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This dissertation analyzes twenty-first century British avant-garde fiction and argues that a defining literary issue is the shifting dynamic between writers and readers. In particular, the dissertation examines avant-garde authors and the ways in which they conceptualize their readers and their own positions in the literary market place. Contemporary avant-garde writers often claim that their authority has been transferred to an empowered reading public. I explore how material changes including new publishing trends and digitization have re-defined and even blurred the distinctions between authors and readers. I then contextualize these concerns by historicizing anxieties about control, readers, and the marketplace to better show how notions of authority are contingent upon shifts in publishing practices, the expansion of the reading public, and the economic conditions of authorship.

In order to demonstrate how these evolving dynamics impact literature, I use the novels of Gabriel Josipovici, Jeanette Winterson, and William Self to show how writers use their fiction to both critique empowered readers and to restore their authority. My study makes the following critical interventions: First, scholarly works on members of the avant-garde have long argued that these authors ignore writing about “real” issues in favor of abstract ideas about literature, beauty, and art. I counter these claims by illuminating how contemporary avant-garde writers are in fact responding to the same economic and cultural pressures as those authors who write for mass audiences. Second,

the dissertation contributes to an emerging discussion about literary trends after the millennium. Critics recently have observed that contemporary British writers are aligning themselves with Modernist aesthetics and ideologies. My dissertation suggests that we can only understand this return to Modernism by juxtaposing Modernist and post-Postmodernist concerns about the influence of mass culture on literature and authorial agency.

REJECTING THE EMPOWERED READER: RE-CLAIMING AUTHORIAL AGENCY
IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, AVANT-GARDE FICTION

by

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CHAPTER I
PRIVILEGING THE READER: THE SEARCH FOR AUTHORITY IN POST-2000
LITERATURE

It is difficult when the writer is serious and the reader is not. Again, this is a newish problem, reading having become a leisure toy instead of a cultural occupation. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*

This dissertation examines the ways in which post-2000 avant-garde British novelists conceptualize readers. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, many avant-garde British writers have used fiction and non-fiction to explore the act of reading. While their concerns about reading and readers cut across numerous issues (competing forms of entertainment; the belief that readers are not reading “correctly”), at the center of this is the anxiety that writers have lost authority because novels no longer hold much cultural value. When I say that the novel has lost cultural value, I mean that in the twenty-first century, the British novel serves a different ideological function than in centuries past. In the eighteenth-century, the novel helped define the nation and its customs. As John Richetti notes in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth Century Novel* the function of the novel was to “accompany and to promote a shift in most people’s consciousness of life and its possibilities” (7). The development of the novel coincided with the shift from feudal society towards individualization. The novel reinforced this individualism not only because it “encourage[d] the isolation and self-enclosure of the silent reader,” but also because the stories frequently charted an

individual character's growth and development (Richetti 7). Often, novels centered on "leaving home, making a break with the familiar world of childhood, finding your way and often enough a mate, seeking your fortune, acquiring an identity by making your mark in the world and 'doing well'" and in this way they promoted a "middle-class myth of personal possibility, of the individual's potential for growth and achievement" (Richetti 7-8). The British novel's origins contrast with the contemporary novel's aims and purposes. Novels may still discuss an individual's experiences, but these extend beyond seeking fortunes or leaving home, and instead explore new tensions. While novels once taught a populace how to define themselves as British citizens and mythologized the belief that one could rise above circumstance, the contemporary novel fictionalizes recessions, global identities, and terrorism. If anything, the twenty-first century novel explores how nationalism has given way to globalization.

At the same time the novel shifted away from defining national identity (at least to the extent that it did in the eighteenth century) it also lost its footing as an authority on a nation's values and morals. Peter Boxall notes in *The Value of the Novel* (2015) that until the 1970s, writers and philosophers were treated as "guardians of a set of (western) cultural values" (2). Until this time, artists and writers created works that promoted a "given cultural, ethical, or moral doctrine or creed" (2). In turn, academic institutions "preserve[d] a set of cultural values from the perceived threat of decline" by championing art that promoted these values (3). However, after the 1970s when scholars observed how these works were limited and exclusionary, critics and writers suggested that literature and the arts should not uphold "moral purpose[s]," as these purposes were often

Eurocentric (9). These critics hoped that by refusing to assign a particular “value” to art, writers and artists could “give expression to new cultural possibilities” (Boxall 9). In the face of these new artistic possibilities, authors began to account for other experiences and to push generic boundaries. Academic institutions re-evaluated the literary canon and philosophers de-emphasized textual authority, as they argued that literary works should be read with a “skeptical attitude” (3). Boxall observes that critical discourse about challenging literary value continued into the 1990s, but by the early 2000s, the same critics who initially praised the de-emphasis of particular values, eventually admitted that this same de-emphasis compelled readers to “‘set aside the literariness’ of what they read” (4). As a result, Boxall suggests that contemporary readers struggle to assign literary value to particular works because they were encouraged to critique and even ignore literary authority.

The novel no longer defines nations or reinforces particular values; instead, it functions as entertainment. This is not to say that reading was not a pastime in eighteenth century or nineteenth century, but that the novel’s purpose is no longer bound up in issues of manners making, nation building, or even establishing literary value. We can better see how issues of authority would arise within the last few years: if authors have long sought authority or respect for their position as a writer, then these issues would be antagonized by the novel’s new cultural position. If a writer is no longer considered a “guardia[n] of western culture” and is not expected (and indeed is discouraged) to make literary works for particular cultural purposes, then what is the role of the contemporary writer? As writers respond to both the novel’s shifting role in globalization and the idea that readers

consider reading as a hobby rather than an artistic experience, they find that their own roles have also shifted. In the face of these changes, contemporary avant-garde writers are reacting against readers' desires for works to be entertaining. In many ways, they want to restore literature's status as an art form that defines culture. Thus, avant-garde authorial expectations about the function of novel clash with readers' expectations for the genre.

Authorial anxieties about relevancy have an especial urgency in the United Kingdom. Britain's national identity is blurred because of the push towards globalization. If every country has become more globalized, though, what makes Britain particularly different? As I show in my second chapter, British literary culture has been profoundly shaped by globalization. This shaping extends beyond content (authors like Zadie Smith writing about what it means to be Muslim in England, for instance) to economic conditions. Within the last few years the Booker Prize has expanded to include American authors and there is even an international prize that largely excludes British novelists. What was a cultural signifier of worthy British fiction is now an award that is shared by nearly every country that has English as its primary language. The prize long served the British Commonwealth, but the inclusion of the United States suggests that a nationalistic prize is outdated. Prior to the Prize's decision to include global authors, the British publishing industry was radically altered. Small British publishing houses (like Penguin) were annexed into larger, global enterprises. As John Feather notes in *A History of Publishing*, the "British novel" was threatened, as these publishing industries were less interested in novels about national problems and were instead more likely to publish

those novels that addressed global concerns (225). While I more closely examine this issue later in the dissertation in the context of economic changes to cotemporary British authorship, these cultural shifts are important as a framework for why authority questions would emerge in British fiction.

Although issues of authority exist across all genres, novelists have long tried to guide or shape the reading process. Thus, the novel is the ideal genre for studying issues of control, authority, and reading. Even the earliest British novels (for instance, Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, a Gentleman*) coached the reader, often providing explanations for interpreting chapter breaks or plot devices. These explanations were necessary because the reader was unfamiliar with the genre. In this way, early novelists helped guide the readers through the text. But this guidance was wholly unnecessary by the postmodern era because the reader was familiar with the genre; so much so that authors like John Fowles would provide the reader with multiple endings that left the novel's ending to this reader's discretion.¹ Thus, the contemporary reader plays a more meaningful role in the text as he/she is invited into the decision-making process. We see this with the postmodern trope of providing conflicting narratives. For instance, in Julian Barnes's *Talking It Over*, he introduces several characters who each tell a story from his or her perspective; each of these stories contradicts the others, and the reader must to decide which story is "true." This trope is no longer very experimental, as it is used regularly in contemporary television shows and films. However, the trope was quite revolutionary several decades ago because it

¹ In *French Lieutenant's Woman* (published 1969) Fowles provides three optional endings.

explored how experience was subjective. It was also radical because the story-telling process encouraged the reader to participate by allowing him or her to control some aspect(s) of the story. Contemporary avant-garde writers are less comfortable with the reader making narrative judgments. This becomes obvious, for instance, in depiction of author-reader relations in Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook*. An author offers a reader the ability to co-write stories, but she eventually drives this reader away because *she* wants the exclusive ability to shape her own text. In this way, the reader poses a kind of threat as it decenters the author's power and narrative discretion.

Although the novel's relevancy has already been the subject of scholarly interest, particularly in the "death of the novel" arguments that emerged out of postmodernism, scholars are only now studying authors' reactions to these cultural shifts. I suggest that contemporary avant-garde writers have turned against this same reading public that presumably struggles with assigning literary value. Thus, these authors' novels and non-fiction often belittle readers, whom they believe have more power. Notably, critics have already argued avant-garde authors purposefully reject their readers, often choosing to write for "art's sake" rather than for economic gain.² The authors that I study throughout this dissertation are no exception, as each has claimed that he or she writes for a select audience rather than for mainstream readers; thus they often struggle to make a living from these novels. However I posit that the reasons why contemporary avant-garde novelists have opted for a smaller, select readership are more complex than previously thought. These authors re-establish their perceived loss of agency by ensuring a smaller

² For more, see Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*

audience, one that is carved out of a wide, anonymous readership. Thus, what often appear to be elitist, confrontational passages about readers and reading in their fiction (and occasionally nonfiction) can also be understood as attempts to re-assert the authority they believe has been transferred to the reader. Furthermore, philosophers and critics from Georg Lukács to Peter Bürger have suggested that avant-garde authors rarely engage with “real” concerns in favor of merely discussing abstract literary ideas. I complicate this idea by exploring how contemporary avant-garde works broach economic, power, and socio-cultural concerns. These writers believe that they have had to forfeit power and authority positions to their readers. In turn, these writers try to reverse this power transfer by depicting empowered authors who reject their readers.

The three authors that I study in this dissertation, Gabriel Jospovici, Jeanette Winterson, and Will Self, all create works post-2000 that have a particular focus on reading and writing. In the fiction of Jospovici, for instance, the central conflict in many of his post-2000 novels is how issues of authority have directly and negatively affected the author’s ability to actually write. His protagonists, often authors, struggle with a writer’s block so crippling, that some end up in mental institutions. In Will Self’s *The Book of Dave*, ignorant readers pick up a rambling, incoherent text, the eponymous *Book of Dave*, and decide to adapt their ideologies and lifestyles to a work created by a frustrated taxi cab driver. Meanwhile, Jeanette Winterson’s novels predict grim futures where cultural artifacts like novels and paintings are destroyed in the name of progress, a loaded term in her novels that is associated with digitization and eradication. But these authors’ assertions are hardly the only ones discussing subjects like these. American

fiction writer Ben Marcus, Czech novelist Milan Kundera, and Romanian writer Dumitru Tsepeneag, among many, have all written or spoke about the need for experimental, challenging literature and attentive readers. These concerns are not exclusive to literature, however; they appear in many contemporary films as well. Experimental filmmaker Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014) explored the power struggle between creators and audiences. In this film, Michael Keaton plays Riggan, a former super-hero movie actor, who tries to bring a Raymond Carver film to Broadway. His attempts are nearly unsuccessful, in part because he will not alter his play to please audiences, even after his manager (his daughter) explains that without a social media presence and without capitulating to his viewers, his work will be futile. Eventually, the play and his attempts are deemed successful, both because critics have approved and because thousands of viewers began following him on social media, but this success is heavily ironic, as fans only love him after his suicide attempt on stage because they believe he has finally given himself to the stage and to their own preferences. His success is guaranteed only after his near-obliteration of himself and the abandonment of his artistic dreams.

The avant-garde's perceived loss of power has been exacerbated by the critical assertion that the writer plays no substantial role in his/her written work once it is published. In Roland Barthes' 1964 essay, "Death of the Author," he argues that authors are "dead" because they cannot exert any control over the readers who alone have to make meaning from the text. Since these claims have been published, some novelists outwardly responded to that argument (Ronald Sukenick's short fiction work, "Death of

the Author,” published in 1974 being perhaps most notable), but most contemporary authors have expressed concern about the author’s role in a critical and cultural world that places meaning in the reader’s, rather than the author’s, experience with the text. In the fiction of contemporary British novelist Gabriel Josipovici, for example, his protagonists suffer from crippling writers’ block, as their ability to write is corroded by worries about their audiences reading the works.

