingly interposes in all forms of human labor, giving rise to both consumer society and an expanded services sector—such that we now live in a time when we don't simply *do* certain forms of labor but pay for it to be done, invisibly, either by a commodity or a service employee.

before getting lost completely in the details. In chapter one, I argue that the only way of ordering this outpour of enthusiasm for Howie (and also for Baker) is through the figure of the list, which comes to supplant narrative as the dominant mode of the novel. Using Georg Lukács' famous essay "Narrate or Describe?" as a theoretical model, I find Baker's list-laden effort to be largely descriptive—and like Perec's attempt in *Life: A User's Manual* to pause time at a precise moment on June 23rd, 1975, just before 8 PM, this description dramatically dilates the single escalator ride that is the book's "plot," such that it becomes the whole of the apprehended and apprehensible world. This tacit attempt to halt the metonymic progression of narrative has the effect of reifying the consciousness of Baker's narrator, proving the lasting value of Lukács' suggestion that at its end novelistic subjectivism becomes a particular and unintended objectivism. Howie and his cohort thus resemble objects more than they do characters, since, as Franco Moretti points out, character only "becomes possible when the attributes that define him...*change* as the narration proceeds" over time (225). In a state of suspended animation, Baker's characters are little more than figurines.

I take up the consequences of this objectification in more detail in chapter two, which examines Baker's nineties "sex books," *Vox* and (more extensively) *The Fermata*. In the latter, the descriptive pause that played out in *The Mezzanine* at the level of discourse is made literal. With the help of a variety of objects—and, in its most advanced (and, in true commodity fashion, most streamlined) iteration, with nothing other than the snap of his fingers—the protagonist of *The Fermata*, an office temp named Arno Strine, is able to freeze time. He uses the power to stage

increasingly complex erotic encounters that are themselves the ultimate fodder for his masturbatory fantasies. The mode of sexuality which provides the best fit for Baker's objectified subjects thus seems to be masturbation—which is logical, given its instrumentalization of the sexual act, and given the difficulty Baker's characters seem to have in relating meaningfully to one another. This prevalence of masturbation, I argue, blurs the distinction between literature and pornography. One might fear, as some of Baker's feminist contemporaries do, the *sexual* objectification that potentially follows; but I find that for Baker, this conflation of art and pornography offers the setting for a new kind of intimacy to emerge. Drawing from the late writing of Roland Barthes and Baker's widely successful *Vox* to supplement my reading of *The Fermata*, I describe this intimacy as a play of mutual masturbation between reader and writer, with each circling around the text qua object, which occupies a position safely in the center.

In chapter three, I explore this relationship between reader and writer as it is thematized in Baker's nonfiction. If in *The Mezzanine* the object is what writes the subject, and in *The Fermata* and *Vox* the text (as object) connects two alienated subjects, then in *U and I*, the theme comes full circle, and Baker figures the writing subject as a kind of text. *Prima facie* a study of John Updike, the book is better understood as a textually mediated autobiography in which Baker reflects on himself through the writing of another. In the process, he writes himself as a kind of book. And because the writing subject is identified in this way as a kind of text, history becomes a history of texts—texts for whom the library should be an ineradicable archive. Baker's concern about the liquidation of paper archives in his long polemic

Double Fold is thus animated by a larger concern about maintaining a productive relationship with history, one which is threatened by the cultural conditions of late capitalism. Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, an examination of the similar position the archive occupies in Sigmund Freud's body of work, suggests that the value of the archive (beyond its use as a hermeneutic map for the subject) is the power of its objects to transcend their position *in* the archive—a provocative notion that I examine in relation to Baker's increasing nonfictional corpus. Taken together, I believe these readings of *U and I* and *Double Fold* provide an explanation for the ethic of preservation running throughout Baker's oeuvre, which I view as inextricable from his outspoken political pacifism—a commitment that received its fullest articulation in *Human Smoke*, a long intervention on behalf of the pacifist cause leading up to World War II, but which follows naturally from his very earliest publications.

In each of these chapters, I contend that a certain configuration of subject-object relations produced by contemporary capitalism determines the form and content of Baker's writing. Thus, while Baker himself seems largely apolitical,³ a close examination of his writing is useful as a means of diagnosing certain features of the economic context from which he emerges. Ultimately, I want to argue that Baker's work renders visible the material scaffolding of late capital through which we are forced to pass in order to understand and relate to ourselves and each other. This, in turn, calls for a more sustained approach to objects, which treats them not just as a

³ Interestingly, Baker describes in a recent essay a “brief, insufferable Young Republican phase” he experienced immediately after graduating college, in which he subscribed to *Commentary* and became enamored of F.A. Hayek (*World* 252). This coincided with a short stint as an oil analyst on Wall Street, an experience which he describes in almost DeLilloesque terms, and which gives some sense of his relationship to the structures of capital: “I got very fired up about kind of mystical notions about markets and trading and everything” (quoted in *Understanding*, 10).

source of capital accumulation, nor simply as a necessary but by and large unremarkable part of everyday life. Rather, they come to dictate our ability to think about and interface with the world; the political value of Baker's writing is therefore the way in which he so carefully attends to all of the things we increasingly have at our disposal. Baker's *re-valuation* of the objects of capital might provide us with the means to *revalue* them—to assess once again their prevailing condition as the epistemological and ontological horizons of postmodernity.

It is possible, with a little bit of effort, to understand Nicholson Baker's project as the novelistic equivalent of what Bill Brown initially set out to do through theory in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*: "beginning with the effort to think with or through the physical object world...to establish a genuine sense of the *things* that comprise the stage on which human action, including the action of thought, unfolds" (3, emphasis mine). Rather than disavowing, dialectically overcoming, or otherwise looking past this "stage" of human action and thought, Baker treats it as an object worthy of attention. Squint your eyes just a little bit more, and Baker comes to resemble none other than Karl Marx himself, the Karl Marx who proclaimed in *The German Ideology* the triumph of historical materialism. If so often in philosophy "men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a *camera obscura*," then the role of materialism is not to explain "practice from the idea" but instead "the formation of ideas from material practice" (Marx and Engels 14, 28). In a strange sense, Baker is *more* of a materialist than Marx—for he enters the world of things and never bothers to leave. It is there where the writer lives and breathes, and it is there where his task begins and ends.

chapter one

**Perforation, Escalation, Meditation, Reification,
Etcetera: An Incomplete List of Observations About
*The Mezzanine***

As I observed, as I noted the shape of their spires, the shifting of their lines, the sunlight on their surfaces, I felt that I was not reaching the full depth of my impression, that something was behind that motion, that brightness, something which they seemed at once to contain and conceal... what was hidden behind the steeples of Martinville had to be something analogous to a pretty sentence, since it had appeared to me in the form of words that gave me pleasure...

Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

In his ongoing attempt to capture life in writing—or more accurately, to supersede life *by* writing—Marcel Proust theorizes a model of human consciousness wherein moments and objects are imbued with radiant beauty by the remembering subject. Beneath and behind the steeples of Martinville, or the famous *petit madeleine*, it is possible to locate a glimmering “brightness,” the radiant envelope of past experience for which each serves as dormant repository, waiting always to be activated. *Things* all around us are capable of catalyzing involuntary memory, of both “containing” and “concealing” a whole subjective world. It is the task of the writer to unload this weight of memory, embedded in things—to transform it into “a pretty sentence.” Writing, as a means of describing, is in this way conflated with remembering, and takes on an elegiac tone. Description, as the vehicle and telos of memory, becomes paramount.

Insofar as the basis of his style is an endless parade of description, and insofar as his writing always serves to memorialize the material culture from which it emerges, Nicholson Baker seems to have situated himself as successor to Proust’s legacy. But he is also a child of the postwar generation, and cannot escape the

confines of late capital, nor does he particularly want to. This is evident from *The Mezzanine* onwards. The story of one man's lunch break, and more specifically the story of his scattered, digressive reflections, over the course of a single escalator ride, on the endless procession of material objects that at once produce and are the products of his corporate lifestyle, Baker's first book is surfeit with description, a veritable test of the elasticity of novelistic discourse as it hangs from the barest possible story. Instead of valuing objects as the bearers of human memory, like Proust, Baker attempts to level the distinction between the two terms, to conceive of memory *as* an object, which can only be constructed in relation *to* objects.

For Baker's narrator, life is stripped of its narrative quality, instead mutating into something eminently *listable*. A list is a way of delineating repetitions and thus serves as a tool to document the lived experience of middle-class labor, which provides little opportunity for great stories. Georg Lukács' warning about the power of descriptive writing to transform "states or attitudes of mind of human beings" into "static situations" and "still lives" is thus dismissed—and in fact, this process of social reification is presupposed as the enabling basis of the novel, which strives constantly to stall time and narrative progression, to keep the escalator ride which organizes it from ever really ending (130). But, of course, the escalator *does* ultimately take our narrator from one place to another, even if his destination is a kind of attenuated, intermediate state (the eponymous mezzanine, the lower space of lowered expectations), and so the counter-narrative impulse is only incompletely successful. What's more, the novel is full of sprawling (micro)histories of the commodity, and makes a concerted effort to historicize the evolution of life's material

texture, inverting the central and incidental as a consequence, so that things like personal development, growth, maturation—the themes of the bildungsroman—are second to the ascendance and tapering off of all the brands, commodities and things that are the true narrative “subjects” of late capitalism.

Howie, our narrator, is far from listless. He abounds in enthusiasm for almost every aspect of daily life, and lists offer him a way of ordering and documenting that enthusiasm, of taming and representing it. As a result, lists proliferate and enfold one another in *The Mezzanine* to vertiginous effect. The text is, in a substantial way, a list of all its manifold lists. This structure manifests itself syntactically, as well as organizationally. Speaking about the transition from paper to plastic straws, Baker notes that the

straw men at the fast-food corporations had had a choice: either we (a) make the crossed slits easier to pierce so that the paper straws aren't crumpled, or we (b) abandon paper outright, and make the slits even *tighter*, so that (1) any tendency to float is completely negated and (2) the seal between the straw and the crossed slits is so tight that almost no soda will well out, stain car seats and clothing, and cause frustration. (*The Mezzanine* 5)⁴

This sentence succinctly demonstrates the way in which the logic of the list can be used to generate possibilities recursively, over and on top of itself. The consequences of the second possible choice, (b), are numbered (that is, listed) only to distinguish themselves from the first list (which is established alphabetically), in relation to which they are logically if not grammatically subordinate. But the numbers also clearly demarcate and at the same time link two independent clauses (1 and 2), thereby subjecting them to the double operation of the list, which simultaneously

⁴ Hereafter referred to parenthetically using the abbreviation *TM*.

unites its parts and keeps them separate. The sentence dramatizes the intrinsic grammar of the list, which relies on a precarious oscillation between hypotaxis and parataxis. On the one hand, the elements of a list stand in absolute hypotactic subordination to the list's title; on the other, the progression between these terms exhibits a maximum of paratactic independence. Here, Baker's syntax becomes nuanced by and thus requires the list to keep its terms from engulfing one another. This figure of the list as a self-generating structure of organization elsewhere appears typographically, as Ross Chambers has noted. When Howie closes a list of life's minor disappointments by identifying the feeling of trying to use a stapler without staples, that description "occupies the greater part of the textual space of page 14...because it is itself clogged with carefully detailed descriptive accounts of the act of stapling...in an indented paragraph," and is moreover preceded by a footnote that produces other, unrelated lists (Chambers 799). In other words, the only way to keep the lists delineated as they propagate and overlap is to list them.

A list is essentially a unit of repetition, since each of the constituent parts is nothing more than a particular instantiation of its organizing principle. In order to function properly, each thing listed must gesture back toward the occasion which joined it with every other thing; so, for example, the very basic list of "major advances in my life" that Howie elaborates after breaking his shoelace—seemingly disconnected realizations that range from "shoe-tying" to "deciding that brain cells ought to die"—links its parts by deeming them personally significant, marking them as "major advances" (Baker, *TM* 16). Moreover, the list radically dehierarchizes its components. Once something is listed it means as much (or as little) as every other

term in the list that called for it, since each term is stripped of the denotative properties that do not directly occasion its placement there.⁵ We might navigate and make sense of a world of objects through the proliferation of lists; but as we try to map out the labyrinth of corporate capitalism in this way, we are forced to leave behind the categories of relative value.

In Howie's unceasing production of lists, there is no meaningful distinction between what is "important" and what is not, between footnote and body text, and between each of the objects that make up technological modernity, big and small. Thus, for instance, our intrepid narrator is able to group together the stapler, train locomotive, and phonograph tonearm into a single footnote, according to the similarity of their "broad stylistic changes" over the long arc of the twentieth century (Baker, *TM* 14). The motivating factor behind this leveling out is "the transvaluation of the trivial," a recognition that if life is nothing more than a list of days, then the material of fiction must lie somewhere in the objects, mannerisms and interactions which fill up those days (Chambers 788). The book is a catalogue of minutiae precisely because there are no matters of personal significance to stand out against the background fabric that these things form. Consequently, upon abandoning the "Hungarian 5/2 rhythm of the lived workweek" and reflecting on it, Howie discovers that "what was central and what was incidental end up exactly reversed" (Baker, *TM* 92).

⁵ The swell of the aforementioned list toward a profound acceptance of mental and physical decay ("deciding that brain cells ought to die") from something as banal and childish as "pulling up on Xs" while tying one's shoes should be read as a comic exaggeration of this flattening effect intrinsic to all lists.

And since the “incidental” is anything but in contemporary life, the language of shock and recognition is reduced to one of mere adequacy—a deflation that is best located in the “oop!” that Howie and his cadre mutter upon inadvertently opening the door into one another. This interjection, which frames Howie’s trip into and out of the bathroom at the beginning of his lunch break, provides the subject in late capitalism with a way of reacting to life’s little surprises (Baker, *TM* 82, 98). “Oop,” we say, when our shoelaces break, one after the other; “oop,” when we bump into someone in the hallway; “oop,” when we realize that we have “finished with whatever large-scale growth” we are going to experience as human beings (Baker, *TM* 54).

The most dramatic reduction of life to triviality through the figure of the list comes at the end of the text, when Howie embarks on an attempt to deduce “a measure of the *periodicity* of regularly returning thoughts, expressed as, say, the number of times a certain thought pops into your head every year” (Baker, *TM* 126, emphasis in original). The result, a table with two columns, the “Subject of Thought” and the “Number of Times Thought Occurred per Year (in descending order),” literalizes the repetitive principle implicit in listing things, since here the list is of recurrent thoughts, and categorically denies any possibility of a hierarchy of value based on something *other than* that repetition (Baker, *TM* 127). The reader is left to ponder the usefulness of a chart that assigns more importance to “Panasonic three-wheeled vacuum cleaner, greatness of” (with a periodicity of 52.0) than “Urge to kill” (with a periodicity of 13.0). And yet, this seems to be the *very stuff of life*; after all, most of the table does not stray too far from the entirety of the book that has preceded and conditioned it. Several of the items on the list have in fact been mentioned (and

therefore “thought”) already, including “Brushing tongue” (periodicity: 150.0), “Shine on moving objects” (25.0), and “[p]aper-towel dispensers” (19.0). Howie’s consciousness is not only couched in the world of objects, but is transformed into a series of objects, which can be laid out schematically and counted. And that might as well be the case—“If you can’t get out of it, get into it,” to borrow from a thought our narrator experiences not once but nine times a year (Baker, *TM* 128). Lukács’ suggestion that “[t]he most evolved subjectivism in the modern novel... actually transforms the entire inner life of characters into something static and reified” is here given its most acute expression (144). What subjectivism can be more “evolved” than an exact account of everything a character has thought and the number of times he has thought it? If Baker is the limit case of a tradition of subjective representation carried through Proust and Joyce, then he is proof that this subjectivism terminates in the “inert reification of pseudo-objectivism” (*ibid.*). Objects here create the consciousness of the consumer, since subjectivity is in its purest form nothing other than reified self-apperception.

Reading Howie’s list of thoughts according to their frequency intimates the tutelage of Virginia Woolf, albeit taken to comic and self-defeating extremity. In her seminal essay on “Modern Fiction,” Woolf proclaims that life is a “luminous halo,” which presents itself in “myriad impressions” that fall in “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms” on the thinking, feeling subject (189). In rendering these impressions with writerly clarity and spontaneity, the “modern” novelist—contra the stiff and outmoded realist—can imbue such everydayness with a spiritual aspect. But Howie, in his eagerness to document the “luminous halo” of each element of daily

corporate life, reveals the limits of Woolf's method. If "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought," then Howie endeavors to fit it all in through the expedient of the list (Woolf 194-195). And in the process, he comes to resemble the nonliving characters dreamt up by the novelists Woolf dismisses as mere "materialists."

That Baker's characters come to resemble statues despite his commitment to Woolf's imperative to include "every feeling, every thought" has little to do with his lack of talent as a writer. In his hands, the dialectic Woolf establishes between the "materialism" of *fin de siècle* realists and the "spiritualism" of her modernist cohort begins to collapse: matters of the spirit begin to point back to the spirit of matter. There is thus some abiding truth in Lukács' diagnosis of prewar modernism, which is why I invoke him now.⁶ Life, for Howie, is "inert," indeed. And yet, Lukács' analysis relies upon a dialectic that is, when brought to bear on Baker's writing, just as tenuous as Woolf's. For Lukács, "narration" (good) and "description" (bad) are antithetical modes of representation. But, as Peter Schwenger has pointed out, when the novel becomes a list, as is the case in *The Mezzanine*, there is no real distinction between the act of describing and the act of narrating. "There is," rather, "an overall narrative movement that arises out of the descriptive and that is related precisely to the novel's status as a list" (Schwenger 148). Thus while I will continually suggest in this chapter that Baker's descriptive pause functions as an attempt to slow or stall narrative, it is also true that it *constitutes* a kind of narrative—a curious fact which will be taken up more explicitly in *The Fermata*.

⁶ It is true that for Lukács this claim is put in the service of a somewhat suspect aesthetic project. He is, after all, the great champion of Maxim Gorky (the father of socialist realism), and the great enemy of James Joyce.

For Lukács, the “still life” that results from description (which, again, is the exclusive modality of the discourse for Baker) is linked to the affective damage wrought by capitalism, and is concomitant with “the continuous dehumanization of social life” and “the general debasement of humanity” (127). There is a dual intimation upon which Lukács’ deployment of the term “still life” hinges: it refers to a specific, historically-bounded category of painting (the *still life*), eliciting in the process the ever-present specter of reification, and it foregrounds the temporal stasis that that description unconsciously enacts (the *still life*). The latter of these two implications will be taken up further on; suffice it to say right now that Baker relies on both the “still life” and the “still” life of description as the mutually reinforced foundations for his project. In Lukács’ system, descriptive writing robs life of its inner poetry—which is a poetry of conflict, of ruptures and the “turbulent, active interaction of men” (126). This internal state, characterized by sudden breaks and violent rifts, is far removed from the experience of the narrator in *The Mezzanine*, who instead figures his relationship to his own past using the perforated surfaces of which he is so enamored. “Perforation! Shout it out!” Howie exclaims in a footnote, noting that the technology is not only operative in rolls of toilet paper, paper towels, plastic bags, and so on, but also in the complex universe of human memory: “The lines dividing one year from another in your past are perforated, and the mental sensation of detaching a period of your life for closer scrutiny resembles the reluctant guided tearing of a perforated seam” (Baker, *TM* 74). Events are easily detachable from a vast texture of sameness, since perforation is also a form of tessellation: the

roll of toilet paper is a gapless mosaic made possible by the symmetry that allows one identical ply to fit into the next.

“The novel is not only signaling the incompatibility between an event-driven understanding of history, a history of pivotal moments and breaks, and the intangible experience of one’s everyday experience,” Graham Thompson writes of this perforated shape of lived existence, “but also asking...how a sense of continuity might be restored to those differential moments of experience or memory” (307). The “sense of continuity” between discrete moments in life requires them to assume a basic iterative structure which recalls the list or the “perforated seam,” and which contains something of the oddness of the phrase Howie uses to describe “one of the greatest sources of happiness that the man-made world can offer”—the “renewing of newness” (Baker, *TM* 93). To “renew” something is to replenish it, to *make it new again*, but this quality of the “again,” of the already having done, tacit in the prefix “re,” undercuts the very category of “newness” which redundantly follows it (and enacts its basic contradiction). In this sense, the perforated life is the stringing together of the same thing again and again and again, such that, “if you had blinked at the right moment, you might never have known that it was different” (ibid.).

The purpose of perforation is to allow the consumer to quickly and safely remove a single specimen from the tessellated whole of which it forms only a part. This “clean break,” taken always against a uniform background, is the means through which Howie is able to meditate on the single, trifling experience that serves as the basis of his memoir—a slow-moving escalator ride to the mezzanine where he works, at the end of a lunch break—since “detaching a period of your life for closer scrutiny

resembles the reluctant guided tearing of the perforated seam.” By removing the event from the texture of everyday life of which it forms a single and ineffable but at the same time deeply representative part, Howie is performing the mental equivalent of “[setting] it down on a stretch of white cloth, or any kind of clean background” and thus allowing it to “take on its true stature as an *object* of attention” (Baker, *TM* 38, emphasis mine). What is being developed in this book, then, is a “microscopy that would proliferate the thoughts, motivations, and experiences out of which...history is formed” (Thompson 309).

In a way, that central image of the text, the escalator, represents the perforated surface *par excellence*. The “brilliant decision to groove the surfaces of the stairway so that they mesh perfectly with the teeth of the metal comblike plates at the top and bottom” legitimates this comparison by turning the escalator into an endless loop, perforating into and out of itself (Baker, *TM* 65). It is therefore in the interest of both Baker and his narrator to elongate the ride as much as is possible, to let it “take on its true stature as an object of attention.” Howie achieves this in the story by letting the escalator move him gradually from bottom floor to mezzanine, electing to stand “in the pose of George Washington crossing the Potomac,” and Baker achieves this in the discourse through an ongoing commitment to digression (*TM* 99). Chambers perceptively speaks of Baker’s digressions as a way of “blowing up” the text—“blowing up” meaning both “distend or extenuate” and “explode” (770). The text’s copious lists and footnotes—and lists *as* footnotes—aim to stall narrative escalation, to situate the work not according to the metonymics of narrative progression, but the metaphoric of listmaking. Lists bring together “a set of different items that are linked

by perceptions of similarity”—just like two terms set in the relation of metaphor (Chambers 776). They are thus also digressive, like footnotes: “a movement away from the *gradus*, or upward escalation, of the argument” (Baker, *TM* 122). This “movement away” is Howie’s specific reference to the “great scholarly or anecdotal footnotes” of historians and philosophers; but of course, the sentiment is expressed only in a footnote of its own, itself a “movement away” from the literal “upward escalation” that lies at the center of *The Mezzanine* (Baker, *TM* 123).

It is worth emphasizing again the fact that these footnotes are the counterpart in the realm of narration to Howie’s motionlessness on the escalator. Both are ways of “standing still,” of slowing down the metonymic movement of the narrative. But no matter how slowly one travels on an escalator, there is always a transition between points in time and space. As such, Baker’s narrative begins with an entrance onto the escalator and ends fifteen chapters and 135 pages later when he steps off of it, having reached the destination. In this case, the destination is limited: it takes Howie from the lobby of his building to the mezzanine, which is an intermediate point, a liminal space between the ground floor and a “true” second floor. The scope of possible movement in Baker’s text is diminished, and this is true of personal development as well. As a kind of bildungsroman, the text outlines what the spiritual education of the modern man might look like. Howie has access only to a parodically deflated masculinity, one that exists somewhere between the “oop” that is the mantra of “average men” and the education of the father, whose contributions to his son’s upbringing and sense of familial continuity are passed on solely through the realm of tie ownership (Baker, *TM* 82)—a continuity whose existence provokes childlike glee

in Howie when he notices it: “I swapped a tie with him, and when I visited the following Thanksgiving, I spotted what had been my tie hanging over a doorknob in the midst of all the ties he had bought himself, and it fit right in, it fit right in!” (Baker, *TM* 28). This moment is laden with pathos because it makes clear just how narrowly circumscribed humans are in relating to themselves and each other in a condition of postmodernity.

So for Baker, “arrested growth is the best we can hope for” (Chambers 785). And if this is the reality of the contemporary moment, then the escalator that takes us from the lobby to the mezzanine might as well be the (ar)resting object of our contemplation. It is therefore also important to consider the mechanics of the escalator ride itself. Unlike Lukács’ stepped progression, which advances through the “turbulent, active interaction of men,” the escalator slides in an imperceptible glissando between its origin and destination. And whereas stairs can only act as surfaces up which we must carry ourselves, the escalator takes us where we need to go. Perhaps another inversion of Marx’s materialism, then: if for Marx production is a mode and expression of life, then for Baker we stand still and let the objects we have produced produce us.

To freeze the progress of the escalator would require an act of mathematical precision, and as Graham Thompson keenly notes, the description of the freestanding escalators as “integral signs” evokes the differential and integral calculus whose purpose is “measuring the infinitesimals out of which change and movement are made” (309). This is the image provided by Baker himself; but perhaps an even more apt mathematical metaphor can be found in the Mandelbrot set, that complex fractal

which can be “blown up” recursively, such that infinite increasing magnifications reveal an ever-finer array of detail. In what other way can one articulate the beauty of one of Baker’s characteristic passages, when a digression that begins as an excursus on the beauty of grooves takes us to the childhood experience of listening to a record—an experience that manages to register an entire world? A heavily abridged sample of the passage gives some sense of this virtuosic movement:

you rode the last grooves as if on a rickshaw through the crowded Eastern capital of the music, and then all at once, at dusk, you left the gates of the city and stepped into a waiting boat that pulled you swiftly out onto the black and purple waters of the lagoon, toward a flat island in the middle...rapidly and silently you curved over the placid expanse, drawing near the circular island...the keel bumped first one shore, then the other, and though your vessel moved very fast it seemed to leave only a thin luminous seam in the black surface behind you to mark where the keel had cut...Finally my thumb lifted you up, and you passed high over the continent and disappeared beyond the *edge of the flat world*. (Baker, *TM* 68, emphasis mine)

The description is of a stylus on a turntable reaching the end of one side of a record, but this singular moment is taken up and expanded—both in the amount of space it occupies on the page and in the scope of the spatial metaphor being employed—so that the record becomes a “flat world,” and the hole, poked through with the nub that holds the record in place, becomes an “island” or “placid expanse” within it. Most interestingly, the stylus itself is given in the second person, which allows Baker to simultaneously refer to the needle passing along the grooves of the record and the reader passing along the small text of the footnote. The equation of the two quite literally reifies the reader. The moment is both meticulously crafted and embedded in the storehouse of Howie’s childhood memories, though, and so maybe this reification is in fact the grounding possibility of a certain brand of intimacy between reader and

writer in late capital—an intimation that echoes Baker’s later novel *Vox*, which as we will see in the next chapter carves out a space for erotics *within* and never *beyond* the margins of commodity and exchange.

And so it is in the CVS, where “so many kinds of privateness” are mixed “together in one public store,” that Howie locates both the ultimate form of human intimacy and the greatest microcosm of the progress of peoples and civilizations (Baker, *TM* 113). Because “emotional analogies were not hard to find between the history of civilization on the one hand and the history within the CVS pharmacy on the other,” the narrator indulges in a long, nostalgic history of the “pantheon” of shampoos as they move from the top to bottom of the store shelf and gradually fade from cultural memory, much in the same way he is able to reminisce wistfully about the gradual phasing-out of milk delivery services, the evolution of the stapler aesthetic, and so on (Baker, *TM* 114). In this sense, the commodity “‘microhistories’ that Baker’s narrator constructs are so seamlessly enclosed by the world of mass culture that ‘macrohistories’ . . . have been squeezed off the page” (Simmons 605). In fact, when all culture becomes mass culture, these ‘microhistories’ become history *tout court*. As Franco Moretti argues in *Signs Taken For Wonders*, our relationship to mass culture is “interminable.” Spurred on by the feeling that we are always “on the verge of . . . finally grasping the object of desire,” which, of course, remains perpetually out of reach, modern history becomes the unceasing repetition of consumption (Moretti 232). It is in this light that Baker’s narrative shifts its focus, such that the micro-story of a man riding an escalator to work becomes the occasion for a micro-

study of the objects all around him, which becomes a comprehensive autobiography and finally an accurate diagnosis of the American moment in the late eighties.

Indeed, Thompson argues that Baker's project is the construction of an alternate "periodization" of its decade. Even though Baker's text "steadfastly refuses to deal with broader events from the 1980s," its "emphasis on the slowing or stalling of time, the detail, and the connectedness between moments and the implications of this for understanding how time passes and how culture is experienced temporally" gives some sense of how it can be read as a work that attempts to capture the whole of the era of which it is a product (Thompson 303). The stasis that Lukács feared description might invoke therefore becomes a moral imperative, and the effort to "slow" or "stall" time, though never complete, becomes a way of grappling with the obsolescence of the commodity inscribed in the capitalist mode of production. All of the things that Howie loves so dearly will one day fade away, and it is the responsibility of the novelist to document their passing. This is, in turn, a way of documenting a life, both in and of objects (and here again Baker comes to resemble Proust). As a result, Baker's writing takes on a memorializing function. Howie feverishly examines the manifold details of everyday life—and this is a Sisyphean undertaking that can only be approached from within a limited (or, ideally, paused) temporal frame.