In order to inject their work with some kind of authority (as they perceive this authority is waning), the avant-garde have aligned themselves with modernism. Indeed, all of the novelists that I examine align themselves with modernism to some degree, whether they self-identify as modernists or their novels are explicitly marketed as modernist works. Josipovici has written several non-fiction works where he charts the transmutations of modernist ideology, and he argues that his own novels are modernist works. Jeanette Winterson has claimed that her work is modernist because of its focus on style, and her many novels contain intertextual lines that can be traced back to Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot. Finally, Will Self brands himself as a modernist, as evidenced by his novel *Umbrella*, which was explicitly marketed as a modernist novel in line with Joycean stream-of-consciousness. His 2014 prequel/sequel *Shark* is similarly a stream-of-consciousness novel. Because these authors have self-identified as modernists, my dissertation will not belabor this by exploring whether or not we should consider their novels as modernist works. Although this dissertation does not specifically study why these authors consider themselves modernist, it does use the “return” to this era as a guide

into a contemporary issue: the desire to reassert authorial agency in the midst of dramatic changes to readership, publication, and authorship.

It is worth noting that these authors often have somewhat reductive definitions of “Modernism.” While the label might cover anything from a literary era (roughly defined as 1911-1940), or a particular ideology often associated with high modernists like T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, these authors often evoke the term and apply it quite liberally to their own work. This is an important distinction because they are not working within an organized movement to bring back modernism. Rather, contemporary authors are finding aspects of modernism relevant to contemporary literature and society.

Often, the language used by contemporary authors when discussing their readers mirror statements made by modernist writers and philosophers. For instance, in her nonfiction work *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, Jeanette Winterson claims that the majority of readers are those who “don’t like books that are not printed television, fast on thrills and feeling, [and] soft on the brain,” while the number of people who can recognize the beauty of art is “proportionally as few as ever” (35). In many ways, her statement harkens back to concerns about the “masses” and their capabilities. modernist philosopher José Ortega y Gasset published his *The Revolt of the Masses* in 1932 and within it he attested that society long divided itself into the majority (created by “average” men) and the minority (those imbued with an especial ability to govern, create art, etc.); however, by the 1930s, that division was beginning to blur (12). He notes the damaging effect this has had on literature: “The present-day writer, when he takes his pen in his hand to treat a subject, if he reads does so with the view, not of learning something

from the writer, but rather, of pronouncing judgment on him when he is not in agreement with the commonplaces that the said reader carries in his head” (Ortega y Gasset 18).

Ortega y Gasset’s condemnation of the masses echoes those made by other modernist thinkers like F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, who published numerous tracts and essays espousing their fears about the masses and reading. Both the Leavises produced *Scrutiny*, an entire project dedicated to selecting texts with merit for the reading public. The need to screen literary works and weed the “minority” from the “masses” emerged in part from cultural shifts such as changes in education. In *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligensia*, John Carey explores how population booms compounded with a better educated public (thanks to the Education Act of 1870) led to the fear that the elite would no longer be in control of art and literature. He observes that modernist authors like T. S. Eliot, for instance, feared that journalistic works would replace novels, as these new readers clamored for works that did not challenge their previously formed views on varying subject matters (Carey 6). For many modernist elitist authors, the masses needed to be controlled, as did their reading tastes, as to protect the boundaries of the culture.

But how could authors in the twenty-first century possibly envision themselves as working within a modernist framework? After all, most of the authors that I discuss in the dissertation are commonly viewed as classically postmodern authors. I view postmodernism through a similar lens used by critic Brian McHale, who in his *Postmodernist Fiction*, argues that the era can be defined by its critiques on meta-narratives such as time, history, and narrative itself (9). Thus, an author like Winterson

fits comfortably within the category of postmodernism, as her novel *The Passion* questions history, perception, and reality. This dissertation then does not try to wrench these authors' works from a postmodern framework nor does it try to select how and why the works should be representative of either postmodern or modern ideologies or aesthetics. Instead, I use modernism as a starting point: what does modernism *do* for contemporary authors? How does modernism inform contemporary avant-garde author's literary works?

All authors, regardless of whether they purposefully publish for the few or the many are writing and publishing within a vastly different paradigm since 2000. The end of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) in 1997 changed the ways in which authors would publish their works. This Agreement had previously ensured that publishing houses could set the prices of books, and these prices could not be altered by booksellers (Utton 114). Post-Agreement, booksellers could slash the prices of books and sell them for drastically reduced prices. Significantly, the end of the Agreement coincided with the beginning of the digital age, which meant that readers could have access to free texts on the web. The corollary of both the NBA's demise and the rise of the internet was that more authors could publish their work, as they could upload novels for free online or even self-publish through sites like Amazon.com. While I explore both of these factors at length in my second chapter, the effects of these were tremendous, as they completely re-shaped the economics of contemporary authorship. Meanwhile, readers could write fan-fiction based on an author's novel, publish it online for free, and gain a small audience of fellow fan-fiction writers. Readers could write in to authors, asking them questions on social media

sites and creating fan-made pages for them. Larger cultural shifts like social media and reality television blurred the line between participant and viewer. Thus, authors writing in the twenty-first century were similarly inundated with a new kind of reader, one whose opinion marketing companies and publishing houses sought on review sites and social media pages.

Readers can now interact with authors across various platforms, which in some way makes them a participant in the process, whether they are helping a novel be selected for publication or they are reviewing it in the hopes of driving an author's sales. Despite this, many avant-garde authors claim that readers are passive, inattentive, and lazy. In a 2014 opinion piece for *The Guardian* titled "The Fate of Our Literary World Is Sealed," Will Self suggested that the internet has created a dearth of "serious" readers who had "self-discipline" to read a paper novel. His concern for digitized versions of novels was that they were not differentiated enough from blogs, digital news sites, and "pulpy chaff" published online. The result, according to Self, was that "the rise of reading groups and online readers' reviews represents the concomitant phenomenon to the political parties use of focus groups to formulate policy: literary worth is accorded to what the generality want; under such terms of endearment, what is loved has always been loved, and the black swan of innovation flies unseen and unheralded." In other words, because editors and publishers put weight on these new readers' feelings and opinions about the novel, it necessarily meant that it was difficult to publish new, experimental works that would not be amenable to mainstream readers. Thus, these readers may be more participatory in some sense, but they have not been properly vetted for their new role as critic.

Self ends his article by noting that the damages to the literary world are irreparable and that the pool of serious readers declines daily. His condemnation of “serious readers,” not only echoes the concerns that Ortega y Gasset and Eliot had for the future of authorship, but it also exposes a prejudice against the “common reader.” In “Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the Common Reader,” critic Robert Alter notes that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “common readers,” were the ideal audience for most authors, as they were considered educated and knowledgeable about cultural phenomena. Most notably, Alter observes that the common man was considered open to new ideas and generally wanted to learn (20). By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, authors began to think of common readers as “philistines,” and this was further fueled by critics such as Q. R. and F. R. Leavis, both of whom wrote about the common reader’s inability to discern “high” art from its lowly counterpart. When Self critiques the common reader, he also envisions a philistine reader who indiscriminately reads works. These assertions are steeped in elitism and, as John Carey notes in his monograph *What Good Are the Arts*, they are largely unfounded, as there is no basis for “high” art.³ However, the contemporary avant-garde *do* deem this reader problematic, both because

³ In Chapter Two of *What Good Are the Arts*, titled “Is ‘High’ Art Superior,” Carey suggests that the division between high and low art has always rested on a false dichotomy. He observes that “high” art is deemed superior because “it appeals to the minority whose social rank places them above the struggle for mere survival” (32). Furthermore, he argues that “high” art solves “spiritual” issues while “low” art addresses bodily or “physical” concerns. Through an examination of various authors and scholars’ opinions, he shows how this discrimination is baseless and pretentious. His larger argument contextualizes beliefs about art in terms of class concerns. While Carey’s fundamental argument has a few limitations (his definition of “high” or avant-garde evolves out of Lukacs’ and Adorno’s shared belief that “high” art does not concern itself with “life,” favoring instead, aesthetic issues), it is nonetheless useful for its elucidation on the subjectivity of “high” art.

he/she does not differentiate between mainstream and experimental art but also because he/she has the power to determine what can be published.

The writers I examine in this dissertation thus have specific notions about who is a “serious” reader.⁴ Significantly, these labels are vague, as the writers have constructed contradictory and problematic definitions. For the writers I study in this dissertation, ideal “serious” readers are defined as highly educated, quite discriminatory, and active in the sense that they are willing to piece together highly fragmented, complicated texts to discern their meaning. One wonders whether anyone could actually embody the kinds of readers they desire. According to these authors, there are fewer serious readers than there are “non-serious” readers, which mean that contemporary avant-garde authors are purposefully ignoring a large swath of their potential reading public in favor of the few who will patiently read through disjointed, novel-length dialogs and broken, abbreviated language. Although reading does appear to be somewhat on the decline overall, as Alter states, most readers embody the original tenets of the “common reader” persona: “They [Common readers] sustain the reputations of the best contemporary writers and keep alive an undercurrent of excitement about the modern masters, even if they are most likely to encounter the latter within the confines of the classroom” (21). Alter’s last point raises an important distinction: often, the avant-garde disparagingly argue that the ability to discern between high and low art is not something that can be necessarily taught, a fact that is

⁴I use the terms “serious” and “non-serious” readers for two reasons. First, contemporary British novelists use this phrase themselves to define readers (as evidenced by the epigram that begins the chapter wherein Winterson prefers “serious” readers). Second, in *S/Z* Roland Barthes argues that those readers who prefer inaccessible dense texts are “serious” (4). As I argue in my second chapter, these terms have replaced “highbrow” and “middle” brow, terms that were popularized in the modernist era and used to distinguish between two type of readers.

problematized by the high number of avant-garde writers *teaching* creative writing in universities and colleges. These are not authors who are worried about fostering a love for literature, but instead, authors who want to locate their ideal readers and write for them.

Contemporary British avant-garde novelists employ several means to ensure that their works will be largely read by serious readers. First, the works themselves are dense and highly experimental. Readers are not going to casually pick up a novel written by Gabriel Josipovici should they want an engrossing plot line or a moving story. Furthermore, even Jeanette Winterson's novels, which are arguably the most accessible ones discussed in this dissertation, are studded with endless intertextual intrusions, and the blurring of her own voice with her characters makes it hard to read the works as fiction. As Winterson gloats in *Art Objects*, readers of her novels will have to work hard to finish and understand her novels (188). To some extent, the authors appear to be making the works purely for themselves, as the works serve as diatribes against cultural and artistic issues. In *The Demotic Voice in Contemporary British Fiction* Jeremy Scott claims that Will Self strives for difficulty so much so that he often invents his own dialect: "Self's novels are written in an art-speech of the most author-centered kind; at the risk of flippancy, in a 'Self'-ish language all his own making" (173). While the authors obviously risk their work being economically unviable, there is little to suggest that they want to exclude their readers entirely.

Ultimately, my dissertation argues that contemporary writers are trying to re-establish authorial agency. These authors believe that readers, marketers, and publishers

have stripped them of authority and re-situated it by extending it to their audiences. Furthermore, these authors do not want to purge their entire readership and write solely for themselves; instead, they want to create a smaller, more specialized readership. By selecting an audience rather than writing for *anyone*, the authors “know” this audience, and by “knowing” their audience, each understand his/her own role. The author will create a work of art, and the reader will accept it.

My dissertation breaks ground in numerous ways. I largely study un-popular authors who have to turn to academic jobs to support their writing careers. In the case of Gabriel Josipovici, the most elusive writer I explore and often referred to as a “critic” or “academic” in articles written him, his fiction is virtually ignored. Thus, I create a context for why novels such as Josipovici’s should be considered culturally relevant. By probing issues surrounding authorship, readership, and authority my work begins to conceptualize the twenty-first century and helps create a new framework for understanding literature that has moved away from postmodern ideas. As critics grapple with twenty-first century literature, many of them suggest that postmodernism has ended, but many are unclear about what has been left in its wake.⁵ My dissertation suggests that larger cultural shifts have contributed towards a loss of authority. While other scholars have noted the rise in authors who yearn for agency, my dissertation contextualizes these concerns within various Post-2000 phenomena (the rise of the internet; the shift towards a global Middlebrow culture). Finally, by examining avant-garde work, I similarly contribute to an under-studied field. While narratologists such as Brian Richardson, Jan Alber, and

⁵ Among these scholars are: Alan Kirby (*Digimodernism*), Peter Boxall (*Twenty-First Century Fiction, an Introduction*) and Dominic Head (*The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*).

Brian McHale have started to explore the poetics of “unnatural” and experimental narratives, this is a relatively new phenomenon. At the same time, my dissertation obviously cannot cover the entirety of twenty-first century fiction, nor can it completely account for the ideological underpinnings of all avant-garde novels.

This dissertation studies avant-garde novels written after 2000 as a way to conceptualize how authorship has changed in the new millennium, given the rise of the digital and the move away from print media. In many ways, it explores how concerns about authorship and readership emerge in avant-garde fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a result of the move towards a more reader-centric culture. The authors that I have chosen to study often come under critical fire for the kinds of comments they make about readers. Given the kinds of comments made about readers, even within their own novels, this is hardly surprising. In fact, in *What Good Are the Arts*, cultural critic John Carey specifically blasts Jeanette Winterson for her comments about contemporary readers, labeling her assertions elitist at best. After quoting a selection from Winterson’s *Art Objects* about her mother’s habit of buying factory-made objects for the home, Carey states, “The prejudices displayed here are securely traditional, though, of course, still prejudices” (32). Winterson has long provoked ire for her essays on the commodification of art, the general lack of serious readers, and the so-called dearth of exquisite literary works. Carey’s monograph takes her to task for these comments, as he claims that there is no actual basis for privileging “high” art over “low” art, and the insistence that “high” art is superior is steeped in baseless elitist sentiment. My dissertation does not attempt to distinguish between “high” or “low” art or to validate

or invalidate the kinds of elitist claims made by these authors. Instead, I examine how frustrations about cultural and economic shifts lead to disparaging remarks about readership, and I argue that these assertions are not merely complaints about readers, but also, attempts to understand what has become a powerful yet anonymous readership. In other words, as I show in my chapter on Gabriel Josipovici's post-2000 novels, these authors try to close the gap between themselves and their readers in order to reinstate their own cultural authority.

While my dissertation delves into new theories on contemporary authorship, I am certainly not the first scholar to note that authority is a prevailing issue of twenty-first century fiction. Many twenty-first century scholars have noted that contemporary authors are worried about authority, but they have either examined how these writers have copied modernist tropes or argued that writers are interested in modernism (and identifying as modernist writers) because aligning themselves with this era means that they are also aligning themselves with an established literary period. Furthermore, these writers are returning to modernism because it was a period wherein avant-garde authors purposefully separated themselves from mass readers as a means to differentiate their work from low-brow counterparts. But the return to modernism has other stakes as well. In their monograph, *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hilyard observe that in order to combat the deterioration of agency (here, broadly defined, as Adiseshiah and Hildyard argue that a multitude of factors like corroding governments, toxic environments, and terrorism have all played their part in stripping away agency), writers have turned back to Modernism:

Amongst the new mo(ve)ments announced in its [Postmodernism's] wake are Nicholas Bourriaud's 'alter-modernism,' Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker's 'metamodernism,' Raoul Eshelman's 'performatism,' Gilles Lipovetsky's 'hypermodernity' and Alan Kirby's 'digimodernism' [... and] it is significant that 'modernism' is included in most of these labels—and so modernism, once again, demands attention.⁶ (4-5)

According to Adiseshiah and Hildyard, several contemporary authors have revived modernist techniques and aesthetics because postmodernism, despite all of its play, irony, and reflexivity, could not ameliorate the many cultural problems that plagued the latter half of the twentieth century (4). But how would a return to modernism give authors authority? Notably, Adiseshiah and Hildyard refer to a particular definition of modernism, one steeped in high literature and elitism. In other words, according to them, contemporary authors look back to writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot and draw strength from their radicalism and their beliefs about the functions of literature. It should be noted that this is a necessarily reductive definition of modernism, and even the grouping of Woolf, Joyce, and Eliot is problematic given that these authors fought among themselves for their own visions of what modernism should do for

⁶ For roughly the last five years, critics have created new labels for the twenty-first century's cultural landscape. In a 2009 manifesto on alter-modernism, Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the movement grew out of the chaos of globalism and commercialism. He finds that, like modernism, it is a largely international movement; however, it "transverses all cultures" unlike twentieth-century modernism, which "spoke the language of the colonial west (see www.tate.org.uk). Meanwhile, Vermeulen and van der Akker see "meta-modernism" as a return to myth and a rejection of deconstructionist ideas. They clarify that their conceptualization of meta-modernism is not a movement, but rather, a heuristic for understanding the cultural climate post-postmodernism (see: www.metamodernism.com). Raoul Esherman's "Performatism" similarly argues against a kind of deconstruction, when he suggests that "performance," and the interest in the "irreducible" has replaced a desire to reduce and destroy subjects, in particular, the human body (see: www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu). Meanwhile, Gilles Lipovetsky argues that we live in a "hypermodern" world, one in which greed and a lack of purposefulness has replaced tradition and meaning (see *Hypermodern Times*. Paris: Polity, 2005. *Print*). I discuss Kirby's definition of "digimodernism" later in this chapter, and I find that it, rather than the above definitions, most suits my dissertation, as the authors that I write about here have been shaped by major changes in digital phenomena and the subsequent changes in the author/reader relationship.

literature. Adiseshiah and Hildyard are not arguing these authors and their respective ideologies constitute the entirety of modernism, though. Instead, they note that contemporary authors look back towards authors *like these* and adopt ideologies *like theirs* to form the basis of their own novels.

In her essay “Such a Thing as Avant-Garde Has Ceased to Exist: The Hidden Legacies of the British Novel,” within *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, Jennifer Hodgson observes that numerous contemporary authors from Will Self to Zadie Smith believe that they are working within a modernist tradition. She notes that such a position is seen as radical and incomprehensible by other writers, who have turned to mainstream fiction as a way to survive “the ‘Amazon problem’” of works being easily accessible online (Hodgson 16). Those writers who have resuscitated modernist ideology and experimentation are opting for smaller audiences, rather than larger ones, in the face of fewer and fewer readers. However, she argues that by doing so, these authors hope to reinstate the novel as an important cultural artifact. Hodgson suggests that a turn back to modernist ideology is inherently anachronistic, as “concerns about fiction’s ability to deliver a coherent whole or to forge an aesthetic community have now been superseded by rather more fundamental doubts about the possibility of representation in an era where the social sphere has already been commodified and aestheticised” (16-17). For the most part, criticism has ignored those authors who have self-identified as modernist. Contemporary British novelist Jeanette Winterson has long referred to her work as modernist and to herself as a modernist writer; however, most critics have not taken these claims seriously, as Winterson employs numerous postmodern conventions *and* the

entirety of her work was written after the 1980s. Yet as Hodgson notes, these authors seek a kind of authority from the experimentation, one that cannot be found in other kinds of fiction, like realist or postmodern, and they also seek a new kind of audience, one that is privy to what these kinds of experimentations exemplify.

Although Adisesiah, Hildyard, and Hodgson note a return to modernism, Paul Dawson in *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction*, suggests instead that post-2000 literature should be defined by the prevalence of omniscient narrators in novels. He observes that while numerous scholars have argued that omniscience is no longer a popular narrative technique, there is nonetheless a surge in third-person omniscient narrators from authors such as “Tom Wolfe, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, and Don DeLillo [...], A. S. Byatt, Gail Jones, and Edward P. Jones” (Dawson 2). However, Dawson clarifies that the “return” to omniscience is complex: “the omniscient narrator as employed in classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels has been considered both technically obsolete and morally suspect in the twentieth century” (3). If postmodernism can be defined by its skepticism towards a unified voice, then why would authors return to a “redundant” form of narrative? (4).

Dawson ultimately suggests by reviving omniscience, some contemporary authors have returned to a traditional story mode, but by abandoning the conservative belief that omniscience can encompass all experiences, these authors have made omniscience “new.” He proposes that omniscience provides authors with a renewed authority:

I want to further argue that the reworking of omniscience in contemporary fiction can be understood as one way in which authors have responded to a perceived decline in the cultural authority of the novel over the last two decades. Claims for death of the novel have been commonplace since the mid-twentieth century, part of the rhetoric of post-modernism, but the latest iteration accompanies significant widespread shifts in the literary-historical conditions which determine the status and function of the novel in the public sphere [...] these conditions contribute to a sense of fragmentation of the public sphere and a diminishment of the cultural capital of literature and literary fiction. (Dawson 5)

According to Dawson, the rise of creative nonfiction, the shift towards book conglomerates like Amazon.com, and new forms of entertainment (electronic tablets, blogs, etc.) are contributing “literary-historical conditions” that have irrevocably changed authorship and the novel’s cultural caché. While my dissertation discusses at length how economic and cultural forces affect contemporary authorship, I find that there are other forces at play as well. While Dawson notes that “blogs, customer reviews, and opinion polls” are problematic for contemporary authors, he does not elaborate on how shifts towards reader preferences have stripped authors of cultural authority.

My work builds upon Dawson’s assertions about anxieties surrounding authority. I find Dawson’s argument useful, as he suggests that, by creating authoritative protagonists, the authors imbue themselves with authority as well. Notably, Dawson’s monograph focuses on voice in the contemporary novel, and he specifically examines how these anxieties compel authors to create protagonists who are skeptical about contemporary life but also authoritative in their assertions about politics, religion, science, and philosophy. In this way, authors create a sense of authority and a purpose for the novel: the novel still holds a mirror back to society and attempts to keep it in check,

all the while acknowledging its own limitations. Thus, he claims, “my argument is that contemporary omniscience is an overt attempt to parlay the conventional authority of a fictional narrator into cultural authority for the authors, or, to put it another way, into cultural authority for narrative fiction itself” (Dawson 21). While the contemporary avant-garde tends to reject traditionally Realist works, and especially in the case of Gabriel Josipovici, opt instead for radical experimentalism, these authors also attempt to use their fiction to bolster their authority.

My project shows how contemporary avant-garde novelists, like those that Dawson mentions, also use their characters to pontificate on cultural crises. In Jeanette Winterson’s post-apocalyptic *Stone Gods*, her protagonist, Billie Crusoe, frets about the environmental impact of contemporary hedonism, as she sets out to find a new planet to replace a trashed, toxic earth. Gabriel Josipovici’s novel *The Andromeda Hotel* figures a lost writer, Helena, who wonders if her art has any place in a war-torn world. While these concerns alone are enough to merit critical attention, what I find more interesting is the depiction of readers and readership in these novels.⁷

Obviously, post-2000 fiction has been discussed at length in terms of global issues, such as terrorism, financial disasters, and multiculturalism. Literature pre-2000 certainly discussed these issues, but as Nick Bentley observes in *British Fiction in the 1990s*, while global issues were beginning to form during this decade, there was also a heightened interest in “specific national and regional identities” (3). He further suggests

⁷ For more discussion on Jeanette Winterson’s *Stone Gods* and apocalypse, see Susan Watkins’ “Future Shock: Rewriting the Apocalypse in Contemporary Women’s Fiction in *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* (2012), 23:2, 119-137.

that because there were global and multicultural pressures placed on Britain and its people, there was a new interest in what it meant to be British. According to Bentley, this meant that previously quasi-stable categories like history, identity, and fiction were destabilized, as other cultures' stories transformed what it meant to be British, write British fiction, and live British history.

A different kind of chaos would define the beginning of the 2000s. Peter Boxall in his *Twenty-First Century Literature* similarly observes that it is hard to locate a single concern in twenty-first century literature primarily because not only are we all living in it but also events like the September 11th attacks and other “geopolitical conditions” have created a “global cultural matrix” where “international, cosmopolitan space [...] exceeds the boundaries of any single cultural domain” (7). In other words, globalization has created a dizzying effect, and it is difficult to pare down the twenty-first century problem into one voice, and one issue. To that end, Boxall covers a wide range of authors, as he believes that the best way to characterize the twenty-first century is to gesture towards a multiplicity of issues, nations, culture, and concerns. Ultimately, he suggests that literature of this century can be defined by the very cultural vertigo that makes it difficult to pin down representative authors and particular interests. He argues that the persistent interest in time and space is the result of authors who have been swept up into the frenzy of the global, digital world, and that this is how we should conceptualize our century and its fiction.

Dominic Head in *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* concurs with Boxall's assertion that twenty-first century literature is primarily interested in global

concerns. The very name of his monograph suggests the shift in criticism towards looking beyond nationalistic issues. Head asserts that novelists like Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie are forerunners of global fiction because their novels broach issues like postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and culture clashes. Head argues that economic and cultural phenomena like the Man Booker Prize helped further popularize postcolonial literature, as these kinds of works were celebrated, while novels about regional concerns were considered too quaint to be great literature (Head 71).⁸ Notably, Head does not bemoan the regional novel's demise; instead, he sees it as a natural corollary to the influx of competing voices and identities that have emerged as a result of globalization and "world" literature. At the same time, he notes that contemporary novelists are not necessarily embracing multiculturalism as the end to oppression and cultural strife, as there has been a resurgence of "cultural tribalism," apparent in works like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (72). In this work, the protagonist witnesses the 9/11 attacks, and returns to Pakistan, fearful that the world will turn against all Muslims. According to Head, then, as we continue into the twenty-first century, the primary concern with fiction is the pressing need to re-define one's self in the context of global concerns. As authors grapple with issues of nationalism and globalism, they search for empowerment against eroding forces.