The scrolling exploration of the Mandelbrot set provides us with a precise visualization of this endless task. But do we require such an abstruse mathematical concept to really grasp what Baker is doing in *The Mezzanine*? It is useful here to return to Proust, whose descriptive outpouring in *In Search of Lost Time* had a similar

function. Gérard Genette, in his book-length essay on Proust's opus, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, uses a durational spectrum that is bounded on either end by the descriptive *pause* (a relationship of infinite discourse time to zero story time, and thus a totally static moment in the text) and the *ellipsis* (a moment of infinite speed in the text, since what is being passed over in the story receives no treatment in the discourse). Somewhere between these two poles lie the one-to-one *scene* and the abridged *summary*. What is unique about Proust, in Genette's understanding, is that in his writing, the force of description is not utilized in order to pause the time of the story; rather, it is a way of "synthesizing several occurrences of the same sight into one single descriptive section" (Genette 100). A beautiful example of this synthesis occurs when Proust describes the church at Combray:

The old porch by which we entered, black, pocked like a skimming ladle, was uneven and deeply hollowed at the edges (like the font to which it led us), as if the gentle brushing of the countrywomen's cloaks as they entered the church and of their timid fingers taking holy water could, repeated over centuries, acquire a destructive force, bend the stone and carve it with furrows like those traced by the wheel of a cart in a boundary stone which it knocks against every day. (60)

In this moment, description is a way of capturing "centuries" of embodied practice and its effect on material culture. That the "gentle brushing of the countrywomen's cloaks" could, repeated on a large enough scale, "acquire a destructive force," warping and bending the stones of the church, doubly inverts the category of description qua pause. Not only is the description a strange sort of summary, but so too is the thing being described. Objects thus contain a sort of memory for Proust, a memory that is tied up in their *repeated interaction with a knowing (and writing) subject*. This repetition is mirrored by his extensive use of the iterative mode, wherein

a “single narrative utterance takes upon itself several occurrences together” (Genette 116). *In Search of Lost Time* is largely written in the language not of “what *happened*, but what *used to happen*”—even in moments of such specificity that the reader knows it is illogical to think of it as an event that regularly recurred (Genette 117).

For Proust, this iterative relationship between subject and object is unidirectional. The latter takes on shape and meaning in direct proportion to its penetration by the former as a site of cathexis. Baker’s world is iterative, too—but the best figure for this kind of iteration comes not from the subject but the object, in the perforated surfaces that abound in corporate life. In *The Mezzanine*, he conceives of the materiality of everyday, cultural existence as a hinge, between which two connected worlds lie. The first is the world of objects, by themselves; in contemporary capitalism, it is this world that provides the fabric of narrative. It is also from this world that the second world—the world of the postmodern subject—is derived. For it is only in the daily repetition of acts (acts that are necessarily with and through objects) that we come to understand ourselves. There is thus just as much value in a fleeting moment, interaction, or observation as there is in the vastness of life that informs it—or better, that it informs, that it constitutes. And since every day is the same, each becomes intelligible through the act of listing. We spend life trying to count the steps so that we might forestall the moment when we will finally have to get off the escalator.

chapter two

Literature and/as Pornography: Nicholson Baker's (Auto)Erotics of Reading

On August 6th, 2006, a group of men and women came together to come together at London's first annual "Masturbate-a-Thon." An offshoot of an event that had been taking place for more than a decade in San Francisco, the London experiment was an effort to dispel cultural stigma toward masturbation: entry fees were donated to charity and the atmosphere oscillated between pleasure and philanthropy. More than just raising the question of how it is possible to share an essentially individual experience with a room full of people, the Masturbate-a-Thon as a model of sexual expression points toward the extent to which cultural capitalism inflects the experience of the subject. For if, as Slavoj Žižek contends, this most recent mode of capitalism is inhabited by individuals who "are not merely buying and consuming" but also attempting through this consumption to do "something meaningful," to "[show]...capacity for care and global awareness," and "[participate] in a collective project," then there is no better site to demonstrate the links between pleasure, consumption, charity and pseudo-collectivity than the Masturbate-a-Thon (*First as Tragedy* 52).

Žižek polemically contends that masturbation of this type is the sexual expression of the ideological poverty of postmodernity, wherein material wealth

precludes ideological commitment and individual pleasure supplants intersubjective experience. In the massive disparity between center and periphery generated by global capitalism, the First World man is a “creature with no great passion or commitment,” who seeks “only comfort and security” (Žižek, *Violence* 28). And the permissive sexual culture that “builds a collective out of individuals who are ready to share the solipsism of their own stupid enjoyment” through events like the London Masturbate-a-Thon is thus nothing other than a manifestation of the dominant economic ideology (Žižek, *Violence* 31). Nicholson Baker’s early career follows a trajectory that dramatizes this fact. After a domestic interlude with *Room Temperature*, Baker’s ekphrasis turned erotic, and in *Vox* he inaugurated what has become a career-long fascination with the paradigmatic brand of sexual self-expression for the postmodern subject: masturbation.

Such a movement, from salary to sex, everyday to eros (as though the two somehow represent incommensurable categories), had an alienating effect on many of Baker’s critics. After the almost universal acclaim that greeted *The Mezzanine*, *Vox*, which introduces his narrative fascination with sex and its material practice, proved controversial. Despite its bestseller status, unique form, and minutely attentive voice, it was denounced by a cadre of critics like James Marcus as “a forgettable washout,” the waste of a talented writer’s attention (quoted in *Understanding*, 64). And critical reception for *The Fermata*, the story of Arno Strine, an office temp who stops time to take the clothing off women, was even more polarized; the novel’s detractors suggested that it was, at best, “a long, dreary, dirty note scrawled in the margins of Nicholson Baker’s work,” and at worst something patently sexist, a morally

deplorable reinscription of the subtle logic of male domination that is coded into the sexual proclivities of its hero, despite his (and the text's) insistent arguments to the contrary (Schine). "Reading *The Fermata* is like having a man you hardly know slip his hand under your skirt while whispering that he's really a nice guy," Rhoda Koenig complained, suggesting that Arno's erotic trespasses (and Baker's descriptive glee) are perhaps not all fun and games (quoted in *Understanding*, 84).

There is, however, a traceable lineage connecting the fastidious description Baker performs in his first novel with the gleeful erotic explorations and writerly ruminations of his later work, which complicates this critical narrative. Description, as we have seen, is the mode of discourse perhaps best suited to the conditions of late capital, in which subjectivity is always constituted by (and analogous to) the daily interactions we have with the objects that surround us. But description is also a form of fetishization, and nowhere is this more succinctly manifested than in the classical poetic figure of the blazon, an enumeration of the attributes of the female body in which, to quote Roland Barthes, "the total body must revert to the dust of words, to the listing of details, to a monotonous inventory of parts," or in other words, "to crumbling" (*S/Z* 113). The consequence of this ceaseless "inventory" is objectification, a reduction of the body to a list by the male gaze—something that happens quite literally in *The Fermata*, as Arno freezes women so that he may better examine their panties, or their breasts, or their pubic hair.

With the advent of home video and the internet, the logic of the blazon has metamorphosed into an immensely profitable commodity: pornography. "I think I'm really from the first porn-saturated generation," Baker has suggested ("The Art of

Fiction”), and so at first glance the pertinent question to ask about his sex books seems to be, “is Nicholson Baker writing pornography?” For feminists like Catharine MacKinnon, whose antipornography diatribe *Only Words* was released in 1993, one year prior to the publication of *The Fermata*, the mere possibility would render the book into an instrument of sexual subordination. But if Baker is trying to reconceive of pornography altogether, then maybe any attempt to establish a firm distinction between “literature” and “pornography” is misleading. Rather than transposing pornography into the rarefied highbrow realm of “literary fiction,”⁷ *The Fermata* (and its predecessor *Vox*) seems to expose the roots of literature as pornography. Indeed, Baker’s sexually explicit writing “aims to be and is only properly appreciable as pornographic art” (Kieran 44). One term follows from the other. Baker’s pornography is not incidentally also art; rather, it is art because of its status as pornography.

For Baker, “The qualities of good sex parallel the qualities of good reading,” and so “perhaps any novel, correctly handled, is an erotic novel” (Saltzman, *Understanding* 74). In an era of reified—and by and large completely unsexy—human sexual relations, Baker is trying to reconfigure the site of erotic possibility, so that it emerges in the reading of a text, in the space of the text’s reception. The result is something like masturbation, with the reader and writer each using the text as an autoerotic aid. For all of his nonconsensual sexual libertinage, Arno is also a perfect figure for the writer-as-masturbator, whose power gives him the unique opportunity

⁷ I follow Mark McGurl in calling attention to the relative absurdity of this bookstore generic classification. Given the continuity between technical craft and media technology, McGurl argues, it is important to think of highbrow writing “not as the antithesis of debased genre fiction” but rather “as a genre in its own right called ‘literary fiction’” (42). In this sense postmodernity does not blur the distinction between high and low culture so much as it reveals each to be a part of the “autopoetic” self-fashioning of mass culture.

to witness the possibilities of intimacy that are able to bubble up (or not, importantly) between reader and text. And if this resituates the literary project squarely in the realm of the pornographic, then readerly pleasure is also and importantly consumptive pleasure. Thus capitalism provides a venue for Baker's erotics, which not only rely on its mechanisms but borrow from its vocabulary as well.

Although Arno eventually realizes himself as a writer—first of imaginative erotic fiction, and, as the reader turns the final page of the text, of the completed autobiography which *The Fermata* claims to be—he is first and foremost an office temp. The temporary worker, who is hired ad hoc to maximize surplus value, is the most emblematic form of labor in a regime of capital. As David Harvey suggests, in the neoliberal model “[w]orkers are hired on contract, and...short-term contracts are preferred in order to maximize flexibility” (167-168). Arno's limited ambition, his acceptance of himself as a source of transient labor power and nothing more, is a consequence of the waxing and waning of his power to freeze time (a power from which the book takes its title, and which he alternately calls “Dropping” or entering into “the Fold”): “The reason I have done nothing with my life is simply that my power to enter the Fold...comes and goes” (*The Fermata* 11).⁸ Trying to articulate the source of his complacency, Arno borrows from the language of the investment class:

My life reminds me of the capital-gains tax problem, as I once read about it in an op-ed piece: if legislators keep changing, or even promising to change, the capital-gains percentages, repealing and reinstating the tax, the rational investor will begin to base his investment decisions not on the existing tax laws, but on his certainty of change, which mischannels...in some destructive way the circulation of capital. So too with me during those periods when I wait for the return of my ability to stop time... (ibid.)

⁸ Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *TF*.

Here Arno presents the reasons deployed in finance to buttress the neoliberal aversion to the taxation of dividends as a way of explaining his own lethargy—and by extension, the reason for his existence as a temp. In both the metaphor being deployed and the situation for which it accounts, then, capitalism is justifying itself.⁹

Arno's masturbatory inclinations are wholly dependent on his ability to enter the Fold. Thus his obsessive onanism is bound up with his status as temporary labor. It is perhaps also a perverse reflection of the cultural and economic realities that demand that labor. The condition of postmodernity, as Fredric Jameson and others have convincingly argued, is concomitant with—and helps to mystify the workings of—the contemporary mode of capitalism. “The narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality, and identity became the leitmotif of bourgeois urban culture” in postmodern New York, for example—leading, in effect, “to the neoliberalization of culture,” which effaced the city's history as an epicenter of the labor movement in the United States while simultaneously ushering in the era of Wall Street and the ultimate ascendance of the financial class (Harvey 47). While Harvey is referring to a specific artistic and intellectual phenomenon, the notion of “narcissistic exploration” certainly resonates with Arno's pleasure-seeking predilections. As Žižek argues, the logical endpoint of this narcissism is masturbation, a kind of self-love in which the other is rendered superfluous; thus Arno, himself a writer, comes to resemble the postmodern artist, whose masturbatory habits link up to his economic status.

⁹ Though perhaps most obvious in the figure of the temp, the notion of the short-term contract, and its specific social consequences, is in fact a current running throughout the early works of Baker's oeuvre. The mediated environment of *Vox*, in which two people foster a relationship at the cost of ninety-five cents per minute until each reaches orgasm, in addition to the office milieu of *The Mezzanine*, where Howie never engages in real conversation but instead only the palest imitations of conversation, suggests that people increasingly internalize in their social comportment the dominant relations of economic production.

Though there is no indication that Baker accepts the pessimistic diagnoses advanced by the likes of Harvey and Žižek, he nevertheless forcefully demonstrates through his protagonists the relation between self-serving pleasure—which is to say masturbatory pleasure—and the cultural conditions of late capitalism. This is true of Arno, who is unable to maintain focus on the “wonderful non-gonadotropic topics” that exist in the world for any extended period of time, and it is especially true of the dyad whose single phone conversation constitutes the whole of *Vox*—which is a Mobius strip of masturbation, layering onto and over itself (Baker, *TF* 118). The vast majority of the masturbatory fantasies mutually concocted by Jim and Abby (the “he” and “she” between which *Vox* alternates) are not imagined sexual encounters but instead *other* instances of real and imagined autoeroticism. The multiple levels of distance separating the two from sexual contact is not an impediment but the enabling basis of the conversation; as Mikko Keskinen puts it, “the many-layered process of mediation forms an important part of their desire” (107). This reversal—through which the erotic potential of a narrative is not based on its proximity to the “real” sexual act but its mediated distance—reaches an apotheosis in Jim’s bizarre likening of female masturbation to a womblike sanctuary. “I almost think that each one of the times a woman comes in private in her life,” he confides, “has to continue to exist as a kind of sphere, a foot-and-a-half-wide sphere, in some ideal dimension, sort of like all the ovums you’ve got queued up in you, except these are...ovums of past orgasms...and I am this one viable spermazoid lurking around among them” (Baker, *Vox* 66). By parodying and inverting the scientific discourse of procreation, so that the “one viable spermazoid” seeks not to impregnate the imagined “ovums” but rather

“lurk” and watch the “past orgasms” they represent, Jim repurposes language typically reserved for heterosexual intercourse to describe the miracle of masturbation.