⁸ Head addresses an apparently popular argument that the Booker Prize judges' preference for postcolonialism is a kind of "cultural imperialism, dominated by commercial interests reaching out from London" by noting that many critics believe that "global" or "world" literature is problematic because it dilutes real political and cultural woes into accessible, mainstream works. He responds to such an argument by noting, "Without forgetting proper reservations about cultural globalization, however, there is an issue of necessity here that cannot be overlooked: world literature is as much a response to the global moment as it is a product of it. We need to grapple with the fact that term 'cosmopolitanism,' and learn to see it (for example) as an effect of economic and migration as much as metropolitan elitism, and so a sign of new and complex global identities" (Head 75).

Even though my dissertation does not directly discuss twenty-first century literature in terms of geopolitics this does not mean that the writers I explore here completely ignore these issues. For instance, Will Self's *The Book of Dave*, published in 2006, explicitly addresses anti-Muslim prejudices after the 9/11 attacks. Even Winterson, whose works are often deemed a-political, wrote a post-apocalyptic novel wherein earth has been utterly destroyed by the lack of concern for the environment.⁹ Thus, the authors I study are reacting to the very same cultural phenomena as Zadie Smith or Hanif Kureishi, and their novels touch on these subjects.

At the same time, the seeming privileging of readers is another global issue that affects contemporary authorship. Critics have begun to take notice of the reader's role and have noted the subsequent effect on authorship at large. In 2014, Jeremy Hawthorne's *The Reader as Peeping Tom: Nonreciprocal Gazing in Narrative Fiction and Film* argued that readers/viewers were often denied power, as filmmakers and authors often obscured elements in narrative, such as the meaning or the actual intent of characters, which kept audiences in the dark, as they were incapable of piecing the work

⁹ In *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicizing Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, Peter Middleton notes the increase of "disaster fiction," published in post-2000. While Middleton specifically addresses Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), there are numerous other works that follow suit: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* trilogy, Ben Marcus' *The Flame Alphabet* (2012), Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006), Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2009), Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven: A Novel* (2014) are just a few. Fears of global terrorist events, environmental decay, and moral degradation serve as the basis for some of these plots, but those novels that exhibit concerns about literature and reading are particularly interesting. In novels like *Stone Gods* and *The Book of Dave*, the demise of literature, language, or the arts results in the end of a culture or even a world. On the one hand, concerns like these are not exactly novel (as exemplified by *Fahrenheit 451*). On the other hand, if, as Middleton suggests, one of the defining traits of this new resurgence in modernism is a focus on the apocalyptic, then it seems important. Middleton traces the apocalypse motif to modernist concerns about ethics and morality, I would argue that novelistic anxieties about the fate of the world without can be traced back to concerns about access to literary works and the cultural repercussions for removing cultural barriers. Middleton ultimately suggests that these works function to "correct transnational cultural politics," and I contend that shifts in readership would be some of these issues they seek to correct.

together themselves. While Hawthorne's paradigm envisions the audience having less power than the work's creator, his argument does not negate my own. In this way, the avant-garde authors I study mirror those who have returned to "traditional" story modes. They, too, have sought a return to pre-postmodern eras, and while they have chosen to adopt Modernist modes of storytelling they nonetheless are working within the same cultural shift as those who are writing linear, "Realist" novels. The fundamental difference between these two strains is that the avant-garde authors have sought Modernism as a way to regain their authority. At the same time, *both* sets of authors are creating some kind of participatory, interactive experience for their readers, but the avant-garde merely ensure that they have *chosen* their audience. Thus, while avant-garde writing has typically been viewed as antithetical to "Realist" writing, they are not so very far apart in their aesthetic ideals. As my dissertation will show, these authors are not working from the fringes of the literary underground, but rather, responding to the same cultural forces as those who write mainstream fiction.

Hawthorne's work is particularly useful because it sheds light on a power struggle between writers and readers, and gives credence to my own argument that authors believe that the audiences have more power within the paradigm. Thus, my project focuses on the obverse: authors must take the power from the audiences, and they do so by creating purposefully obfuscating works that turn meaning-making and interpretation into arduous tasks. If readers want to piece the work together, they must work for it, and through this process, the serious are sorted from the non-serious.

Hawthorne deems the ideal reader-author relationship as “reciprocal,” but notes that most media cannot achieve reciprocity. He uses photography as the exemplar for the non-reciprocal relationship and argues, “Movies [...] do not evoke death for us in quite the same way that photographs do. Unlike photographs, they divert our attention from the fact that our relationship with the characters and events they present is not a reciprocal or interactive one” (Hawthorne 5). For Hawthorne, this medium (photography) would be the least reciprocal, as the audience can never meet the photographed gaze. In this way, photography is not reciprocal. He extends this to literature and suggests that because readers cannot control the narratives, the audiences are inherently powerless. Hawthorne characterizes reading novels as a “silent, individual act,” one in which the authors will rarely address their readers (6). But Hawthorne’s work suggests that, at best, readers can only ever strive to the role of spy or voyeur.

Hawthorne’s claims that that readers become “ghosts” or “observers,” as they can only learn in the novel “what happens next,” are problematic. As Roland Barthes notes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, readers’ ability to move quickly, elide sections, re-read others, and refuse ultimately to connect with a work necessarily suggests that readers *do* have agency. In other words, it is the act of reading itself that becomes a power struggle between author and reader, and it is this site (the reader handling and reading the book away from the author’s own gaze) that creates authorial anxiety. The authors I examine try to negate the readers’ ability to know what happens “next.” Indeed, few readers would be in suspense over how one of Josipovici’s author-protagonists will end their diatribe on Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Patagruel*. Thus, I find that the readers are imbued with a sense

of power, and I disagree with Hawthorne's assertions that that readers passively follow along in a novel, dependent on what the authors provide them. As we begin to conceptualize the twenty-first century, we cannot ignore this trend in audience and viewer involvement across various media. Indeed, there is no sign of reader/viewer participation ending any time soon, especially given how pervasive it has become. While it is easy to see how an increase in audience participation has transformed television and journalism, the effects they have had on literature are perhaps subtler, although in my next chapter I do discuss how such participation has impacted publication houses.

The expanding role of the reader has been explored by Alan Kirby's *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (2009) wherein he argues that digital media and phenomena (web browsers, for instance) have irrevocably altered the cultural landscape. He points to television shows like *The Office*, which he argues are more interactive (the actors, for instance, often turn to address the audience through a confessional-like monologue), and the result of a global culture that is interested in making authorship more democratic. Perhaps Kirby's most significant example of digimodernism is Wikipedia, a site that encourages all users to make anonymous contributions. Authorship is thus extended to anyone and knowledge is democratically constructed (113). On the democratization of authorship, Kirby suggests, "the digimodernist text in its pure form is made up to a varying degree by the reader or viewer or textual consumer. This figure becomes authorial in this sense: s/he makes text where none existed before [...] In an act distinct from their act of reading or viewing, such a reader or viewer gives to the world textual content of shapes the development and

progress of a text in visible form. This content is *tangible*; the act is physical” (51, emphasis original). I heartily agree with this part of Kirby’s argument; there has been a rise in television shows and video games, for instance, where the audience becomes part of the production, whether they “star” in the show or they select the video game protagonist’s choices and dialog. However, Kirby claims that these types of products have little impact on the culture at large because they are not reproducible. He juxtaposes a scripted show (*Fawlty Towers*) with an audience-created show (*Big Brother*) and posits that the former can be re-watched while the latter is only a guilty pleasure. This assumption is problematic (for many reasons) and short-sighted. Although Kirby’s work is insightful, he seems to suggest that audience-centered works are a mere fad. Numerous times in the monograph, he hints that novels like *Madame Bovary* and films like *Citizen Kane* will last because they have “clear limits,” while digital works are “endless” and thus lack coherence and depth (52). I will not weigh in on the relative merits of “literary” versus “audience-driven,” works, especially given that the latter concept is loaded and vague.¹⁰ However, whether or not “reality” television or digital texts will be remembered as cultural classics, the shift towards audience-centered works has definitely left its imprint.

¹⁰ Kirby is quick to note that readers/audiences *all* participate in some way, whether the work is “traditional” or “audience produced,” as they construct meaning while watching/reading. He observes Roland Barthes’ statement that “reading is a sort of writing,” while acknowledging that the kinds of audience-produced works he refers to are largely reality television shows and video games. My own dissertation doesn’t dwell on this distinction, nor does it specifically explore audience-created text, other than as a cultural shift that has impacted author-reader relations post-2000. Also, Kirby largely explored “anonymous” texts like Wikipedia entries, where the actual author(s) is unknown. Thus, the texts he explores *are* audience created as there is not a central author-figure who has “authority” over the text.

For instance, in the summer of 2014, a reality television show called *Rising Star* aired in the United States on primetime television. The premise of the show was, in many respects, not a novel one. Some hopeful singer competed with others and was voted to the next level by Americans who called in their votes. Indeed, shows like *American Idol* and *X-Factor* have long capitalized from this type of program. That being said, *Rising Star* departs from its predecessors in the sense that it radically changes the role of the “voter,” or the average American viewer who wants to vote in his or her favorite singer. Whereas in other shows, people voted and maybe had some kind of tweet that was displayed at the bottom of the screen, in *Rising Star*, the voters’ faces are projected onto a large screen. Both the viewers at home and the contestant can see the viewers’ faces. In order to win the competition, the singer does not simply impress a panel of judges, but instead, all of the potential viewers. As he/she sings, a screen is lowered and the faces of the viewers are projected. Once the singer has proved to these viewers that he/she is talented, the screen rises and he/she performs for the judges and are sent to the next round.

Other so-called reality television shows would follow suit: *Project Runway*, various Bravo television shows (the *Real Housewives* series, for instance), and The Learning Channel (TLC) would similarly ask their viewers to vote in, promising them the chance to have their face on television. Thus, visibility of one’s self on television, an audience member as part of the television show, became a frequently used gimmick. While an audience member who is “tweeting,” “posting,” or “voting” is obviously not a star in ways that most cultures would define one, the fact that television shows proffer

visibility as an incentive is quite significant, especially given the shift towards social media within roughly the last decade. In the same way that readers had earned a wider role, audience members are no longer passive individuals who watch a television show, but rather, active participants, with the possibility of even changing the outcomes of various shows.

Indeed, nearly every “reality” television show has given the power to the viewer to some degree. Whether they are voting for a singer or even going on the show themselves, the “average” viewer is both the audience and the participant in these shows. On most networks, reality television shows fill the screen while traditionally scripted shows fall by the wayside. But *Rising Star* seems to encapsulate a trend towards privileging the viewer *over* the traditional “critic” or even the performer. As the singer must confront the *faces* of his audience, and must pass through the veil of their criticism before he can achieve fame, it suggests that there is a growing shift in the role of the viewer.

Some may argue suggest that *Rising Star* is just one more cultural artifact of a generation obsessed with “selfies” and sharing all their thoughts on social media. However, I contend that *Rising Star* is not just another insipid reality television show, but rather, it is a sign of a larger cultural movement that encompasses literature as well. Within the last few years, the viewer has gained much cultural caché. To a large degree, the internet and social media are behind this cultural shift. On websites like *Goodreads*, any reader can finish a book, create a profile (real or fake), and write an extensive review for the public *and* the writer to read. On sites such as this, reviewers can gain a modest

amount of fame as well, as the best are “starred,” which catapults them to the role of trusted critic. News outlets and online magazines frequently end their articles asking the readers to weigh in on the subject. Small business owners who sell through online retail giants like Amazon.com ask that unhappy reviewers contact them personally rather than post a critical review on their sites most likely because they understand that a few one-star reviews is the difference between profit and not selling. Companies and publication houses understand that in order to woo readers, they must reach out to them online through extensive positive reviews, and extend an invitation to be a participant in the success of a product, show, or novel.

In the following chapters, I use the fiction and non-fiction of three avant-garde novelists to explore how the expanding role of the reader shapes contemporary fiction. All three authors critique modern-day readership in their novels, whether their main characters spout metafictional assertions of the implied author or the protagonists are themselves authors. I examine how these fictional passages often conflict with the expressed or implied desire for authority. In other words, I ask questions like: how are we supposed to read Will Self’s *The Book of Dave*, a novel that at once faults society for its lack of intelligence, yet curiously provides a thorough appendix that readers can use to make the reading process easier? Why do the author-protagonists in Josipovici’s novels fear that all readers misinterpret their work, while at the same time, the authors apparently want to be able to interact with this inattentive audience? How would interacting with them shape the process of writing? By paying close attention to the inconsistencies and contradictions, I show how contemporary avant-garde novelists are

turning to fictionalized authors, scholars, and readers in order to wrestle with cultural issues surrounding authority.

I use the phrase “avant-garde” in the following chapters in favor of the term “experimental,” primarily for the connotations associated with the former. Many authors employ some aspect of experimentalism in their novels; protagonists produce clashing stories that undermine the veracity of the tale they tell, authors produce dueling endings that readers can choose from, and historical figures are transmuted into transworld identities, to be parodied or redeemed by contemporary society.¹¹ The authors using these techniques may employ them because of postmodern beliefs about metanarratives, but largely, experimentalism is so mainstream that it becomes simply another option for most writers. Avant-garde writing, on the other hand, carries political connotations. Those working within the avant-garde are less likely to concern themselves with audiences’ reception of their work. They are experimental to shock and even repulse their audience. The work is meant to not only push boundaries, but to push the art form in an entirely new direction.

In order to show how issues of authority and the reading public are interconnected, my second chapter historicizes the literary marketplace. The chapter, “The Twenty-First Century Literary Market Place, a Historical Contextualization,” examines how the literary market place has evolved since the Victorian era. In this era,

¹¹ Brian McHale uses the term “transworld identity” in his *Postmodernist Fiction* to describe those historical figures whose stories are rewritten by contemporary authors for various political ends. McHale provides an example where an author might create a character named “Robert Frost,” who may or may not resemble the poet of the same name. The purpose of this, McHale argues, is to destabilize the reading experience, as it forces the reader to process that the novel is a constructed piece. For more on this, see *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge: New York, 1987. 83-97. Print.

authors wanted writing to be considered a respected profession. As such, they used various methods (like compiling “living” biographies) to separate themselves from literary hacks and to distinguish their writing. These writers often sought legitimization from the reading public; however, Victorian writers appealed to specific segments of the reading public, often scorning the lower classes, who wanted entertaining, rather than literary, works. The chapter examines how writers in this era had to contend with a newly forming mass audience, the pressures of publishing practices, and the desire to be authoritative. From there, I move to a discussion of modernist writers, who similarly adopted an antagonistic stance towards their readers. Whereas critics previous argued that modernists reacted by isolating themselves from segments of the reading public as a way to escape commercialization, others have noted these writers promoted their work and were heavily involved in creating specific literary personas, which suggests that modernists were participating in aspects of commercialization. I use both of these historical examinations as a way to frame the contemporary literary market and to explain how contemporary writers’ search for authority emerges out of long-standing authorial anxieties about the reading public. Furthermore, the chapter examines how the publishing industry pressures writers to change the content of their work and how the university offers these writers a literary refuse and alternate economy.

I begin my analysis with Gabriel Josipovici’s work, as the core themes that run through his fiction (the writer’s distance from his/her reader; the writer’s contemporary for contemporary readers; the limitations of print text versus oral traditions) foreground many of the issues that arise in Winterson and Self’s novels. The chapter, “Phantom

Readers: ‘The Invented Reader, Space, and Agency in Gabriel Josipovici’s Recent Fiction,’ examines several of Gabriel Josipovici’s more recent novels. In the only monograph on his work to date, narratologist Monika Fludernik’s *Echoes and Mirrorings* (2000) proposes that Josipovici’s work can be divided into two principle concerns: space and isolation. By looking at *Goldberg: Variation*, *Everything Passes*, *Infinity*, and *Hotel Andromeda*, I suggest that his post-2000 literature constitutes a new phase: one of authorial agency. In these works, authors revile readers for their perceived inability to accurately read novels, and the authors themselves are unable to finish their novels because they believe their works will not be properly venerated. I suggest that these fictional authors create fantasies about their readers, imagining them as obstinate and uncultured, which in turn, render the authors incapable of writing. However, while these negative fantasies might merely be construed as elitist diatribes, I argue that these imaginings are attempts at creating a “face” for otherwise unknowable readers, as knowing one’s audience is the only way to end writer’s block and authorial anxieties. In this way, authors try to wrench back power they believe has been shifted towards readers. Furthermore, I complicate this by including an analysis on his most recent novel, *Hotel Andromeda*, a seeming departure from his *oeuvre*, as the author-protagonist within self-critically wonders whether art-for-art’s sake should be forsaken for politically motivated work.

My next chapter further expands upon the distance between a writer and his/her reader, by exploring how authorship shifts in the digital era. Whereas Josipovici’s writers feared that print culture limited their power, as readers had the ability to read the novel

whoever they pleased, Winterson's protagonist fears that digitization will further strip writers of any authority. The chapter, "Nothing is Solid. Nothing is Fixed": Digitization, Hypertextuality, and Co-Authorship in Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook*," illuminates the impact of digital media on the writerr/reader dynamic. Winterson's novel, published in 2000, parodies hypertextual, collaborative works. The protagonist, Ali, initially offers to sell her stories online to readers, who will help "co-write" the story. Frequently, scholarship on Winterson suggests that her depictions of reading/authoring dismantle patriarchal notions of authorship, as readers *are* invited into the creation process, thus, they are not merely passive, silent readers. However, as this chapter shows, the author-protagonist in *The Powerbook* struggles to transfer this power from herself to her reader(s). The "power" that is given to readers is cursory at best. The reader may be less passive, and may have a voice, but this "voice" is heavily controlled by Ali, and the "power" often comes in the form of selecting non-essential aspects of the story. I frame this discussion by showing how, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Winterson published her work, scholars and authors were convinced that the internet would lead to a new kind of authorship, one that was more democratic and less concentrated in a single voice. The chapter then exposes the tension that emerges for an avant-garde author when faced with a readership that wants a new, participatory role.

The last chapter in my dissertation, "'Self'ish Art: Critiques of Aestheticism, Authorial Control, and the Avant-Garde in Will Self's Post-2000 Fiction," adds complexity to the overall argument about control and readership. Like Jeanette Winterson and Gabriel Josipovici, Will Self has long been perceived as an elitist author who snubs

his readers. Numerous critics have explored the ways in which Self privileges his own authorial voice in his fiction. For example, Self often uses antiquated diction in his novels, so scholars have suggested that he does so to assert his own knowledge and vocabulary above his readers' capacity to understand the work. Certainly, Self does produce difficult, impenetrable fiction, but often these very same novels critique authorial control. Those authors who want total control over their own literary works are lampooned and satirized. I argue that Self's fiction questions whether authors can exercise *any* control over their readers, as literary works are consumed and mythologized by various generations for their own purposes. Furthermore, his fiction suggests that if literary works do have the capacity to be culturally absorbed into various movements, then they must have purposes beyond self-interest. In other words, "art for art's sake" is an unacceptable literary purpose, as literature should address the kinds of political and social concerns in the time period. This chapter shows how there are varying concerns within the avant-garde community, and every author has her/his own view about the future of contemporary authorship.

CHAPTER II
THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LITERARY MARKET PLACE, A HISTORICAL
CONTEXTUALIZATION

In this chapter, I examine the twenty-first century literary market place. I contextualize the anxieties and claims made by contemporary authors and scholars about the economic conditions of authorship by juxtaposing them with Victorian and modernist authorial concerns. I turn to the Victorian era to start my examination because it marks the beginning of authors transforming writing into a respected profession. These authors faced pressures to alter their writing styles and to concede to a wide reading audience and often used various methods to better establish respect and authority. From there, I move towards a discussion of modernist writers and their own tempestuous relationship with their readers *and* mass culture at large. Finally, I explore the current literary market and show why contemporary writers consider themselves to be modernists and how this resuscitation of modernism is reflected in their relationship with both their readers and their decisions to make inaccessible novels. While this chapter does explore the postmodern literary marketplace, it does not treat this period of time (still roughly defined as beginning 1945) as a distinct era for two reasons. First, scholars have yet to provide a convincing end date for this period, which means that we are still technically in the postmodern era; as such, the economic conditions I refer to are still technically postmodern concerns. Second, by discussing twenty-first century authorial issues, I

address how these anxieties have changed within the last few decades. Although many novelists and critics argue that contemporary writers are facing “new” pressures such as the so-called rise of the middlebrow novel and digitization, my chapter contextualizes these claims and demonstrates that concerns about audience and making a living from one’s writing are mere extenuations of century-long issues surrounding authorship and professionalization. Authors have long had to concede to readers to make a living and publication houses have always published popular works, and in this way, contemporary anxieties are nothing new. However, digitization has expanded the role of the contemporary reader. In other words, writers now have to differentiate themselves from other writers, mass culture, *and* from readers who now share some of the same authorial roles. In this way, concerns about authority emerge as the literary market extends particular privileges to readers.

I focus my discussion of the literary marketplace to Victorian, modernist, and postmodernist British authors. Although concerns about the middlebrow and digitization are not unique to British authors, I focus on this literary market place largely because British writers’ conceptualizations of their readers differ somewhat from American writers’ approaches. As Thomas Strychacz notes in *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism*, American writers already had to contend with mass culture as early as the Romantic Period. Indeed, book sales in the United States far exceeded their British counterparts. Thus, the book was perceived by writers as a commodity by 1830: “A link between a developing mass market and consumer-oriented cultural forms had certainly begun to emerge in America in the 1830s” (Strychacz 13). After the Civil War, American

culture was flooded with “the launching of paperbacks, dime novels, cheap reprints ‘libraries’ of classics, and mass magazines” (13). British mass culture, however, transformed more slowly. Whereas American writers could expect to sell “50,000 copies of even a moderately good book,” British writers of the same mien only sold “10,000” copies (13). Strychacz attributes the influx of books to “the spread of education and literacy in this period” in the United States. Britain would eventually undergo the same shift towards mass culture, but it occurred during the Modernist Era, as literacy laws at the end of the Victorian era would usher in many new British readers. Certainly, British writers in the Victorian era felt the impact of mass culture; however, writers in Great Britain have become highly invested in separating themselves from their readers arguably within the last hundred years.

While my chapter primarily offers a historical framework for authorial concerns, this is not to say, however, that contemporary conditions of authorship are identical to those modes in the Victorian or Modernist eras. As such, contemporary British fiction continues to be a site wherein authors voice their concerns about the changes in publishing and readership. Many British authors have published works, within the last few years, that feature protagonists who bemoan the economic conditions of contemporary authorship. These same authors turn to newspapers and interviews to voice their displeasure that they cannot earn a living from their novels. Often, contemporary articles echo these anxieties, as they claim that digitization and book selling warehouses (like Barnes and Noble and Amazon) have altered how books are marketed. While these phenomena have left their respective imprints on book sales and authorship, I argue that

writers have long considered themselves under siege from the literary market place. In turn, these authors have adopted methods to restore the authority they believe has been conceded to mass readers or publishing pressures. Indeed, whenever the landscape of the literary market has changed via literacy laws, legal changes to book selling practices, or technological changes made publishing more or less lucrative, writers have responded by trying to control how readers perceive authors and authorship. Whether these authors compile living biographies to shape the public's perception about their work or they make inaccessible literature as a means to separate themselves from mass readers, writers have made various attempts at restoring their authority. As this dissertation demonstrates, contemporary avant-garde authors attempt to restore this authority by depicting authors who are in powerful positions over their readers. This chapter examines how authors in prior literary eras similarly used their writing to establish authority and how these attempts were parallel to changes in the literary market place.

While my chapter does show how publishing conglomerates have changed the face of contemporary publishing, and I agree that market and legal changes have altered book-selling practices, my chapter frames these claims in the larger history of the literary market and the economics of authorship. Within the last two hundred years, whenever there have been large shifts in publishing practices, writers have responded by trying to solidify their own profession against literary "imposters" or wider reading audiences. As such, despite the contemporary outcry against authors being able to make a living from their work because digitization and recent book-selling legal agreements have made it

more difficult for writers to sustain profits from their works, writers have long faced economic pressures to make their works accessible to many readers.