As the device through which the 900-number that connects Jim and Abby is able to generate a profit, the telephone is more than just the means for their masturbatory encounter to come into being. It is also a vital, active component of that encounter. When Abby suggests that the conversation is “getting expensive, at a dollar a minute or whatever it is,” Jim prevents her from hanging up and calling his number directly with a succession of implausible concerns, wondering whether she might forget his number, or lose interest, or return only to discover that “we’re suddenly awkward with each other” (Baker, *Vox* 44-45). But these apprehensions are “not totally rational,” and “presumably their conversation is partly fueled by the expensiveness of the service and its disconnect from the ordinary use of the telephone” (Keskinen 100). In other words, “the telephone becomes a fetish,” though it is necessary to specify this claim somewhat (*ibid.*). It is not that the telephone and nothing else is a fetish; rather, the telephone as a commodity, a way of disposing with income, is what becomes the centerpiece of the characters’ sexual attention. Erotic glee is for the two consumers generated from the way each makes use of the “licensed venues of capitalist getting and spending” (Saltzman, *Understanding* 79).

It is enough to consider the pair’s first co-constructed fantasy to understand the depth and sexual intricacy of this capitalist imaginary. Straight away, Jim mentions to Abby an ecstatic moment he once had after fixating on a certain model wearing “beigey-green pointelle tights” in a catalog called “Deliques Intimates”

(Baker, *Vox* 13). “I had a vision of myself jerking off while I ordered that pair of tights” for a coworker, he tells Abby, and here the fundamental interconnections between mediation, masturbation and consumption are spelled out (Baker, *Vox* 15). Undeterred by this fantasy of fantasy of consumption, Abby interrupts his narrative, imagining a comic scenario that nevertheless implies the inseparability of sexuality from the global circulation of capital: “there has been a strike at the Deliques warehouse, and what’s happened is that Deliques management has had to hire the male models from the catalog on an emergency basis to fill in for the normal pickers and packers, who are of course mostly middle-aged Laotian women” (Baker, *Vox* 17). The image of “male models” being brought in by “management” to deal with an organized labor force may be laughable, but the movement in Abby’s story that at once evokes and swiftly glosses over the wage slavery upon which capital accumulation relies (the “middle-aged Laotian women” exist only to be dismissed) intimates an eroticization of its mechanisms.

The nature of the work Jim and Abby do is never made explicit, though it is likely not far removed from Howie’s vocation in *The Mezzanine*—or Arno’s, for that matter. The economic logic undergirding each of these character’s sexual dispositions remains largely unconscious; in *The Fermata*, however, Baker begins to spell out its problematic ethical basis. Desperate to convince his reader of the moral soundness of his actions in the Fold, Arno relates a conversation he once had with a security guard in which he asked the man how he would make use of arrested time. The guard’s response is as direct as Arno’s prose is elegant: “‘What would I do?’ he said. ‘I’d find the nicest, best-looking chick I could find and rip her clothes off and plank her right

there” (Baker, *TF* 87). The directness is startling to the reader, too: after pages and pages of lovingly detailed description, idiosyncratic wordplay, and long, carefully constructed sentences, the unpunctuated, redundant, and vulgar confession presents us with the (more) perverse obverse of Arno’s own autoerotic use of the Fermata.

Confronted with the brutal honesty of the man’s rape fantasy, Arno quickly adopts a defensive tone: “Morally, I *am* different from that security guard—no, let’s not mess around: morally, I’m a little bit better than he is” (Baker, *TF* 91, emphasis in original). But his emphatic denial has the opposite of its intended effect. For all of Arno’s verbose affability and apparently genuine appreciation of women, his forays into the Fold are deeply troubling trespasses. It’s hard to take Arno seriously as he tells you he is morally “better” than another man when only twelve pages earlier he describes in minute detail an encounter in which he sneaked into his ex-girlfriend Rhody’s bedroom, watched her having sex, froze time, “pulled the guy off her and out of her and hauled him to the garage,” returned to the bedroom and “stationed [himself] in exactly the same position that [the other man] had been in, with [his] cock inside Rhody, and clipped time on” (Baker, *TF* 79). This is not “rape-like,” as he grudgingly admits some might describe his actions—it is rape. Despite Arno’s logical leaps and dazzling personality, and despite the novel’s largely comic tone, the question of consent is consistently elided in his exposition. What registers in his dismissal of the security guard, then, is not his moral superiority but his class bias. “I should know better,” he admits (Baker, *TF* 91), and his condescension is telling, especially since he has already mentioned the overriding guilt he felt after using his power to exact revenge on a group of muggers—something which compelled him to

spend a day “performing acts of lite altruism” that involved “wandering in the Fold through crummy neighborhoods collecting concealed handguns off anyone who looked under thirty” (Baker, *TF* 49). The misplaced altruistic impulse is reminiscent of the guilty liberal who seeks to ameliorate the social ills of which neoliberalism is the sine qua non without recognizing the need for structural change. Even the phrase Baker uses to describe it, “lite altruism,” belies its purpose, turning charity into consumption; so too are his sexual justifications a way of sidestepping the true ethical implications of the liberties he takes with women inside the timelessness of the Fold.

It seems clear, then, that in *The Fermata* Baker wants to insert some degree of critical distance between himself and his protagonist. Arno’s moral slippage is deftly controlled by Baker, and after his encounter with the security guard, the reader becomes especially attuned to its problematic moral basis. At the same time, however, he strives to relate Arno’s endless sexual inventiveness to his aspirations as a writer, and his voyeuristic impulses are nothing other than fantasies of readership—and so perhaps there is a broader parallel, conscious or not, being drawn between the author and his work. Though distinguished by his comic ability and masterful command of his medium, Baker is by no means the first to conceive of reading as a fundamentally erotic project. Both Ross Chambers and Arthur Saltzman have rightly identified the unlikely thread that ties together Baker and the late writings of Roland Barthes—specifically his intensely personal ruminations in *The Pleasure of the Text*.¹⁰ But the level of similarity between the two men is worth reiterating and

¹⁰ Nicholson Baker and Roland Barthes make strange bedfellows, no doubt. If the theorizing of the latter is, as D.A. Miller has convincingly demonstrated in *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, tied

expanding upon. “The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*,” Barthes insists, and this desire is inextricable from a generalized neurosis, itself “necessary to the seduction of [the text’s] readers” (*Pleasure* 6). The combination of neurosis and virtual desire has had autoerotic connotations since Freud; and Barthes’ insistence on the “asocial nature of pleasure” further indicates the text’s situation of production and reception as strikingly akin to a game of mutual masturbation (*Pleasure* 16).

It is one thing to speak of reading, writing and sexual satisfaction in the language of analogy, as Barthes does; for Arno, they are literally part of the same process. “What else was there in the world beside masturbation?” he asks, before recounting his first attempt at producing erotic fiction—and the answer is predictable: “nothing” (Baker, *TF* 121). Arno’s literary aspirations, his “wish to create something true and valuable and even perhaps in a tiny way beautiful” are in this way motivated by a “basic grunting cuntlapping lust,” so when he writes short pornographic vignettes that he can surreptitiously deliver to women while hidden in the Fold, he is charged with a “soaringly doubled sense of mission” (Baker, *TF* 124). The image of the inspired artist intimidated by the “doubled sense of mission” is thus undercut—or more accurately, the “grunting cuntlapping lust” of the chronic masturbator is valorized. In fact, Baker is able to elevate Arno’s pornography at a purely structural level: two of the stories his protagonist “writes” are (re)produced in full *within* the completed book called *The Fermata*—and they comprise nearly fifty of the novel’s

inextricably to his identity as a queer man, then the former comes off at times as almost oppressively straight. In addition to the almost total absence of any form of non-heteronormative coupling in his work, Baker—especially in his early writing—seems almost oppositional about his own sexual disposition. In *U and I*, he describes being at first off-put by the “initially kind of disgusting level of homosexual sex” in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library*, before going on to claim that, by and large, novelistic fiction is the province of women and gay men, and that his own “carnal circuitry” is an impediment to be overcome (53, 137)—though we may follow Judith Butler in suggesting Baker’s “sex books” go a long way in revealing just how queer heterosexuality can be.

most explicit pages. Just as in *The Mezzanine* the figure of the list dehierarchizes its components, here the categories of (fictionalized) autobiography, pornography, and “literary fiction” are stripped of meaning; each is, ultimately, nothing other than masturbation (subsumed, one might imagine, into a list with this very heading).

Eventually Arno’s unified philosophy of (or as?) masturbation catches up with him, and he develops a crippling case of carpal tunnel. In the novel’s penultimate erotic encounter, which takes place inside a magnetic resonance imaging machine, his autoerotic tendencies reach their climax. After revealing to the repetitive-motion expert at a corporate hospital the pattern of writing-masturbating that may have aggravated the nerves in his hand—he will “type, say, a word or a phrase and then masturbate a little, and then another phrase, masturbate a little more” and so on—she asks if he would be willing to participate in a study that would simulate the conditions that had brought him to her in the first place, while a team of scientists scan and record data for future study (Baker, *TF* 260). Far from being clinical, the scene that ensues is a flourish. Asked by the doctor to “[k]eep a running commentary” while he masturbates inside the tube, his disinterested analysis quickly turns into dirty talk (Baker, *TF* 268). The erotic scenario he narrates—both to the team of scientists watching him on closed circuit television and to us, the reader—involves a man in exactly the same position as he is, who, due to “some kind of bizarre, anomalous micro-funnel” which has developed in the “universal core of time,” is able to “put humanity on hold every time he snaps his middle finger” (Baker, *TF* 271-272). Punctuating this story with a snap of his fingers *does* indeed stop the flow of time, indicating that his power, hitherto absent, has once again returned. It is as though

Arno was able to regain his supernatural ability *in the very telling of the pornographic narrative*, the narrative whose purpose it was to arouse him while he masturbated, and which is an abridged duplicate of the chapter up to that point. The Fermata may in this moment be a way of explicating the psychology and subjective experience of time at the peak of male desire; it is also a narrative ouroboros, which consumes itself in the telling. Once he has successfully paused time, Arno exits the MRI machine and walks into the control room, where he describes a peculiar scene: “Dr. Orowitz-Rudman was...frowning in concentration at a monitor that showed an image of me lying feet first, legs parted, with my hand clutching my erection” (ibid.). Here the mediated masturbation that was so prevalent in *Vox* reaches its hypothetical apex, as Arno watches himself touch himself on television. He is compelled to violate the doctor as she also watches, and when he resumes time after returning to the tube, the encounter is consumed into the fantasy to which he is masturbating:

this guy who’s in the MRI machine, he snaps his fingers and time stops...time is stopped and he crawls out of the machine, naked, jerking on his big swollen dick-knob, and he scampers into the control room and he throws back the doctor’s lab coat and pulls up her shirt and brings her tits out and he laps at them...so then he puts her tits back in her bra...and scampers back into the magnet...and he lies there thinking of the tits he has just sucked on...and it’s such a tremendous thought that he has to come... (Baker, *TF* 273-274)

Fantasy and reality have caught up to one another, and like M.C. Escher’s self-drawing hands, the strange loop has completed a full circuit. The only possible outcome is, of course, a short-circuit—and so it is little surprise that that “he has to come” right when he has written himself, masturbating, into his own fiction; or inversely: masturbated to himself, writing, in the MRI machine.

“If it were possible to imagine an aesthetic of textual pleasure,” Barthes contends, “it would have to include: *writing aloud*” (*Pleasure* 66). What can possibly be meant by this strange, counterintuitive image? How can the written word be rendered as voice? For Barthes, it entails a reimagining of the text’s primary appeal, “value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier”—or, in language that more closely approximates Baker’s own, “the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language” (*Pleasure* 65-67). Refocusing attention in this way, locating the seductive quality of the text in the sensuous corporeality of its signifiers rather than the coolly intellectual web of its significations, dovetails indirectly with Baker’s vision of sexuality. More often than not, masturbation is the province of fantasy, an autoerotic substitute for the sexual desire that motivates it—put differently, it is a *stimulating signifier*, one which gestures elsewhere, toward the sexual union for which it is a substitute, as a part of its normal functioning. The imaginative component of the act is thoroughly present in the erotic fantasies of Baker’s inspired narrators. That their masturbatory fixation is so often also masturbation itself, like the Masturbate-a-Thon which is for Žižek the postmodern sexual encounter *par excellence*, is simply a doubling of Barthes’ dictum: a pleasure of the signifier that points only back to itself.

This circular logic of signification might be deemed masturbatory, in the pejorative sense—but for Baker, that is exactly the point. Another consequence suggested by Barthes’ revaluation of the signifier is a profound lack of faith in the ability to meaningfully communicate the experience of extreme pleasure with other people. Bliss is “the abrupt loss of sociality, and yet there follows no recurrence to the

subject (subjectivity), the person, solitude: everything is lost” (Barthes, *Pleasure* 39). For Barthes, the experience is marked by a positive sense of ineffability (what he continually refers to as the “atopic” quality of the text); for Baker, it might be said that the experience of pleasure is tied up with something largely negative: the inability to meaningfully communicate with other people *at all*. This is an affliction that almost all of Baker’s characters seem to possess, whether or not they choose to admit it. As Saltzman argues, “Regular and availing human contact is either an ambition that most of Baker’s population cannot achieve or one they do not even aspire to” (*Understanding* 79). The result is a sense of protagonists who navigate human relationships with the same careful detachment and analytic interest that they use to approach objects.

And as is so often the case in *The Fermata*, Arno’s protests in this regard do nothing but affirm what he tries so hard to disavow: “Am I an alienated person? Some who have read this far might say so—some might say that a man who comes onto an unknown woman’s ecstatically squinting orgasm-face without her being aware of it is definitely an alienated person—or worse” (Baker, *TF* 155). Though he will go on to reject this label, his logic falters. Just because Arno is, in his own words, “friendly and likable,” and moreover doesn’t have a “flat affect,” there is no reason to believe him to be any less alienated; if anything, it reveals just how little those traits reflect on his—or anybody else’s—character, and how painfully shallow most intersubjective experience tends to be in the conditions of late capitalism (*ibid.*). This helps to account for Arno’s declamation, a few pages after he introduces (and promptly denies) the possibility of his own alienation, that his use of the Fold is

morally defensible because of the access it gives him to some kind of transcendent noumenal world, in which he is able to witness the glory of Kant's thing-in-itself (except for "thing," read: "woman"):

The Fermata... is the exact opposite of the necrophilic ideal: it allows me enough time to take in a particular lived second of one woman's life, the incremental outcome of so many decisions and misfortunes and delights and griefs, while she is in the very midst of fleetingly bringing it into being... each time I Drop I get another chance to love a chosen body *as it really is*: to see a woman's ass, for example, when its owner-operator is talking at a pay-phone and thinking about other things than the fact that she has an ass, and her ass can therefore be completely itself. (Baker, *TF* 158, emphasis mine)

A pervert's solution to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, then: freeze time and take the clothes off of a woman to see something that is "completely itself." Even if Arno does not think of himself as an alienated individual, his belief in this profound truth given to him by the Fold betrays a deeper sense of the aloneness he finds to be inherent to lived experience, to the encounter with another that finds them encountering him in return. It also suggests that masturbation is not simply the preferred mode of sexuality in consumer capitalism, but also perhaps the only thinkable one, given the prevailing difficulty of intersubjective connection.

This is a feeling that largely persists until the glint of human contact that shimmers at the book's conclusion (or if the book does not succeed, *despite* that glint), which finds Arno with someone who understands and accepts his past behavior and once again seems to ground his sexual compulsions in the experience of writing—a domain that promises the possibility of mutuality and real intimacy. To understand the implications of Baker's "happy ending," it is worth mentioning first the area in which we can find the most overt isomorphism between Baker and

Barthes: Arno's transcribing duties. As an office temp, Arno's main responsibility is copying the words his superiors have spoken into tape recorders; in fact, this is the cause of his initial attraction to Joyce Collier, to whom he ends up inadvertently transferring his powers of time manipulation at the end of the novel, and with whom he seems to have achieved a degree of real happiness. "Writing aloud" is, after all, another way of describing the dictations that Arno takes special pleasure in transcribing. Some of that pleasure is derived from his ability, but for the most part, it is the intimacy allowed to him when he is able to watch language in a state of active becoming that he enjoys. "It is a great privilege to be present when a person slowly puts his thoughts into words, phrase by phrase, doing the best he can," Arno announces—and of course, "It isn't difficult to imagine an erotic aspect to all this" (Baker, *TF* 36-37).

This is pointedly not an eroticism connected to what is being said, so much as the saying of it—the "uttering" and not "the sequence of utterances" (*Pleasure* 13)—which is why seemingly innocuous phrases such as "lied like hell" and "invade the annuity" are able to cause a "strange thrill" among Arno and his ilk (Baker, *TF* 37). The vocation of dictation and transcription provides the transcriber the proximity to another typically foreclosed by the masturbatory comfort of late capitalism. As Arno discourses on the pleasures of "deep transcription," he cannot keep himself from inadvertently returning to the language of the Fold:

I become amazed by the power I have: the power to lift my foot off the transcriber pedal at will and halt that sentence of hers right *there* for as long as I want in order to think about where I am in it, and about what it can mean that this living, feeling creature is spending five days a week saying such things into a tape recorder, and about what her mouth looks like as she says them. I pause within her pause and float

in the sensory-deprived lagoon of suspended meaning. (Baker, *TF* 38, emphasis in original)

Through his work, Arno is able to go “within” his love interest Joyce—but this expansive interior space is a “pause,” which is to say a “lagoon of suspended meaning.” Thus the intimacy in dictations that Arno cherishes is one devoid of signification, except insofar as it compels him to wonder about what Joyce’s “mouth looks like as she [speaks].” Just like the ass that can be “completely itself” when brought to a halt by the Fermata, the double pause allowed when Arno lifts his “foot off the transcriber pedal” during a moment of hesitation is a way for him to stop the chain of associations that carry an articulation away from the articulating body. The sentence, frozen as its speaker is in the “midst of fleetingly bringing it into being,” offers its listener erotic access—but only if we don’t let it “elide, glide over, hide whole self-contained vugs of hidden activity or distraction” in an attempt to focus on what it *means* (Baker, *TF* 39). “Vug,” which refers to the crystal hidden within the empty cavity of a rock, is apropos: something apparently impenetrable or contrariwise pure surface—the objects and interactions that constitute middle-class labor—that gives way to a deep, buried beauty. In *The Mezzanine*, too, Howie tries to forestall the metonymic progress of narrative through a similar focus on the mechanics and minutiae of his vocation; he simply lacks the magic power to *actually* complete the “pause.” In both cases, description promises to restore some of the access to the other denied to the postmodern subject. And this description is vocational, for both Arno the temp and Baker the novelist.

What both are perhaps seeking, then, is an erotic and literary encounter that mirrors the relationship which emerges in the intimate space between dictator and

transcriber. The novel closes with Arno's abilities being supplanted by a burgeoning relationship with Joyce, his dictator-cum-girlfriend. He speaks with all the conviction of a convert: "I guess I had simply forgotten that there is no satisfactory autoerotic substitute for a kiss" (Baker, *TF* 298). Presumably, however, his interest in Joyce is at least partially motivated by the professional (and covertly erotic) relationship he cultivated with her in the confines of their work—and by extension, the confines of corporate capitalism at the end of the twentieth century.

It is the same kind of intimacy that the book can offer, properly read, and so it makes sense that Baker closes not on the happy couple, but on Arno's dreams of readership. Even if he has to self-publish his autobiography, he says, he will have succeeded: "I could still have, say, a hundred copies made up...I'll design a jacket that uses the logo of some flush, big-name publisher like Random House. Yes, I'll put that little stylized house on the bottom of the spine of my book...It will look like a real book!" (Baker, *TF* 303). The irony is clear, as Baker's book, first published by Random House in 1994, does indeed have "that little stylized house on the bottom of the spine." Thus Arno's fantasy, of being able once again to Drop and distribute his work, punctuated by the grandiose pronouncement "[t]hey will read me," proves redundant: the reader has already done *precisely that* (*ibid.*).

The "real book" that he dreams of is inseparable from the book qua commodity, the book put out by the "flush, big-name publisher." The commodification of reading is certainly something with which Baker is familiar: Random House engaged in a marketing campaign for *Vox* that entailed extensive distribution of review copies "wrapped in brown paper" and the promotion of a "toll-

free telephone number featuring explicit excerpts” from the book (Saltzman, *Understanding* 190f1). The result was a piece of “literary fiction” that was also a bestseller. But by locating the true eroticism of the follow-up to *Vox* in the encounter between dictator and transcriber, reader and text, Baker is forcing his audience to reconsider what counts as sexy in the contemporary moment. As Arthur Saltzman puts it, “By virtue of its bizarre modification of erotic possibility and its deftly stylized commoditization of erotic fiction, *The Fermata* is doubly subversive of expectations” (*Understanding* 106).

The text is pleasurable for Barthes *only* as an instrument of subversion. Increasingly dissatisfied with the war of jargons—Marxist, Christian, academic, scientific, and so on, all motivated by the conception of language as a “warrior *topos*”—Barthes construes the language of the text as something beautifully *atopic* (*Pleasure* 28). The most pervasive jargon of all is that of capital, which seeps into the discourse surreptitiously, not as a powerful contender for hegemony but the very enabling basis through which language is realized: the “pressure of capitalist language is not paranoid, systematic, argumentative, articulated: it is an implacable stickiness, a *doxa*, a kind of unconscious: in short, the essence of ideology” (*Pleasure* 29). Barthes’ use of the word “doxa” is meaningful here—as the unavoidable etymological root of words like *orthodox* and *heterodox*, it implies a common belief that cannot be escaped even in its denunciation.¹¹

¹¹ If we take seriously Louis Althusser’s understanding of the word, this is also the very interpellating power of ideology: it is that which hails us, constructs us as subjects, whether or not we choose to respond. “[A]ll ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects,” Althusser suggests, in an exchange that resembles the “most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” (173-174, emphasis in original).

In Barthes' optimistic understanding of the text's production, "the system is overcome, undone" because of the supersession of signification, described earlier (ibid.). At the same time, however, he argues that the pleasure we as *consumers* may be able to derive from a text must be related to its ability to "abolish the false opposition of practical life and contemplative life" (*Pleasure* 59). From *The Mezzanine* onward, Baker has wanted to level this distinction between production and consumption of the text—which explains the fixation his narrators have on "practical life." The writer in Baker's understanding of late capital does not mystically escape the doxa, but revivifies it, relocating erotic potential within its strictures. The appropriate mode of expression is thus pornography, capitalism's "licensed venue" of sexual consumption *par excellence*. Baker's "sex books" make a point of not labeling themselves "erotica"—in fact Arno goes so far as to mock the term, preferring its debased abbreviation, "rot"—and instead squarely situate themselves in the pornographic tradition. So it is that Baker inverts the conclusion Susan Sontag comes to in her groundbreaking essay, "The Pornographic Imagination." Whereas for Sontag pornography signals the "traumatic failure of modern capitalist society to provide authentic outlets for the perennial human flair for high-temperature visionary obsessions, to satisfy the appetite for exalted self-transcending modes of concentration and seriousness," for Baker, the erotic and "visionary obsessions" are directed inward, to the very center of "modern capitalist society" (231). Pornography is in this schema not the means through which capital commodifies sex but rather the way it sexualizes the commodity, taking something with latent erotic potential and making it manifest.

A similar turn toward the pornographic marriage of writing and commodity motivates the narrative momentum in *Vox*, wherein elaborate storytelling replaces straight dirty talk as an expression of mutual desire. That book, which is formally a kind of “epistolary romance,” is “not about sexual intercourse but discourse” (Keskinen 100). Despite billing itself as a novel, the only interventions on the part of the narrator are occasional clarifications about who is speaking—and the last declarative sentence, “They hung up” (Baker, *Vox* 169). *Vox* is, in other words, about the exchange of words, two people in dialogue with one another.¹² Their conversation is “epistolary” because it is an escalating exchange of “written” stories, a mutually constructed sexual encounter with the promise of sexual equality. These stories are validated by the phone service that connects Jim and Abby, its broadcast power. “I called tonight,” Abby says, because of the appeal of “the idea that five or six men would hear me come, as if my voice was this *thing*, this disembodied body, out there, and as they moaned they would be overlaying their moans onto it, and, in a way, coming onto it...” (Baker, *Vox* 150, emphasis in original). This fantasy of the reified voice of a literally objectified woman—a voice that is a “thing” that others can “come onto”—is the counterpart to Barthes’ “writing aloud”: speaking on the page.

And as Keskinen points out, though *Vox* is “nominally divided into two voices, two speakers, the novel gives the impression of one narrative voice, characterized by wit, wordplay, and stylistic virtuosity,” which is why the singular *vox* is more appropriate than the true plural *voces* (111). This is perhaps Baker’s

¹² Baker’s later *Checkpoint* reprises this theme. The story, which not coincidentally presents itself as a literal transcription of a tape recording, concerns a fantastical attempt to assassinate George W. Bush; extending the logic of *Vox* to its extreme, there are *no* interpolations on behalf of a narrator, such that the “novel” reads exactly like a stage play.

ultimate autoerotic trick, and one that emerges in an even more forceful iteration in *The Fermata*: the book as analogue to the 2VOX number, the means through which the masturbator is able to write his desire to a captive audience. It is up to us, then, to discover a masturbatory form of reading to match—and it is in the exchange that literature comes to resemble pornography, rather than the other way around.

Pornography, whose purpose is to “elicit sexual arousal” through “explicit” sexual representation, relies upon a logic of consumption (Kieran 32). So too with literature: when Jim buys an erotic novel, what he ends up masturbating to is the idea insinuated by an advertisement in the book’s back matter for a book strap that allows readers to peruse their paperbacks hands-free, “the thought of a woman reading that this invention will leave her hands free to do other things, and the thought of her ordering it, and then maybe holding the strapped-open book between her bent knees” (Baker, *Vox* 72). And equally telling is the cavalcade of imaginative dildos Baker invents in *The Fermata*, the most memorable of which is “the Monasticon, which was a large twisting Capuchin monk holding a clit-nuzzling open manuscript” (Baker, *TF* 60). This isn’t reading as a vehicle for masturbation: it is reading as masturbation.

Both *Vox* and *The Fermata* are timely books. Despite their bestseller status, each seems to slyly engage with contemporary debates in academic feminism. In the former, “voice and self are identical with each other” (Keskinen 102), and this insistence on the voice strangely resonates with Catharine Mackinnon’s *Only Words*, a feminist critique of pornography that organizes itself around the claim that First Amendment advocacy of pornography is illegitimate since “[p]rotecting pornography means protecting sexual abuse as speech, at the same time that both pornography and

its protection have deprived women *of* speech” (9). The danger of pornography is in this narrative its performative power, its ability as speech to strip women of agency by transforming them into sex objects. Using the Anita Hill hearing as a paradigmatic example of the pernicious ubiquity of the pornographic imaginary, MacKinnon pronounces: “because she *says* she was hurt, it is believed she had a wonderful time...Only words: but because they are sex, the speaker as well as the spoken about is transformed into sex,” and thus robbed of her “human status” (67). Talking about sex and having sex are conflated in Baker, too—but in the opposite direction. Instead of “transforming” words “into sex,” Baker reimagines sex as primarily the autoerotic self-expression of (written, spoken, dictated, transcribed) discourse.

As Judith Butler contends in her critique of MacKinnon, “the antipornography stance opposes the state of disarray into which the utterance has apparently fallen”—but this lament over language’s “state of disarray” presupposes a utopian view of a lost, unequivocal version of language that has submitted to “consensually established meaning” (86). That there never existed such transparency of meaning is for Butler a necessity for resistance: “The disjuncture between utterance and meaning is the condition of possibility for revising the performative...[t]he citationality of the performative produces [a] possibility for agency and expropriation at the same time” (87). Perhaps, but for Baker’s characters, trapped as they are in the doxa of late capital, the absence of “consensually established meaning” is more simply an occasion for getting off. Jim doesn’t need any recourse to theory to “expropriate” language. “[W]hat do you think of that word?” he asks Abby, after saying “masturbate,” and upon learning that she doesn’t “love it,” he takes swift action:

“Let’s get a new word for it” (Baker, *Vox* 35). In the postmodern sexual exchange, it’s as easy as that.

“The universe proposed by the pornographic imagination is a total universe. It has the power to ingest and metamorphose and translate all concerns that are fed into it, reducing everything into one *negotiable currency* of the erotic imperative,” Susan Sontag writes (228-229, emphasis mine). The same could be said of the imperative of capital, which cannot simply be negated. Instead, it trickles down into the sexual imagination, which in a frenzy of consumption and the help of an inexhaustible wealth of objects is increasingly dictated by the logic of masturbation. With *Vox* and *The Fermata*, Nicholson Baker has created pornography that does not simply aim to provide material for masturbation but also ruminate on the epistemological and subjective implications of masturbation as a condition of the contemporary moment. The consequence seems double-edged: if it is a mode of sexuality that best suits the objectified subject, who can only relate to others as objects, it is also analogous to the relationship between reader and text, which offers some hope of a new kind of intimacy. This intimacy relies on a relocation of erotic potential to the margins and blind spots of the structures of global capital. Contra Barthes, who declares the writer to be “outside exchange, plunged into non-profit” (*Pleasure* 35), Baker’s authorial narrators—and Baker himself—are profoundly *inside* exchange, shifting value to the signifier, working to turn the primary *modus operandi* of capitalism from the profit motive to the pleasure principle.

chapter three

“Vast Dying Sea”: On the Life of Objects and the Texture of History

The archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself.