At the same time, there have been contemporary shifts in publishing that have altered the conditions of authorship. Over the last few years, publishing houses have been sold and merged into larger conglomerates that often are hesitant to take risks on more experimental novels. John Feather's *A History of British Publishing* observes that the publishing industry underwent a transformation in 2000. Smaller publishing houses, many of which were British institutions, were absorbed into larger conglomerations. Feather suggests that as a result of the rise of conglomerates, the British novel has not only lost its sense of identity, but it has similarly "lost the position of cultural privilege" (228). He notes that in the years leading up to 2000, these publishing corporations no longer wanted to print risky novels and instead relied on safer, more mainstream works to guarantee economic success: "Publishing good books was no longer enough; modest profits were often inadequate. The search was for the bestseller instead of the steady seller, and for books which could command the vast English international market" (Feather 227). The re-organization of the bookselling industry has had far reaching effects on novelistic production. As Claire Squires notes in "Novelistic Production and the Publishing Industry in Great Britain and Ireland," the postmodern era witnessed the rapid commercialization of the novel. She argues, "the novel has always been a market-based literary form, but the period of 1945-2000 witnessed an intense period of commodification of fiction" (189). Squires suggests that the novel became a short-term form of entertainment as the publishing industry encouraged the rapid turnover of books

in favor of “new” bestsellers. The result of this turnover was that new books were sold in record numbers. Whereas “in 1945 6,747 new books were published [...] the year 2000 saw 116,425 new books” (Squires 190).¹² Authors are now pressed to produce more books, to “counter act short shelf lives” and publishing companies further encourage them to write for mass writers, as these works were the most profitable (190).

As a result of these publishing changes, contemporary writers have further discovered that the industry is less likely to publish their experimental works. The more mass appeal a novel has, the more likely it is going to be published. We can see this with Paul Kingsnorth’s Booker Prize nominated *The Wake*. In an article on the work titled, “Paul Kingsnorth’s *The Wake*: a Novel Approach to Old English,” Mark Brown reports that Kingsnorth’s novel was published via Unbound, a “crowdfunding site,” because no publishing house would accept it. *The Wake*, a novel set in the 11th century and written in Old English, would eventually be nominated for not only the Man Booker Prize, but also, the Gordon Burn Prize (which it would later win) and the Goldsmiths Prize, indicating the work’s literary value (Roberts). While the success of *The Wake* initially suggests that changes in digital culture (such as the popularity of crowd funding sites) have allowed avant-garde authors to find new ways of publishing their works, the reality is much bleaker. Kingsnorth could not find a publisher willing to take a chance on the novel, precisely because it did not have mass appeal.

¹² The number of books sold in 1945 may be particularly low because Great Britain was rationing paper for World War II. The amount of books published was thus affected by the ration, although book sales around the 1940s and into the 1950s were substantially lower than in 2000 (Squires 180).

That being said, avant-garde writers have long struggled to have their works published. In a review for Gabriel Josipovici's *Whatever Happened to Modernism*, fellow novelist and avowed contemporary modernist Tom McCarthy claims, "In cultural terms, we live in deeply conservative times. Editors at several major publishing houses have to run novels' synopses past reader focus groups before being allowed to publish them; 'literary' festivals feature newsreaders and other media personalities." At the same time, he acknowledges that authors who work against mainstream traditions have always been neglected: "We shouldn't imagine, though, that things were that different in the golden age of modernism. *Ulysses* was printed, in 1922, on a small, private press in Paris, in a run of 1,000; Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, on its small-press publication in 1915, sold 11 copies – of which 10 were bought by Kafka." In other words, contemporary avant-garde authors are merely facing a century-long issue with publishing obscure literature: authors who want to publish inaccessible texts will face a mostly hostile publishing industry. McCarthy's claims suggest, however, that the market is reliant on a public who cannot determine if a work is worthy of publication. In this way, McCarthy envisions that the reading public is empowered, as it controls both literary taste (since it helps select the books that will be published) and the economic conditions of authorship, as the public's reading choices impact book sales and direct market decisions.

McCarthy's claims about publishing are particularly lugubrious, but they echo many claims by journalists and writers that the literary marketplace is under siege by new publishing decisions. Since the 1990s, the publishing industry has altered how it pays its writers, has virtually eliminated all small publishing houses in favor of larger

conglomerates, and has made concessions towards the pressures of offering free or discounted content. The corollary of such changes is that even established writers are finding it more difficult to make a profit from their works. Robert McCrum's 2014 exposé, "From Best Seller to Bust: Is this the End of an Author's Life?" in *The Guardian* notes that various writers, some of whom like Hanif Kureishi, are quite high profile, have struggled to pay their bills, let alone make a profit from their novels, over the last few years. McCrum notes that although British literary authors benefitted from a period of prosperity that stretched from "1980 to 2007," largely the result of "The Booker Prize [being] televised for the first time" and general economic security in Great Britain, writers were finding it harder to find a market for their works by 2008. (McCrum). Authors were pushed to make works accessible online all while their own copyrights were being infringed upon by pirated copies of digitized books. Additionally, as McCrum observes the preference of digital media to print significantly contributed to shrinking incomes:

Roughly speaking, until 2000, if you wrote a story, made a film or recorded a song, and people paid to buy it, in the form of a book, a DVD, or a CD, you received measurable reward for your creativity. Customers paid because they were happy to honour your creative copyright. When the internet began in the 1990s, many utopian dreams of creating an open society, where information would be free for all, sprang into prominence [...] Film-makers, writers, musicians, became professionally annihilated by the loss of creative copyright.

He continues to suggest that "For writers in Britain today, the future is incredibly uncertain for all but the mega-selling super-authors" and that those authors who did not

appeal to wide audiences or manage to scoop up various literary awards were left wondering how to support themselves and their work (McCrum).

In part, fiction's potential profitability was impacted by legal changes to book selling practices. Writers have been worried about relying on profit from book sales particularly because since 1997, book profits have been declining, due in part from the end of an important book trade agreement. Without a doubt, the end of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) made a substantial impact on book culture. It also changed the economic conditions of contemporary authors. In 1997 the agreement that had been in place since 1901 was dissolved. Before the agreement's dissolution, bookshop owners had to sell books for the price set by publishers. The stores were not allowed to adjust the price of the book, even if they wanted to offer discounts to attract more customers. This meant that books were often expensive for readers to purchase, but authors could reasonably make a living from their work. Significantly, the agreement had been challenged before by booksellers eager to sell discounted books. Often, this meant that booksellers would damage the books in some way, marking on them or bending their covers, so they could justify selling the text at a lower cost. But they could only mark so many copies before publishing companies would complain. Hence, booksellers repeatedly challenged the Agreement. When the NBA was challenged in 1962, for instance, the courts upheld the agreement as they believed it benefited customers who could be potentially price gauged by competing bookshops who would be allowed to sell the book at any price (Utton 116). By 1997, the courts found that the economic conditions of authorship, publishing, and bookselling had changed so dramatically that a

review of the agreement was necessary, and they dissolved it, this time arguing that customers would benefit from lower prices.

While the courts were convinced that customers would profit from a surge in discounted novels, they did not accurately predict how the dissolution would affect bookstores, authors, and literary agents. M. A. Utton in “Books Are not Different after all” notes that the court “did not foresee substantial switching of purchases of popular titles away from independent bookshops to retail chains or supermarkets” (120-121). Indeed, when the NBA ended, the publishing world was re-structured; after all, the termination of the agreement coincided with the rise of the digital era. Readers could go online to find even better discounts on web retailers such as Amazon.com. By the mid-2000s, Amazon.com (and Amazon.uk) had become a powerhouse, and the online retailer would promote its own e-reader, the Kindle™, which allowed them to sell books at even cheaper rates. Thus, the most notable impact of digitized books was not so much that the codex was changed, but that the e-books were often sold at a deeply discounted price.

Even if authors were able to secure print runs of their texts, their ability to make a profit from their works was tenuous, as publishing houses dismantled typical ways of making profit from book sales. We see this in the following scenario: Harper Collins subsidiary, Hyperion, announced in 2008 that it was ending advance author bonuses and would instead give authors a share of book profits. This would prove problematic both because authors earned less on electronic books, as electronic books are significantly cheaper than print texts and because the end of the NBA ensured book prices dwindled. For instance, in a 2014 *Slate* article, titled “Amazon-Hatchett Dispute: How the Big Five

Publishers Could Have Avoided the Latest Power Grab,” Evan Hughes recalls that literary agent Brian DeFiore blogged about a marked difference in who profited from ebooks: “‘Look at Harper’s own numbers,’ DeFiore wrote. “‘\$27.99 hardcover generates \$5.67 profit to publisher and \$4.20 royalty to author. \$14.99 agency priced e-book generates \$7.87 profit to publisher and \$2.62 royalty to author’” (Hughes). Obviously, DeFiore references American authors in this scenario, but as British book review site *The Bookseller* notes, British e-books are similarly sold at substantially lower rates than their print counterparts. In the *Slate* essay, Hughes expects that the literary world will be negatively impacted, and not just in terms of economics. He suggests that “brain drain” will be the long term outcome of unprofitable works, and predicts, “If an advance of \$100,000 exceeds the budget that an Amazon-dominated world will allow, then the only author who can write such a biography must be either independently wealthy or subsidized by a full-time job, probably teaching at a university” (Hughes). As I show later in the chapter, writers are having to turn to university positions as a way to subsidize their writing careers. Certainly, novelists and journalists alike are concerned about writers’ inability to make large profits from their works. Yet I am suspicious as to whether or not the literary market has witnessed a “brain drain,” primarily because the university provides a refuge for writers and allows them to publish to a niche audience.

Nevertheless, writers’ inability to make livings from their work has become fodder for their fiction. One such work is Rachel Cusk’s 2014 novel, *Outline*, which centers on a contemporary author who runs a creative writing workshop in Greece. In the second chapter of Cusk’s novel, the protagonist, Faye, meets one of her fellow workshop

teachers, Ryan, for lunch. Whereas Faye takes pride in being an author, Ryan is filled with uncertainty, and wonders whether he should have chosen to write novels that had more mass appeal. He declares,

If it's a choice between paying the mortgage and writing a story that'll only see the light of day in some tiny literary magazine—I know that for some people there's a need, or so they say, but for a lot of them I think it's more that they like the life, they like saying that's what they are, a writer. I'm not saying I don't like it myself, but it isn't the be-all and end-all. I'd just as soon write a thriller, to be perfectly honest. Go where the real money is. (Cusk 47)

Cusk's heroine neither agrees nor disagrees with Ryan's declaration. However, at this point in the text, she has already stated to another character that she “was no longer interested in literature as a form of snobbery or even self-definition,” a detail that appears especially poignant, given that Cusk's novel was hailed for its experimental form and minimalist structure (17).¹³ Ryan's confession is juxtaposed with that of another author's beliefs about authorship. Angeliki worries that others do not take her craft seriously, viewing her novel-writing as a hobby, rather than a profession, even though she writes complicated, feminist novels (108). All three authors in the novel understand that authorship is threatened by the instability of the publishing world.

Cusk is hardly the only twenty-first century author whose work exposes the economic and cultural problems facing contemporary authors. Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word*, published the same year as *Outline*, similarly showcases a cast of struggling novelists, most notably, Mamoon Azam, an avant-garde writer who has made so little off

¹³ See Kate Kellaway's “Outline Review—Rachel Cusk's Greek Chorus Enthralls and Appeals” in *The Guardian*, 6 September 2014.

his novels that he consigns a younger, flashier writer (Harry Johnson) to construct a sensationalist biography on his behalf. Johnson's first novel was poorly received, and his agent, Rob, persuades him that penning the salacious biography will be a better position than "get[ting] work as an academic. Or worse [...] teach[ing] a creative writing class" (Kureishi 9). Meanwhile, in Margaret Atwood's 2014 collection of short stories, *The Stone Mattress*, the story "Aphinland" contrasts two authors' lives and careers. In the story, a fantasy writer, Constance, has published numerous fantasy novels that take place in the fictional realm, Aphinland. When Constance was still with her ex-lover, an avant-garde poet named Gavin, Constance was relentlessly mocked for her "low brow" works, even though her novels supported his fledgling and economically unviable career. Interestingly, her ex-lover dies penniless and virtually forgotten, with the exception of a graduate student writing a dissertation on his work, while Constance enjoys a comfortable retirement.¹⁴ The short story illuminates how the decision to be a "middle" or "high" brow writer has long-term economic ramifications. With the exception of Constance in *Stone Mattress*, none of the aforementioned fictional authors are able to make a living without supplementing their income with sensationalist writing, teaching creative writing classes, or being dependent upon a spouse. All three of these works, published within only months of each other in Canada and the United Kingdom, suggest

¹⁴ The graduate student working on her dissertation suggests that Gavin's work is only valuable in an academic sense. This trope (the experimental author's work a goldmine for potential PhD scholars) is echoed by critic Dominic Head in his monograph, *Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction 1950-2000*, where he suggests that academics only read Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter so that they can write dissertations on their experimental novels (94).

that making a living from publishing is nearly impossible, especially if one wants to publish avant-garde novels.