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

Don't feel you must recirculate everything that you have found (so I tell myself); a recopied passage will urn [sic] its keep even if you never quote it anywhere.

Nicholson Baker, “Narrow Ruled”

As I have already suggested, Nicholson Baker's minutiae-mindedness is arguably continuous with a tradition of subjective representation that counts in its ranks challenging modernist figures like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust; but it is couched in a language concerned just as much with communicability as it is with beauty. Like the transcriber (which is to say, like the temporary worker), the reader is able to quickly and efficiently process his sentences, pausing, if she chooses, to linger in the beauty of a word or a phrase—without ever losing sight of the entirety to which it belongs. It would therefore seem that a universe—or perhaps several—separates the abstruse experimentation of Claude Simon's *nouveaux romans* from the conversational warmth of Baker's prose. And yet it is possible, if slightly perverse, to make use of Fredric Jameson's claim that the unique achievement of Simon's writing is the way it “renders reception (or consumption) indistinguishable from production” as a means of describing the pointedly different contours of Baker's work—though admittedly the equivalence is less about creating a unique moment of nonalienated labor, the value which Jameson identifies in reading the notoriously

difficult “new novels,” and more about the alignment of reader and writer in and through the objects that alienated labor produces, of which the text is one (146).

All of which is to say (and this too I have already said): the line dividing reading and writing in Baker’s fiction is often perilously thin. This is certainly true of Baker’s pornographic fiction, *Vox* and *The Fermata*, whose sexual pleasures are also and importantly *textual* pleasures—but it is also a current running through Baker’s nonfiction, from his early appraisal of John Updike, *U and I*, to his impassioned preservation polemic *Double Fold*, all the way through the massively controversial pre-history of the Second World War, *Human Smoke*. Baker’s most recent published work, a collection of essays entitled *The Way the World Works*, formalizes the connection, and takes it a step further, suggesting crossover not only between writing and reading but reading and living.¹³ Gathering together writings from a period of fifteen years, he chooses to group his works into a variety of subject headings, the first two of which are “Life” and “Reading.” One may follow from the other: but which from which?

In an essay called “Narrow Ruled,” which he categorizes under “Reading,” Baker describes the importance of copying out in longhand the writing of others as an aid to his own vocation. This is a real-life analogue to (and one of the likely sources of) the pleasure Arno takes in recording dictation at work; and as copyist, Baker’s writing is literally indistinguishable from his reading. In fact, he tells us, “it is almost the only handwriting I do now, aside from writing checks, and whenever I take up the studious pen and begin, it makes me a happier person: my own bristling brain-urchins

¹³ This is something which has been intimated before: Howie’s careful descriptions in *The Mezzanine*, which constitute the whole of his interior life, are after all not too different from extended, gleeful *readings* of the objects of capital.

of worry melt in the strong solvent of other people's grammar" (Baker, *World* 47). The description should sound familiar. It recalls the meditative state of "deep transcription" through which the office temp is able to delve into the "sensory-deprived lagoon" of another's speech—in addition to the surplus of description that the novelist can utilize to "blow up" a single moment in such a way that even a short trip up an escalator can open out *en abyme* and come to embody the entirety of the knowable world.

The fundamental belief in the possibility of turning the logic of lived existence inside out, so that a moment in time can stand in for the whole of which it constitutes a single ineffable part, and Baker's self-reflexive application of this axiom to his writing, accounts for much of the seemingly variegated array of interests that defines his nonfiction. The overriding ethical imperative present in these texts is the need to *put it all in*, to elide nothing—an imperative the Haverford graduate Baker claims in *U and I* to be a result of the "ingrown toenail of the Quaker conscience" (69). Underneath this ethic of inclusion is a strategy of textual personification, latent in the form of *Human Smoke* and the content of *Double Fold*. In the latter, Baker rails against a group of library "preservationists" who, spurred on by the disaster rhetoric of scientists claiming the imminent demise of acidified paper, have taken it upon themselves to microfilm their holdings, even if that means disbinding, destroying, or selling off their paper archives in the process. To Derrida's provocative claim that provides the first epigraph to this chapter, then, we might add that, in the case of the microform enthusiasts who Baker confronts, the archive is working against itself *a*

posteriori, too. In the wake of this “assault on paper,” what’s lost is not simply the books, but the history that they both contain and comprise.¹⁴

As has so often been the case, Baker’s fight to save physical texts is thus motivated by a larger project: to recuperate a relationship with history that is quickly disappearing from contemporary life. This relationship relies upon the preservation of things that would otherwise be discarded—and so it may be claimed without too much hyperbole that Baker’s ardent pacifism encompasses more than just people, that it also includes the objects people produce. This framework operates through the personification of texts but also generates its inverse: *the textualization of persons*. This is perhaps most evident in *U and I*, in which Baker performs a remarkable kind of prosopopoeia that transcends rhetoric and becomes an epistemological fact. That the book, which is purportedly “about” the writing of John Updike, can transform over the course of its composition into a textually mediated autobiography indicates the intimate proximity of the text (as object) and the human (as subject). The equivalence between reader and writer is in this sense a result of the position of each on either side of a text, which spins both out from its position in the center. And though such a mode of thinking could give way to a grim pessimism, this is obviously far removed from the actual experience of reading Baker’s writing, which is, by and large, life-affirming. Rather than devaluing human life, his project seems to have as its impetus the goal of revaluing—or better, *re-valuing*—the life of objects, which are

¹⁴ Incidentally (and somewhat surprisingly), *Double Fold* is likely Baker’s most “controversial” work to date—at least among the library administrators at whom he takes aim in the book. It is, in any case, the only one of his works to condition a book-length response, the librarian Richard Cox’s *Vandals in the Stacks?* In the interest of space, I do not assess the validity of the claims Baker is making about paper and microfilm technology in *Double Fold*, as Cox endeavors to do—rather in what follows I take Baker at his word and try to draw out the theoretical consequences of his position vis-à-vis the preservation of books.

all we have, and which, without someone hard at work preserving them, always run the risk of passing by unnoticed.

“Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive,” Jacques Derrida announced at a lecture given in 1994 during a colloquium in London that would become the basis for his book *Archive Fever* (1). If the text which Baker privileges is the *physical* text, the text as an object that exists in the world, then we might be tempted to say something similar to begin a reading of *U and I*. Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even on the first page. Clues about Baker’s self-textualizing impulse are locatable outside the boundaries of the text proper, in the marsh of commonly ignored data that identifies *U and I* as a book, in the strict sense of the word: the paratext. On the verso that follows the title page in the book’s first edition, a glimpse at the obscure block of text that comprises the Library of Congress cataloging-in-publication data conceals several readings of its own. A list of headings under which the book will be cataloged, composed either by the book’s publisher or the Library of Congress itself, suggests that it will also hold a spot in the archive using the alternate—and technically incorrect—title *You and I*. Of course, the *U* to which the book’s actual title refers is John Updike, and more specifically, the Updike that filters down to Baker through his writing. But the *You/U* confusion (or perceived interchangeability) is telling in its assumptions, and provides us with a hermeneutic guide for the text itself. The second person deictic (“you”) becomes the literary third person (“U”), known only through the mediation of the texts—or what Baker calls Updike’s “*oeuvral* space” (*U and I* 84, emphasis in original). In their imputation of

the alternate cataloging title, Baker's readers thus actualize (or perhaps, given the ongoing confusion between reader and writer, "rewrite") the premise that Baker has presupposed in his work all along. After all, with the exception of two brief "real life" encounters, Baker's Updike is a person *only* insofar as he exists in the vast "space" of his writing. In a way, then, and like Howie and Arno, Baker can know Updike only through his work—"work" here coming to mean both the objects of his labor, and the labor itself.

The cataloging data is equally insistent on what *U and I* is "about." In its efforts to categorize, it specifies "Authors, American—20th century—Biography," but whether the book is a biography of John Updike, a criticism of Updike's writing, or an autobiography—a story about Nicholson Baker, by Nicholson Baker, in the guise of an extended meditation on the writings of another—is by no means clear. As one critic has dismissively proclaimed, "the *I* engulfs the *U*. In the end, *U and I* is almost all about Baker" (quoted in *Understanding*, 59). But the complaint is perhaps less perceptive than it initially appears: Baker himself contends that his book is not simply about Updike, and that instead "the subject is a writer thinking about an older writer" (*U and I* 68). In fact a degree of topical uncertainty appears early on, manifest in Baker's choice of epigraph, from the literary critic Cyril Connolly: "It may be *us* they wish to meet but it's themselves they want to talk about." Here, "themselves" stands in for "myself," imposing yet another layer of self-as-text trickery. And how appropriate: "I'm fundamentally a first-person guy who yearns to be a third-person guy," Baker declares in an interview more than twenty years after the publication of

the book (“The Art of Fiction”). In other words: Baker is fundamentally a living subject who wants to acknowledge himself in the language assigned to a written one.

Lest spending so much of my own space on the space prior to the beginning of Baker’s work be deemed indulgent, it is worth pointing out that within *U and I* the author admits to doing exactly the same thing. After noting a generic formula and some of the permutations thereof which authors are obliged to include in the prefatory material of their books—to the effect of “Portions of this book first appeared, in somewhat different form, in [magazine]”—he asks, “Am I right in thinking that my generation is madly plagiarizing Updike when we all publish books with this classic example of the Updikean rhythm murmuring its parentage in our copyright pages?” (Baker, *U and I* 153). “Updikean” prosody is not confined to his prose, but extends out into the world—which is why even rote copyright pages can mimic his cadences, or intimate the “parentage” of his textual persona. As a creator not just of texts but objects, the author’s task is not confined to the limits of his work. It expands to include the paratextual apparatus surrounding it, such that Baker’s own copyright page is just one more site of textual expression.

Later, Baker relates a dream in which he sees himself glimpsing over yet another of Updike’s copyright pages, and when he notices what appears to be a typo, he can’t help feeling “a momentary mean-spirited triumph” at the mistake that slipped by Updike’s keen editorial eye—until the number “blurred and reformed itself” into something correct in response to Baker’s smug observation, leaving him dismayed at the realization that “always, always, Updike turned out to be right in the end” (*U and I* 155). In this fantasy, Updike and the copyright page are literally the same thing.

Baker looks down upon a copy of *The Same Door* and sees “Copyright © 1954, 1955, 1956, 1934 by John Updike,” but he might as well be seeing John Updike himself (ibid.). After all, it is in direct response to his moment of “mean-spirited triumph” that the book begins to “reform” itself—as though channeling Updike to begin a dialogue with (and disprove) the presumptuous young writer. Appropriately, given the context of late capitalism, the proper name (“John Updike”) and its human referent becomes identical to the copyright it holds.

Of course, like an earlier conversation Baker concocts in the conditional mood between himself and his mentor on a golf course, in which each man speaks under a cloud of “guardedness and mutual suspicion” for fear of his ideas being stolen by the other, the dream-dialogue is completely imagined (*U and I* 56). But this fact does little to lessen its meaning. If in the dream John Updike is manifested *as* text (and more specifically, as copyright text), in the golf course fantasy both Nicholson Baker and John Updike speak *in* text, the declamatory text of their future novels—which is why Baker’s fear of literary cross-pollination betrays a deeper claim about subjective identity and the language through which it finds expression. It is also why he is able to declare emphatically, “I *am* friends with Updike—that’s what I really feel—I have, as I never had when I was a child, this imaginary friend I have constructed out of sodden crisscrossing strips of rivalry and gratefulness over an armature of remembered misquotation” (Baker, *U and I* 58-59, emphasis in original). Baker insists that he *knows* Updike—or at the very least, he has *read* Updike (even if only partially); the distinction between the two does not seem to amount to very much.

And the difference between this “imaginary” friendship and real friendship is similarly one of degree and not of kind: both literary companionships of the sort that Baker envisions between himself and Updike and the more conventional camaraderie between actual acquaintances are united insofar as they provide “the only real means for foreign ideas to enter your brain” (ibid.). This account of what a relationship means for its participants evokes simultaneously the relationship of a reader to a thesis and writer to a piece of paper. That is to say, if the thesis is successfully argued, the “foreign idea” enters the “brain” of the reader; or conversely, if the writer has the “means,” she can inscribe her idea onto the mind of the other. In either case, the friendship operates according to a textual logic. Baker seems to have both notions in mind when he attempts to explain to his audience the value of his own ideas, despite his unfamiliarity:

[W]hat a writer of an essay like this [i.e., like *U and I*] is trying to do, it now seems to me, is to cheat in a sense on this process: I’m trying to convince the reader that I’m such a stone-washed article that even lacking a recognized corpus or a biography or a remembered history of dorm-cafeteria conversation, or any known self outside of the one chunk of me here offered, I am somebody you know... (*U and I* 63)

The jaunty tone of this passage effaces its crucial movement: the “writer of an essay” makes use of prosopopoeia to become a “stone-washed article”—which is a word that refers both generically to objects and more specifically to pieces of writing¹⁵—before characterizing himself as “somebody you know,” so that the instant of personification

¹⁵ The inclusion of the adjective “stone-washed” also gestures toward a third referent: an *article of clothing*, and more specifically, a pair of jeans. Stone washing as an industrial practice—now somewhat outmoded as a fashion choice, but popular at the time of *U and I*’s release—has specific symbolic value in consumer society that Baker also draws on here. To give the impression of wear in the very manufacturing process suggests perhaps the parodic limits of the “experience economy,” wherein the postmodern subject can forego the experience altogether, instead purchasing it in the purchase of the commodity itself. If, as I suggested in chapter one and two, Baker limits subjective experience to the experience of objects, here, he suggests that objects can themselves encode experience for the subject, right off the shelf.

vanishes almost immediately after it is evoked. Or maybe more accurately, the impression remains, so that even after the prosopopoeial moment has flickered out, the sense of the writer qua “article” is fixed. Thus Baker’s suggestion that he is “lacking a recognized corpus” operates as a pun. He does not have a “recognized corpus” because he has only published two books prior to *U and I* (those being *The Mezzanine* and *Room Temperature*), and he is lacking a “corpus” because his body is at this moment textual rather than anatomical. Put simply, Baker’s paltry body is his paltry body of work.

It is a body that Baker is working through the writing of *U and I* to enlarge. What begins as an attempt to write a “letter of condolence” to Donald Barthelme’s editor after Barthelme’s death transforms into an essay of “appreciation” for John Updike, before ending up almost 200 pages later as “this kind of a nose-pressed-against-the-store-window book” meditating variously on Updike, authorship, and the writing process (Baker, *U and I* 4, 13, 175). From letter to essay, and essay to book—we might justifiably add, as one final step, from book to life. One of Updike’s works that Baker seems most drawn to is his memoir *Self-Consciousness*; but the title may be even more appropriate for Baker’s own writing. Indeed, self-consciousness provides nearly all of the book’s propulsive energy. For example, uncertainty about his showy use of the words “florilegia” and “plenipotentiary” launches Baker into a long digression on the “deracinated adjacency of the thesaurus” and his fear that readers will think he is using one (*U and I* 78); the moment (and the chapter which contains it) terminates in Baker’s declaration that “[e]very concrete substantive seem arbitrarily lyrical” in an attempt to defend his aversion to words like “sky” (*U and I*

83), and the next chapter (putatively) follows an entirely different path than he initially intended because of the inclusion of this observation. It is almost as if any reading of the text must necessarily be a kind of second-order reading, because so much of the content of the book is reflexive criticism.

The effect can be dizzying. After quoting the early English writer John Lyly, Baker, characteristically, stops himself. “But here again, here again,” he says, “I have to call attention to this problem of tone. Is it like me to rope somebody like John Lyly into the present context? No, it is not. Or rather, it *is* only when I can then call the reference immediately into question by a follow-up act of self-reproach” (Baker, *U and I* 108, emphasis in original). What is the object of this “self-reproach”? Is it, simply, the reference to Lyly? Or is it, reflexively, the very introduction of the “follow-up act of self-reproach”? I would argue that it encompasses both: self-consciousness, so often manifested as self-reproach, is a ubiquitous force in the text, and arguably the very means through which the text is able to come into being. If a brand of writerly hypersensitivity is what enables the careful descriptions of works like *The Mezzanine* and *Vox*, in *U and I*, this sensitivity is turned inward. And if Baker has a general sense that “the stakes are very high” it is not only because he is trying to prove himself as a writer, but also and perhaps unconsciously trying to write himself as a book (ibid.).

To write oneself as a book—this does not sound altogether unfamiliar. It is another way of describing self-analysis, and might call to mind the figure that turned this kind of analysis into a science: Sigmund Freud. The comparison is apropos not only because of the way in which Baker continually uses what he knows of Harold

Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* to frame the relationship between himself and Updike as a kind of comic-Oedipal agon, but also because one of Freud's accomplishments was to conceptualize memory itself as a kind of notebook, upon which the text of experience was scrawled. Put differently, Freud's theory of human consciousness was one in which nothing was ever forgotten, even if it was relegated to the palimpsestic realm of the unconscious—it was an attempt, according to Jacques Derrida, “to represent on the outside memory as internal archivization” (13, emphasis in original). And if the archive is itself something external to memory, what Derrida refers to as a “*hypomnema*,” or documentary record, then in this model the mind does not remember but instead writes down.¹⁶

As Derrida reminds us, *hypomnema*, the physical record, is tied etymologically to *hypomnesia*, the condition of having abnormally poor memory. Writing, in *U and I*, is thus a way of externalizing and thereby preserving what has already been written on the mind, just as writing in *The Mezzanine* is a way of documenting and memorializing the passage of material culture—a passage which is accelerated in the capitalist mode. Baker's preliminary labor in preparing *U and I* involves a “rubber-banded pile of three-by-five cards,” which he uses to write down half-remembered quotations and images from Updike's prose, together with a glossary of “attractively cryptic check marks” that are only helpful to the essay at hand “as a physical presence” (*U and I* 92, 99, 100). This index card model of

¹⁶ An understanding of the mind as something that records everything is for Freud best figured by *der Wunderblock*—the “mystic writing pad” toy that was roughly contemporary with the maturity of psychoanalysis in the early 20th century. The toy was significant as a metaphor for the unconscious because it retained traces of everything that had ever been written onto it; but while Baker might value the commodity lineage that connects *der Wunderblock* with the modern-day Etch-a-Sketch, the notion of perfect, unerring memory seems to be antithetical to the productive forgetting that lies at the heart of his study of Updike and cultural forgetting against which he writes in his elegiac fiction.

consciousness represents the subject not as a complete, indelible repository of experience, but rather as a loose assemblage of objects that stay fixed in the mind—that constitute the mind—with varying degrees of solidity.

Significantly, Baker never corrects (or perhaps, “effaces”) his mistakes after consulting the archive of Updike’s works, but instead includes bracketed notes that allow the reader to compare the “real” hypomnema—the published work—with his remembered iteration. In addition to maintaining his ethical commitment to avoid elision, this method allows him to extrapolate meaning from the words of another “when the context was now hazy and irrelevant”—to use them as a fount of creative meditation (Baker, *U and I* 33). The best image for the kind of memory that is operative in the book comes not from Baker, but from Updike, who in an early short story describes all of the poetry one of his characters has read as a “vast dying sea” quickly fading within him. In a move that is deeply typical of Baker’s recursive style, this “vast dying sea” comes to refer both to his own fragmentary recollection of all that he has once read and is itself an inclusion among those fragments:

In an early story a character leans his forehead against a bookcase, and considers “all the poetry he had once read evaporating in him, a vast dying sea.” It’s a stupendous moment in the story, in fiction, perfectly situated (at least so I remember it), but I think its stupendousness derives in part from its own plucky ability to stay afloat...as the rest of the story and almost all of literature capsizes and decays in deep corrosive oceans of totaled recall. I remember almost nothing of what I read. (*U and I* 33)

“Vast dying sea” as a fragment of remembered prose thus survives the “vast dying sea” of semi-recollected reading. Baker is not claiming total recall so much as he is “totaled recall”—memory is thus what remains after everything else “capsizes” or “decays.”

Index cards are study tools: they help facilitate memorization. But for Baker, memorizing is tantamount to memory. While this may seem tautological, the distinction between the two terms has epistemological import. A subject has memory; objects are remembered. This is the distinction between Marcel Proust and the *petit madeleine*. In *The Holocaust of Texts*, Amy Hungerford argues that trauma theory coming after deconstruction—and particularly, Cathy Caruth’s book *Unclaimed Experience*—has reified experience, so that it exists independently of an experiencing subject. “Once what a subject does is detached from the subject,” she argues, “the act of experiencing can become a thing in the world, like an object” (Hungerford 115). A paradigmatic case of the kind of memorizing-memory conflation this reification engenders can be found in the figure of Guy Montag, the protagonist of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. At the end of that book, Montag commits himself to memorizing the Book of Ecclesiastes in the wake of a nuclear war, “making the content of the book not only the content of his mind but the very content of his body, the content of his blood” (Hungerford 54). The text is thus assigned a person, Montag—but so also (and Hungerford never makes this explicit) does Montag become a living, walking text.

The memory/memorization of Baker, the reader of Updike and writer of *U and I*, is more irregular. Rather than complete, internalized knowledge of a single text, Baker’s recollected past is a “vast dying sea.” And whereas Hungerford perceives the breach between memory and memorization to result from the reification of subjective experience, for Baker it follows from the subjective experience of reification. It is nothing more than an expression of an already-textualized model of

subjectivity, in which anamnesis is supplanted by hypomnesis and hypomnema. Rather than recall, in other words, we read and write. This is a surprisingly personal reality for Baker. In the sixth grade, he remembers a brief passion for “word collecting,” which compelled him to carry around a box of index cards (much like the ones he organizes in trying to write *U and I*); coupled with this short-lived attempt at memorization is a memory of his father, who happily provided him with a “graduated series of near homonyms” to copy onto the index cards (Baker, *U and I* 98-99). He remembers the first two words in the series, “ascetic” and “acidic,” but the “last word” remains veiled. It is only after he has copied out a pithy quotation from Updike (who describes a piece of writing as “pretty acerbic”) in preparation for the writing of *U and I* that “two neural power lines [cross]” and the memory of his father’s third vocabulary word (“acerbic”) finally registers (Baker, *U and I* 103). Something memorized compels (or creates) something remembered; the text mediates lived existence, which is (re)produced as text—from the index card, and in the completed book which we call *U and I*.

One of the neologisms Baker uses to describe his study of Updike’s oeuvre is “*closed book examination*” (*U and I* 87, emphasis in original). After claiming ownership of this new critical method, however, he quickly disavows it: “I don’t *want* to see the techniques of ‘closed book examination’ applied to any other novelist,” he protests, “I want this essay to be the end of it” (Baker, *U and I* 89, emphasis in original). Baker may hope that what he is doing in *U and I* is *sui generis*; but just ten years later, his next work of nonfiction would rehearse its own kind of “closed book

examination.” *Double Fold* is an attempt by the author to reclaim the word “preservation” from its perverse misapplication by a group of library administrators who, in a decades-long romance with the ill-fated microform medium, have destroyed books and divested themselves of original, bound runs of newspapers in order to produce adequate (and sometimes less than adequate) filmed copies. Baker does not need to open these books to value them as objects. He wants to save paper—and he decries the absurdity of a profession that has institutionalized the distinction between *preservation* and *conservation*. “Preservation,” practiced by library administrators in search of grant money, treats the book as nothing more than a container of words, and thus something wholly disposable, assuming its content can be salvaged. In fact, disposal is often the fate of the object, since the practice of disbinding produces better scans and better photographs. Conservation, on the other hand, is the province of craftsmen, who treat the book itself as something worthy of consideration and never a “mere [receptacle] of data” (O’Connell 291). As Baker wryly suggests, “The conservation lab wants to save the book; the preservation lab wants to ‘save’ the book” (*Double Fold* 109).¹⁷ Baker’s own preservationist impulse is, by contrast, steadfastly unambiguous. In nearly every one of his books, his tack amounts to the exact opposite of the pseudo-preservation espoused by microfilm enthusiasts. As he notes in a recent interview, his desire to hold on to the things that others are ready to discard does not depend on the content of those things; rather, it is their very existence *as* things, under threat, that lends them value. “It’s almost that the loss is what makes them interesting,” he decides, “And that’s the paradox. The beauty of the

¹⁷ Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *DF*.

things I wanted to save...was partly because they were threatened” (quoted in O’Connell, 295).

Baker’s archival writing—and this is a description that seems applicable to his whole body of work—is thus the product of his philosophy of preservation (his own type, not the pseudo-preservation of which he is so critical), which in turn informs his sense of what an archive should be. Ultimately, a library (the public archive *par excellence*) is a repository of objects that are infrequently used. But this does not mean that they must suffer neglect or face destruction. “A true archive must be able to tolerate years of relative inattention,” Baker contends, and its preservation prerogatives cannot be determined by use, since “library books (and newspapers and journals) that were ignored can become suddenly interesting” just as “heavily read books, newspapers, and journals can drop way down in the charts” (*DF* 242, 244).

If the maxim guiding Baker’s work is thus “value everything,” the same might be said of all that capitalism produces for use only to later render as detritus (O’Connell 294). While Baker’s preservationist mission generously embraces the “mountain of commodities” that makes up the material culture of contemporary capitalism, his relationship to these objects is diametrically opposed to the value imputed onto them as a source of capital (Mandel 406). Marx notes that the accumulation of capital functions through an inversion of the logic of simple circulation, whereby the dominant formula becomes “buying in order to sell” rather than “selling in order to buy” (248-249). Exchange-value therefore eclipses use-value, and commodities freely circulate to generate capital. In fact, capital relies, *by definition*, on this circulation—which is to say that it relies, by definition, on the

willingness of its bearers to let it (and the commodities which mediate it) enter into a process of exchange. It is only at this moment that “[v]alue... becomes value in process, money in process, and, as such, capital” (Marx 256). But this is precisely the moment (or “place”?) in which (or “where”?) Baker intervenes: it is his project to document commodities in exchange, to snap his fingers and pause within the mechanisms of capital accumulation, so that he may dilate, extrapolate, describe, or, in a word, *preserve*, what he finds there. The dictum “value everything” assigns *intrinsic value* to commodities, which comes to take the place of exchange-value as their dominant attribute, and this is how Baker attempts through both his fiction and his nonfiction to *re-value the world*.

Whence is derived this intrinsic value, and how can we find it in the archive? Baker’s re-valuation relies upon a chiasmatic operation, through which objects act not only as records of history but also as historical facts, at the very root of their existence. The object, regardless of its content, is a historical actuality: “No matter what is in a newspaper,” for example, “we know for sure that these particular words and drawings and pictures happened—were published—on that day” (Baker, *World* 140). In the very act of its production, the object *imprints* the history that it records.¹⁸ Thus the two terms become linked, and it is appropriate to speak of each using the genitive: objects become the objects of history, as we learn from *Double Fold*, and history becomes the history of objects, as we have already seen in *The Mezzanine*. This is a symbiotic relationship, and, given the right archival conditions, it is what

¹⁸ Such a condition evokes Derrida’s reading of the novel *Gradiva*, by Wilhelm Jensen, in which a young man seeks out the “singular pressure or impression” of the titular character’s step in the ashes of Pompeii—“the step itself, the step of Gradiva herself, that very day, at that time, on that date” (98-99). The printed page, like the “step itself,” is not just the trace but also the content of history—it is history registered onto the object, the mark of its ontological presence.

allows each (the “history” and the “object”) to withstand the vicissitudes of time. As a metaphor, this is suggestive; in the case of newspapers and books, it is quite literally true:

the margins often become brown and flaky, since moist, warm air reacts with the acidic compounds in the paper and weakens it, and the binding glues can stop working; but a little deeper inside the flatland of the tightly closed folio, the sheer weight of the text-block squeezes out most of the air. The effect is roughly equivalent to vacuum-sealing the inner expanses of the pages: the paper suffers much less impairment as a result. (Baker, *DF* 5)

The text “squeezes out most of the air” that would damage the paper, thereby protecting the medium that contains it. While the empty margins can become “brown and flaky,” the history *in* the object preserves the object *as* history. Preservation, the province of the true archive, becomes in this light the “vacuum-sealing” of history.

In one of the most fascinating chapters of *Double Fold*, Baker provides the reader with a historical anecdote that allegorizes this understanding of the mutually constitutive relationship between history and paper. He tells the story of Isaiah Deck, a geologist from the nineteenth century who, in an era marked by the rising cost of paper, proposed digging up mummies buried in Egypt to use their rags as a source of pulp. Eventually he began to market his product in the United States, and historical evidence suggests that the mummy-rags ended up providing the material substrate of at least some American dailies. One paper, the *Syracuse Daily Standard*, admitted to the practice in one of its issues, and thanks to the *true* preservation efforts of Onondaga Historical Association, paper copies of that particular newspaper still exist. These papers “entomb more than the history of the United States,” Baker opines, and indeed, “The pages of the *Daily Standard*’s mummy issue rattle when you turn them”

(*DF* 63-64). The language is vivid: the newspapers aren't just documentation of history, they are printed on the very pages of history, refined from the bodies of the dead. Their paper has a historical presence—one that can be felt and touched. What's more, the newspapers *are* themselves mummies, “entombing” both American history and the “historical testimony” of the paper from which they are made (Baker, *DF* 67).