While contemporary authors fear recent publishing changes are undermining their ability to make a living from their work, and members of the avant-garde particularly are concerned about how much power readers have in the publishing process, anxieties about the profitability of literature *and* readers' influence in the literary market are hardly new. Authors have long struggled with readerly demands and publishing practices. On the surface, contemporary authorial concerns appear to be indistinguishable from those in prior eras. For instance, in 1858, Wilkie Collins published "The Unknown Public," an essay about the rising popularity of dime-novels and pulp fiction. He states,

Meanwhile, it is perhaps hardly too much to say that the future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad. It is probably a question of time only [...] When that period comes, the readers who will rank by millions, will be readers who give the widest reputations, who return the richest rewards, and who will, therefore, command the service of the best writers of their time. A great, unparalleled prospect awaits, perhaps the coming generation of English novelists. To the penny journals of the present time belongs the credit of having discovered a new public. When that public shall discover its need of a great writer, the great writer will have such an audience as has never yet been known. (191)

Collins's essay espouses his distaste over the growing popularity of "penny journals" and uninformed readers. Lorna Huett in "Among the Unknown Public: *Household Wares, All the Year Round, and the Mass-Market Weekly*" notes Collins' essay was first published in a periodical that appealed exclusively to middle-class readers. During this time, periodicals appealed to either middle or lower class readers.

Periodical writers were keen to distinguish their audience because during the 1830s and 1840s, magazines and periodicals became popular with “the increasingly literate working class” (64). These periodicals often “cannibalized the Gothic novel format to produce fiction filled with violence, murder, abduction, and the supernatural” (Huett 64). The popularity of periodicals frightened the largely middle-class reading public, as “the penny papers were seen as a potential irruption of the lower classes into society at large, and thus as a threat to the reading public in general” (65). Huett argues that periodicals carved out audiences, as they appealed to class-specific issues. Thus, readers had to self-select themselves lower or middle-class readers.

To some extent, Collins’ “The Unknown Public” echoes contemporary authors’ beliefs about mass readers and taste. In the previous chapter, I showed how authors like Will Self have used *The Guardian* and other popular newspapers to complain about the current state of authorship and to castigate readers for their literary preferences. However, Collins’ essay also indicates that Victorian writers believed readers had the capacity to at least learn how to distinguish between low and high quality literature. While his essay is unabashedly elitist and classist, it nevertheless praises the periodical genre for its unearthing of a “public [that] shall discover its need of a great writer” (Collins). In other words, Collins believes that although this “unknown public” is problematic (as it prefers low brow works), it has the potential to be a powerful influence on the literary market. This distinction—that Collins views the larger reading public as a potentially positive force—is significant when contextualized with Victorian attempts at establishing authority.

At the same time that periodicals and penny-journals were gaining popularity, Victorian authors were trying to establish writing as a worthy profession. Richard Salmon in *Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession* argues that Victorian writers perceived their craft was under threat from a few forces, namely, literary hacks and the pressure to write for a newly expanded mass audience. Writers considered those authors who appealed to lower class readers as “literary hacks” and tried to distinguish their own publications from those written for mass audiences. Thus, writers were not only concerned about the shifting reading public. They were also anxious about the kinds of authors who were gaining popularity and profitability. In response to this, Salmon observes that many Victorian authors published compendiums and lists of living authors, often noting what works they had published. These compendiums formed “living biographies” which were widely circulated. He notes that author “commemorations” of living authors were often circulated as a kind of “aristocracy of intellect,” a class of persons which it claimed was not adequately represented by traditional social and professional registers” (Salmon 5). Notably, if these biographies did include dead authors, they were physically separated into another section of the book, so that readers would could differentiate between dead, established authors and those who were alive and currently publishing. The larger purpose of the compendiums was, as Salmon clarifies, to help the United Kingdom “recognize authorship as a distinct professional grouping” and to “validate a new kind of author” (6). Significantly, Victorian writers appealed to their readers to make judgments about writers’ qualifications. In other words, the popularity of biography compendiums compounded with periodicals’ tendency to

publicize authors' biographies and writing achievements suggests that Victorian authors entrusted the reading public with discerning who were the professional writers. Collins' assertion that the public could be taught to recognize "a great writer" is especially significant, given that writers were actually trying to train readers to differentiate groups of writers.

Indeed, Victorian writers were invested in establishing their own authority, and they tried both controlling their own image (via the compendiums) and by demythologizing writing. Whereas Romantics placed great emphasis on writers having an especial creative genius that allowed them to create literary works, Victorians de-emphasized this creative genius as they feared that readers would be intimidated and instead suggested that writers should position themselves as equal to their readers (Salmon 12). They hoped to earn the respect of the reading public by "not appear[ing] aloof from the broader debate on the nature of work within modern society" (Salmon 16). This mode of authorship, of course, contrasts with contemporary models of authorship. The authors that I study have resurrected the model of creative genius and differentiate themselves from the reading public by reinforcing their own superiority over these readers. I would argue that this still prevails; the authors that I study throughout the dissertation have all written essays espousing their particular talents, all using the kind of language about genius that evokes Romantic conceptions about authorship. However, the larger cultural changes in the modernist era (the influx of newly literate readers) meant that authors no longer looked to readers to legitimize their profession, nor did they look to other authors, as publishing practices became laxer. Instead, contemporary authors

have further retreated, distancing themselves from both low *and* middlebrow authors and their readers in an attempt to give themselves authority by separating themselves from all possible legitimizing forces. In other words, contemporary avant-garde authors have moved beyond trying to train a public to appreciate their work; they instead focus on reinforcing their superiority through their own fiction. Contemporary avant-garde novelists thus disregard whatever pleasure their readers *could* have gained from the text, as the novel's function is to reinforce their authority, not provide readers with a pleasing reading experience.

That being said, Victorian writers hardly embraced the economic conditions of authorship that forced them to write for mass readers. Although Victorian writers argued that they should conceptualize themselves as in league with, rather than opposed to, the majority of their readers, many of these writers were envisioning middle rather than lower class readers. Furthermore, Victorian novelists still complained that the literary market pressured them to make their work accessible to mass readers. Thus, even though Victorian authors wanted to demythologize writing and appealed to readers' sense of taste, they still were concerned that they had to make literary concessions in order to make a living from their work. Largely, they were under pressure to write periodicals rather than fiction, as this genre was more lucrative. While contemporary avant-garde writers may bemoan the state of literary publishing, authors have long had to make the decision to write for art's sake or for a living. For instance, Erickson notes that "In 1827 Bulwer-Lytton writes to his mother that 'at present, I must write for the many, or not at all. I cannot afford to write for the few. I do not write for writing's sake'" (Erickson 176).

Bulwe-Lytton's letter shows that writers already understood that particular genres were financially viable. Periodicals, in particular, offered authors a steady income that could subsidize their income; however, many hated the genre as the length of each periodical placed limitations on subject matters and the amount of time they could spend writing about them (178). Although authors wanted writing to be seen as a profession, many balked at the idea that literature should be seen as pure labor rather than artistic production. Erickson notes that by the end of the Victorian era, authors had demythologized writing to the point that authors felt alienated from writing as they envisioned it as a kind of labor that paid poorly unless they used certain genres to appeal to wide audiences (178).

The Victorian literary marketplace thus presented writers with various tensions: the desire for authority and acceptance as professionals, the equal desire for literature to function somewhat artistically and be viewed not entirely as a labor, the belief that authorship should be demythologized alongside a growing concern about the quality of contemporary readers. These concerns would evolve as modernism replaced Victorian realism. The Education act of 1870 ushered in new readers and mass immigration across Europe changed the cultural landscape of Great Britain. Readers no longer purchased books for leisure or even as an outward sign of prosperity as they did in the early nineteenth century. Instead, journalism and periodicals were further popularized by the newly literate readers. In turn, modernist writers began to fear the influence of journalism on literature. Like the Victorians, modernist writers were concerned about the effects of

other media on literature. However, many writers chose to make literature more inaccessible as to exclude those readers who preferred easier reads.

For decades, critics argued that modernists (in particular, avant-garde high modernists) greatly distanced themselves from their readers. If Victorian authors were largely concerned about whether the reading public considered them professionals, the modernists' authorial anxieties centered on literary consumption. Concerns about the reading public continued, and certain avant-garde modernist writers sought obscurity to escape pressures to publish for mass readers. Jenny McDonnell observes in *Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Marketplace* that modernists often differentiated between "popular" and "literary" writers (2). Whereas T. S. Eliot's "*Criterion* aimed for—and achieved—deliberately low circulation figures," other writers had to concede to the economic pressures of writing for mass readers (McDonnell 2). In other words, avant-garde modernist writers preferred obscurity because writing for the masses was perceived as non-literary. The impetus to separate themselves from mass culture derived from a multitude of factors, one of which was "commodity capitalism" (Mickalites 4). Modernist authors had to contend with industrialization and urbanization, both of which contributed to "modern consumerism and the booming mass media" (4). In *Modernism and Market Fantasy*, Carey James Mickalites notes that many Modernist writers rejected the commodification of art; thus authors like Henry James and T. S. Eliot relied on patrons so that their works would not have to be marketed towards the masses (7). At the same time, Thomas Strychacz suggests that although critics have long argued that modernist writers "articulate an opposition between them and mass culture," these same authors often used

the kinds of self-promotion that were becoming popular in the modernist literary market (7). He complicates this by noting that many modernists annexed mass culture and “assimilated” mass cultural artefacts into their own works. In this way, Modernists tried to distance themselves from the masses while simultaneously pulling from the very culture they rejected.

Whereas critics long suggested that modernists shunned commodification, scholars such as Howard and Mickalites assert that avant-garde modernists understood how to manipulate their image to suit their professional goals. In “Dismantling the Modernist Myth: Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf in the Literary Marketplace,” Alison Howard observes that for decades, critics argued that Samuel Beckett was treated like an author who “preferred failure to commercial success” (153). She shows how this image of Beckett is at odds with his actual literary career, as he was “involved with every step of the publishing process” (154). Similarly, Virginia Woolf “deployed an array of tactics in her efforts to master the marketplace, including increasing the value of her work through the release of limited editions and autographed copies, [...] composing ‘silly’ books to counterbalance her serious yet less economically viable novels, and colluding with advertisers to craft an image as a highbrow writer” (160). A writer’s ability to navigate the literary market was essential to his/her literary success. McDonnell observes that authors often felt an “anxiety of authority” because of the way their works were “consumed by [...] various readers” (17). She notes that Katherine Mansfield, for instance, was uncertain as to whether “the social and cultural authority of her work lay with the author, the editor or the market/reading public” (McDonnell 17). These

sentiments were exacerbated by Mansfield's indecision over whether to market her books as highbrow. On the one hand, marketing herself as a highbrow author would make her work appear literary. On the other hand, by producing inaccessible texts, Mansfield would negate her ability to make a living from her work.

Both Woolf's decision to market herself as a highbrow author and Mansfield's inability to decide if she was middle or highbrow are representative of modernist authors aligning with particular "brows" as a way to distinguish their literary career. During the modernist age, the three kinds of cultural "brows," low, middle, and high, emerged as a way to further classify artistic works, writers, and readers. Low brow works were defined as cheap, generic works. By contrast, highbrow works were inaccessible, avant-garde pieces. Finally, the middlebrow catered to audiences who wanted works that were intellectual but not wholly inaccessible. Champions of highbrow culture spurned the middle and low brow forms as they were considered mere reproductions of genuine art. As Adrian Bingham notes in "Cultural Hierarchies and the Interwar British Press," middlebrow reviews filled the pages of newspapers in 1930s Great Britain, and he shows how cultural "critics" like F. R. and Q. D. Leavis criticized these works, as they believed the reviews tried to dilute the great works of literature. Of course, this is highly ironic given that their own book review project *Scrutiny* tried to codify and "recommend" great works of literature. However, Bingham argues that these much maligned reviews actually exposed readers to many works of literature: "many lower-middle-and-working-class readers with little knowledge of literature were exposed to reviews of latest works, the opinions of leading authors and serialization of notable novels" (65). While we would

expect that avant-garde novelists would appreciate the idea that more people were reading “great” literary works, the problem is that they believe art is being compromised for the sake of accessibility.