Of course, Baker brings up Deck and his mummy scheme negatively, in reference to the modern day phenomenon of microfilming. In both instances, “certain purificationally destructive transformations of old things into new things seems to excite people” (Baker, *DF* 54). That is: in both instances, history is consuming itself. The past is expended as fuel to motorize the present. In a strange and perhaps not altogether coincidental turn, the process is reminiscent of Fredric Jameson's suggestion that the cultural condition of postmodernity “cannibalizes” the past, turning it into a “vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” (18). But whereas for Jameson the postmodern simulacrum represents an “identical copy for which no original has ever existed,” the microfilm, as *actual* simulacrum, risks destroying the original through the very process that brings it into being (*ibid.*).

What's lost in this destruction of objects, for both Jameson and Baker, is the texture of history itself. “Real historians...aren't reading the old newspapers very much anymore...not page by page and month by month, for pleasure—and the texture and content of historical writing has, one, suspects, undergone subtle changes” as a result, Baker declares, because in front of a microfilm reader, “you're rarely tempted to spend several hours splashing in the daily contextual marsh” (*DF* 39-40).

The “contextual marsh” available only through browsable print runs of daily newspapers is something that can engross a researcher, such that the papers do not only relay historical facts but a sense of history itself. Thus the historian able to browse old newspapers, in a way that is analogous to the temporary worker awash in the “lagoon” of dictated speech and the reader soaking in the “solvent” of another’s copied writing, is able to delve into the depths written into the surfaces of history’s objects.

Perhaps it would be better to say that that depth is written *onto* the surface—after all, for Baker it is not a matter of some hidden depth buried beneath or behind an only apparently superficial veneer, but rather a thoroughgoing rejection of the argument that would equate *surfacedness* with *depthlessness*. For Jameson, the two terms are interchangeable, and indeed, “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, [is] perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (9). In *Double Fold* and elsewhere in Baker’s writing, however, the former does not betoken the latter. Instead, surfaces are the very site of a certain historical richness that cannot be conveyed except through the irreplaceable fact of their presence. In embracing their poorly photographed simulacra, Baker argues, librarians have “drained the beauty and color and meaning from the landscape of the knowable past” (*DF* 259). This is consistent with Mark O’Connell’s suggestion that Baker’s writing “persuades us that if we attend to things, to surfaces, in the right way, those surfaces will then reveal their depths” (293). Don’t look past the page, Baker seems to implore, instead, look at it: it is there, inscribed onto the surface of the object itself, that you will find the “beauty” and the “color” of history.

Here and elsewhere, Baker describes history and the objects through which it is communicated using a topographic vernacular. Just as microfilm has irrevocably altered the “landscape” of the “knowable past,” and the “tightly closed folio” is figured as a kind of “flatland,” so too can the newspaper, as a physical artifact, take on the scope of an entire apprehensible world. Part of this is a result of its monumental dimensions. In an address delivered at the Bibliographical Society of America (which bills itself as the “oldest scholarly society in North America dedicated to the study of books and manuscripts as physical objects”), Nicholson Baker describes the experience of reading the paper in this way: “the unfolding begins, and once you open up a section and hear the rattly sounds of the singled-out pages, the rest of the world falls away—the newspaper is so big now that it becomes the landscape” (*World* 136). The size of the paper means that it occludes everything else: it extends to the very limits of what can be seen. The world “falls away,” and a new world, a new “landscape,” opens up and takes its place.

In an essay written for the sesquicentennial of the *New York Times*, shortly after the publication of *Double Fold* and collected in *The Way the World Works*, Baker describes the experience of turning his way through the 100th-anniversary issue of the *Times* from 1951—an experience that is possible for him because his mission of preservation, laid out in theory in *Double Fold* (and earlier), became praxis when he founded a nonprofit and purchased a partial bound run of the newspaper. “What was the news in 1951?” he asks, before going on to describe, in piecemeal detail, a number of facts he was able to glean from the paper (Baker, *World* 142). The essay mimics in its movement from one topic to another the experience of the newspaper

reader, who “proceeds nonlinearly...circling around the opened double-page spread, perhaps clockwise, or counterclockwise” (Baker, *DF* 24). Rather than following a single narrative thread, and like a list, Baker’s reading-writing proceeds according to the logic of another kind of contiguity, such that a word or an image in one news story will propel him into another. So to cite just one example, an ad for a tie, described as a “sure conversation starter” morphs into a “conversation of sorts” which had begun between the United States and the Soviet Union (Baker, *World* 144).

Synecdoche is not a strong enough word to describe this movement, whereby the reader is emplaced in the history emplaced on the page. The part does not simply stand in for the whole; it reveals itself as a whole, the size of which is hardly fathomable. I described a homologous image in *The Mezzanine* as resembling the recursively-scrolling Mandelbrot set, a figure I want to reprise here. Baker “blows up” the fleeting, the ineffable, the material and the inconsequential, so that it comes to contain a whole, describable universe. The movement, *mise en abyme*, is a spatial one: magnification. And the biggest threat to this flowering of descriptive possibility is the attitude embodied in the librarians who view it as their responsibility to make space, to empty out the archive by any means necessary, even if it entails the actual, physical destruction of books. Behind all of the pro-microfilm rhetoric, there is little other than the “fear of the demon Growth”—and indeed, the desire to *reduce* the amount of physical space taken up by the archive, from microfilm to digital copies until it reaches a theoretical zero point wherein it occupies no space at all (Baker, *DF* 81). But the desire to “save space” does not end there, and in “The Charms of Wikipedia,” Baker praises the medium and describes his efforts to preserve articles

that have been flagged for deletion by other users. Mark O'Connell is incorrect when he asserts that there is an "open contradiction" between Baker's enthusiasm for material culture and his enthusiasm for the decidedly virtual Wikipedia project (296). Both are facets of Baker's larger struggle against a teleology of spatial economy that does not stop even after it has left physical space and entered digital space. Baker's "archive fever," his passion for the archive, is in this way not so much a symptom of what Fredric Jameson identifies as the spatialization of history so much as it is a recognition that, in an important way, history *is* space—and not so much the empty/emptied space that the microfilm fetishists dream of, but a space replete with objects whose home is the archive.

The spatial recounting of history in "The Times, 1951" is a kind of formal (re)enactment of the experience of reading the paper—and should, Baker hopes, feel contemporary. "For a little while, as I turned the pages, the headlines and columns expanded and pushed aside all the rest of history—ungeneralizably rich and busy and full of telling confusions," he says, and the sense one gets is of an author (as a reader) not so much learning but re-experiencing history (Baker, *World* 147). Once again, the description calls to mind Freud, channeled through Derrida in *Archive Fever*. For in spite of Freud's archival model of human consciousness (outlined above), he deploys a number of archeological metaphors that signal an "ecstatic instant" in which the archive "*comes to efface itself*," so that the *arkhē*, or origin, "appears in the nude, without archive"—which is to say, "Live, without mediation and without delay" (Derrida 92-93). According to this logic, one can encounter, within the archive, the experience of the past *in the present*—"without mediation and without delay." In the

moment of reading a paper, or holding a book, there exists a discoverable world; the archive—which is in this case both the object and the library whose responsibility it is to safely contain it—has the possibility of transcending itself and falling away. And because objects from another time offer this resplendent and unmediated historical access, they are always worth preserving.

The facts, in these moments of historical possibility, speak for themselves. *Human Smoke*, Baker's most recent book-length work of nonfiction, elaborates a unique method of historical inquiry—one which advances a tacit set of historiographic principles with the hope of building a political project out of this historic encounter, engendered by the archive but located at the exact point of its dissolution as such. What ultimately reads as a sustained argument for pacifism, the book does not preach. Rather, it is a straightforward, descriptive narrative, albeit in fragments—a series of paragraphs, each of which contains a proper noun and a date, sketching an incomplete mosaic of the events leading up to the eve of World War II. “I’ve relied on newspaper articles, diaries, memos, memoirs, and public proclamations, each tied as much as possible to a particular date, because they helped me understand the grain of events better than secondary sources,” Baker writes in an afterword, suggesting that the only way of representing the history is in all of its constitutive multiplicity, dispersed across and available through the objects that survive it and through which it survives (*Human Smoke* 473).

The effect of the book is akin to witnessing the ashes of history fall from the sky, appalling and ungraspable. Its title comes from something not altogether

different, though decidedly more horrific. Imprisoned in Auschwitz at the end of the war, one of Hitler's mutinous generals describes a moment when flakes of "human smoke" came billowing into his cell. Baker's adaptation of the title is a testament to the breadth of his pacifism, which comes to embrace both the victims of history and the objects through which their histories are made manifest. Just as *U and I* invoked the textualization of persons, this amounts to the personification of texts, and it becomes possible in this way to articulate a connection between the book and Baker's earlier (and no less intensively researched) *Double Fold*. While Baker's attempts in *Double Fold* to show the vast personnel overlap between the defense and microfilm industries might come off as paranoiac, his purpose for doing so is largely an attempt to cast the life of texts in language typically reserved for humans, without devaluing either. Textual personification of this sort, Amy Hungerford argues, is put into action when the purpose and meaning of literature is under threat. For Baker, the threat is war itself. "Wars trivialize every small-scale concern you have, like saving newspapers or saving a train station," he says in an interview in *The Paris Review* ("The Art of Fiction"). They are "bad for the novel, because suddenly all of our precious mundanity is justifiably marginalizable" (ibid.). Baker's pacifism is thus at once intrinsic to his project as a writer and a philosophical necessity for that project to have sensibility; to believe anything else would render his entire work "justifiably marginalizable."

Many critics found something morally reprehensible in Baker's stand against the war that is often presented as pacifism's deadly weakness. To give just one example, in an extended misreading of the book and its intentions, Christopher

Hitchens complains of Baker's "assumption of own daring transgressiveness," his "self-satisfied...analysis," and his naïve assertions of moral equivalence ("Just give peace a chance?"). But these criticisms are derived more from the tone Hitchens imputes onto Baker's work than the work itself, which is little more than an assemblage of documents that together call into question the decisions that led to the greatest war in human history. The confusion between what Baker actually wrote and what he is perceived to have written, and the vitriol it has produced among critics like Hitchens, seems to largely overshadow the book's attempt to put Baker's preservationist ethic to work, in the service of a tangible political end.

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Of course, I have endeavored to show that political possibility has been latent in Nicholson Baker's work from the very outset. For if objects are like people, then they, too, run the risk of dying. In this sense, "pacifism" seems an apt way of accounting for both Baker's opposition to the loss of human life in wartime and the loss of object life in the routine functioning of capitalism. In Baker's first novel, this expanded pacifistic impulse takes the form of an outpouring of gleeful description, meant to memorialize each of the innumerable object-interactions that constitute the total life of the subject. Description, in other words, represents an attempt to preserve the objects that not only enable the culture of late capitalism but also and equally *are* its culture. And while capitalism's comportment toward itself is one of maximum liquidity, Baker's description searches for solid ground.

In the end, there is not enough writing in the world to contain this enthusiasm for the world, and Howie only manages to make it to *The Mezzanine*. In *Vox* and *The Fermata*, the exotic fascinations of everyday life reveal themselves to be part of an “erotics of attentiveness” (Saltzman, *Understanding* 181). As Jim, Abby, and Arno the office temp show us, capitalism’s material substrate is at once an object of descriptive and sexual desire and the very language through which that desire can realize itself. Masturbation may be the fate of the postmodern subject, just as objects may be the limit of the postmodern consciousness, but Baker adjusts the contours of his project accordingly, increasingly acknowledging that textual pleasure and pornographic pleasure are not altogether separate.

For a writer who is also emphatically a reader, this lends the text (as an object, always) absolute primacy. Indeed, Baker’s final trick is to write *himself* as a kind of text, the product of his labor as novelist, as I show in my reading of *U and I*. And since the distinction between subject and object is in this way being leveled, human history can be read through the history of and in human objects—foremost among them the books that Baker fights to save in *Double Fold*. In the teleologies of economy and efficiency that dominate in the contemporary moment, this becomes an even more urgent reality. Nicholson Baker’s body of work thus challenges his reader to maintain her attention on the things that abound in contemporary capitalism not because they blossom before our eyes but because they are so easy to miss.

coda
“Last Essay”

Following a selection of essays grouped under the heading “War,” Nicholson Baker’s *The Way the World Works* adds one “Last Essay” before it comes to an end. Rather than concluding his collection with a series of meditations on the topic that consumed his attention in his most expansive work to date, then, Baker leaves his reader with a short piece about something “small”—mowing the lawn. In bringing it up now, let me try to do the same. “Mowing” is a joyous, compact piece, and it sheds light on the perception Baker has of his own writing. “Curiosity is a way of ordering and indeed paring down the wildness of the world,” he writes, and the process of writing a book is a way of clearing out some of these curiosities in order to create avenues for others to emerge (Baker, *World* 314). The infinitude of the world at every moment runs up against the finite capacity of individual memory, and so after you have published a book, “you can forget most of the details—eject them, clean those warrens out, make room for more” (ibid.). The writer fills up his head in order to empty it. But on certain days, Baker confesses, he dreams of a different, unrealizable project:

I want to write a short book called *The Way the World Works*. I want it to be a book for children and adults, that explains everything about history, beauty, wickedness, invention, the meaning of life. The whole unseemly, bulging ball of wax. One of those books that Dover Books

reissues...I get this ambition most powerfully when I have the feeling I have right now, that everything is simple...Why am I the lucky one who almost knows all this? It's because I did some patient research into a few forgotten areas. I filled out the call slips and summoned the acid-free boxes stuffed with archival folders. I half mastered several isolated turf-squares of history, and I know a little about my own lived world as well, and with these several stake-points to steady me, I can pitch my moral tent. (*World* 313-314)

Baker posits this impossible ambition in contradistinction to the kind of writing he actually does, but perhaps the two are not totally distinct. The world may be divided into “isolated turf-squares of history,” but each of these “turf-squares” is also, itself, a world. A world worthy of attention, and equally, preservation—for the whole “unseemly, bulging ball of wax” is contained in it, and made from it. To write *The Way the World Works*, then, is to write a world—or maybe, *the* world, and to read it too. And if the human is text, to live is to write it. It is a book, one imagines, replete with passages to copy.

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