Modernist authors reacted to changes in literary and material consumption by articulating a language of exclusion. The “Battle of the Brows” reinforced cultural distinctions made among groups of readers. Authorial anxieties about literary consumption were tied to prejudices against social classes, as the influx of literate working class readers led to changes in publishing preferences. In response to these evolving preferences, modernist authors adopted literary personas who shunned consumerism while they simultaneously participated in self-promotion. The division of reading classes into arbitrary and elitist categories continues today. Contemporary writers (regardless of whether they ascribe to avant-garde tenets) distinguish between their reading populations. While these distinctions may not be grounded necessarily in socio-economics, authors still cultivate sections of the reading public. In the twenty-first century, concerns about literary consumption are compounded with anxieties about the literary profession. Thus, Victorian and modernist authorial concerns persist. However, these concerns take new form in the twenty-first century as critical perceptions of the reading public shift.

Contemporary writers still distinguish between “high” and “low/middle” brow readers, even if they have adopted different labels. Authors now often divide the reading public between what are vaguely termed “serious” and “non-serious” readers. These “new” terms are merely modern-day substitute terms for high/middle/low brow readers.

In “Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v Middlebrow” Nicola Humble argues that the difference between high, middle, and low brow readers “rests not on merit [...] but on the culture and practices of reading” (42). She further suggests that authors and critics created these distinctions as a way to “establish[h] and privilege[e] a very particular way of reading” (48). The modern-day “serious” reader is studious and wants to “work” to finish the end of the book. This conception has its origins in how the modernist highbrow writer envisioned his ideal reader, who “engages with his reading from a bodily position of alertness, hostility [and] separateness from the text” (Humble 48). By contrast, authors categorize the “non-serious” reader as one who prefers a leisurely reading experience and desires “relaxing into his book and chair” (48). As Humble observes, when authors categorize readers they assess “their [the readers’] literary judgments” (45). While these divisions reveal elitist assumptions made about wide swaths of readers, they nevertheless prevail in contemporary essays about the reading public. We can see this in the literary “feud” between Jonathan Franzen and Ben Marcus at the turn of this century. In a 2002 *New York Times* essay titled, “Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books,” Franzen suggests that there are two types of reading paradigms: Status and Contract. He argues that the author invested in the former type believes that “if the average reader rejects the work it’s because the average reader is a philistine” (Franzen 2). Conversely, authors who create a “contract” with their readers promise that in exchange for a few hours of reading, they will not find the work too difficult (2). Ultimately, Franzen argues that most authors do and *should* aim at creating a contract, because fiction is inherently “conservative and

conventional, because the structure of its market is relatively democratic (novelists make a living one book at a time, bringing pleasure to large audiences)” (7). According to Franzen, the real divide between these two groups of authors is how the authors envision their audiences. Those writing for status purposes want a “serious” reader, one who will patiently wade through pages of confounding passages. Meanwhile, the “contract” author reconciles with him/herself that she will have a “non-serious” reader, a reader who may not read as carefully, but who is willing to pay for a novel and read it for fun.

Furthermore, the passage shows how Franzen realizes that “pleasure,” one of the tenets of Middlebrow fiction, is vital to keeping the “contract” alive between author and reader.

The divide between a serious and non-serious reader resurfaces constantly in the non-fiction writing of many contemporary authors. More “difficult” writers pine for serious readers and less “difficult” writers find non-serious readers more appealing, as there are many more of them, and they allow authors to make a living by selling novels to a wide audience. Those who do not want a wide audience, however, are often just as vocal and passionate about the future of the novel as their counterparts. In a sort of response essay in *Harper's* to Franzen's piece, Marcus penned his acerbic “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It.” In this essay, Marcus argues that because most authors *are* appealing to a wide, more passive audience, those who do want to publish their avant-garde novels, often do not find a publishing company willing to publish their work precisely because it will not be economically viable. Marcus even suggests that non-difficult authors have diluted novels and constructed a lazy reading audience: “If we do not read, or do so only rarely,

the reader's muscle is slack and out of practice, and the stranger, harder texts, the lyrically unique ones that work outside the realm of familiarity, just scatter into random words" (19). According to Marcus, writers must construct difficult texts in order to challenge the reading public *and* push the boundaries of the novel, lest it grow stagnant. The Franzen-Marcus debate exposes how authors still divide audiences by their presumed taste-level. In Franzen's case, he believes readers are owed a pleasurable reading experience. In turn, he is guaranteed economic security. By contrast, Marcus finds fault with these kinds of readers, who want reading to merely be enjoyable. As Humble notes, authors like Marcus want authors who will struggle with the text rather than seek enjoyment from it.

Significantly, the division between serious/non-serious readers comes at a time when readers' participation in culture is at a zenith. As Ildako Olsz and M Genieve West note in "Follow the Reader: New Views and Inquiries in Reception Studies," reader participation spans book fan clubs, online fanfiction websites, and hypertextual stories (2). In *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production*, Mirko Tobias Schafer argues that readers are not merely participants on online literary forums, they are also "active participants and agents of cultural production" (10). If readers are assuming participatory roles, how can we think of them as "lazy" or even "uninformed?" On the surface, highbrow authors like Marcus attest that they want "active" readers, but really, they merely desire readers who will studiously read the novel but will not be a participant in the process. Of course, as critics have noted, readers ultimately make meaning from textual works and authorial control beyond the text's production and

publication is negligible. However, as Roland Barthes notes in *S/Z*, authors produce either “writerly” works (those that require the reader to think through complex terms and concepts) or “readerly” (those that do not require such thinking and work) (4). Members of the avant-garde prefer to produce the former works as they prevent readers from assuming participatory roles. But in the twenty-first century, readers prefer both leisurely works *and* the luxury of participatory forums.

We can see especially how contemporary authors appeal to these two groups of readers through the construction (or absence thereof) of social media presences. In many ways, the creation of social media personas mimics the self-promotion tactics of those high modernists who argued against commercialization but participated in it nonetheless. Just as Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf constructed literary personas, so too, do contemporary avant-garde novelists actively create authorial personas who promote difficulty and exclusion. In other words, in the twenty-first century, self-promotion and the construction of authorial personas prevail, particularly in the ways that writers construct and negotiate their online presences. Many contemporary avant-garde novelists decry the popularity of social media and its ability to shape the economics of authorship. Yet a writer’s decision to be an online presence is itself an economic decision *and* a kind of literary performance. Gabriel Josipovici has virtually no online presence; in fact, his sole website is run by narratologist Monika Fludernik, who publishes extensively on his work. By contrast, Margaret Atwood has a very popular social media presence. Her social media pages, in particular Facebook and Twitter, have catapulted her into a cultural icon. She frequently hosts Q and A sessions through her Facebook page, encouraging them to

write in and ask her anything. She has over 194,000 followers on Facebook and 1,060,000 on Twitter, and while these numbers pale in comparison to a very mainstream and popular author like American novelist James Patterson, who has well over 3,700,000 followers on Facebook, these are substantial numbers when compared to her literary peers like Martin Amis, Jeanette Winterson, or Ian McEwan, all of whom do not have any social media presence and whose linked Wikipedia sites have roughly 16,000 to 63,000 “likes” a piece on their respective Facebook sites.¹⁵

Atwood’s use of social media has garnered her much admiration from various news organizations who have labeled her “The Literary World’s Technology Mascot.”¹⁶ For Atwood, interest in social media sites would appear in-line with her novelistic explorations of science, technology, and their potential catastrophic effects on the world. But in an October 2013 interview with *Huffington Post*, interviewer Claire Sibonney asked Atwood if digital media was used to remain culturally relevant, and Atwood noted that using social media was a definite choice, one that impacts one’s job. Atwood has entirely embraced it, as an article in *New Republic* noted back in May 2013:

Atwood has not merely taken to Twitter [...] She has also lent support for a start-up devoted to staging virtual book tours and promoted it on the crowdsourcing website Indiegogo.com by pledging to name a character in her forthcoming novel after anyone who donated \$10,000. She has written stories for Byliner.com. She recently finished the final installment of a serialized novel about zombies co-written with a novelist who moonlights as an iPhone game-developer, for the Youtube-style social reading website Wattpad.

¹⁵ According to their own websites, as of February 2016, Winterson has 16,000 followers, Amis has 22,000 and 63,000.

¹⁶ For more, see Leon Neyfakh, “Margaret Atwood: The Literary World’s Technology Mascot.” *New Republic*. 7, May 2013. Web.

Atwood's enthusiasm for social media signifies that she also embraces a new, empowered readership. Sites like Wattpad blur the lines between author and reader because anyone can post stories to the website. Thus, the barrier between literary professionals (like Atwood) and literary amateurs (like average users) is removed. Furthermore, virtual book tours expand her audience, and crowd sourcing pages allow her readers to become literary patrons in the sense that they financially contribute to the project. Atwood encourages readers' desires to be "active participants in cultural production," while the avant-garde dissuade their readers from assuming these roles (Shafer 10). Each kind of author merely cultivates his or her preferred readership, whether through offering exclusivity (for "serious" readers) or freedom (for "non-serious" readers).

For contemporary authors, digitization offers authors various avenues of self-promotion, and in this way, even avant-garde authors are using mass culture to market their works, whether they control their own social media page (or use a proxy, like Gabriel Josipovici) or engage in online video interviews (like Jeanette Winterson) or write lengthy blogs about the state of readership (like Will Self). Digitization may set some limits on writers' abilities to profit from their work as there is a real effort to make content free, but it can also offer writers a chance to promote their work, which can have incredible effects on how many books they can sell. It also allows writers the ability to define their audiences and to cater to particular sections of the reading public. In this way, the contemporary avant-garde apply modernist techniques of self-promotion to contemporary cultural phenomena. By shunning popular media, the avant-garde similarly

shun mass readers and those readers who want participatory reading experiences, whether they are “talking” to Atwood via a question-and-answer session on social media or co-writing stories alongside them on Wattpad. If members of the contemporary avant-garde do not want their work to appeal to mass readers, how can they possibly fund their careers? Especially in the face of such dire publishing circumstances?

Rather than concede to mass readers (by extending participatory roles) or turn to the patronage system (like some high modernists), the contemporary avant-garde fund their literary career by working in universities. For those authors who seek authority and who want to subsidize their literary career, teaching often becomes a kind of refuge. Indeed, the university has become a site that fosters avant-garde authors.

Universities and colleges assign complicated, challenging narratives to their students, and they hire the writers to teach creative writing courses. Notably, the rise in creative writing programs was not welcomed by everyone in the literary world. In 2013, *The Guardian* ran Rachel Cusk’s “In Praise of Creative Writing Program,” wherein she notes the pushback from writers who questioned both the legitimacy and purpose of creative writing programs: “Why, he wanted to know, were writers giving encouragement to this abysmal creative writing trend? Why were they perpetuating the fallacy that writing can be taught? Did they really want writing to become a kind of occupational therapy?” She counters these concerns by arguing that while creative writing programs were beneficial to students in the sense that they were given guidance and clarity in writing, they were even more helpful to those teaching it, as it gave them authority and legitimacy. Cusk claims that authors sought creative writing positions as a way to “ward off the suspicion

of amateurism,” while at the same time acknowledging that many writers take the job simply for economic reasons. Meanwhile, Richard Lea in “US Authors Take Literary Prizes but British Writers still Pushing Boundaries,” somewhat cynically suggests that authors have devalued their own work by choosing to make a living from teaching: “While some writers continued to aspire to reaching a mass audience with their work, others prefer to pursue tenure in creative writing departments, as described in Chad Harbach’s *MFA vs. NYC*. For these academic authors[,] publication is no longer a way of making money, but merely a new line on a *curriculum vitae*.” On the one hand, Lea’s suggestions make sense: creative writers are more likely to need subsequent publications to ensure tenure rather than fame. On the other hand, this comment elides the very real move that literary authors are making both towards an academic institution *and* an academic audience.

The university, in some form or another, seems to have shaped and been shaped by contemporary experimental writers. Numerous critics argued that novelists like Martin Amis and Jeanette Winterson were shaped by English degrees that taught them deconstruction and literary theory. In fact, critic Richard Bradford in his *The Novel Now* argues that degrees in English can account for nearly the entirety of the rampant literary experimentation that occurred in the 1990s, as these authors had completed their degrees and were applying their critical knowledge to their fictional works. Conversely, Mark McGurl argues in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* that these same authors, who would eventually take university positions in the 2000s, shaped future creative authors, pressuring them into creating experimental fiction (17).

McGurl, who acknowledges that authors have always been shaped, by some form or another, by either contemporaries or teachers, nonetheless notes how prolific these programs have become. He observes that in the United States alone, programs have ballooned from 52 in 1974 to 350 in 2008 (he further states that these numbers take into consideration graduate programs only, and that there are 720 undergraduate creative programs in the United States), which suggests that university writing programs have become economic necessities for authors (24). In the United Kingdom, creative writing programs have grown at an astonishing rate as well. *The Times Higher Education* reported in 2008 that while there were only two universities that offered graduate degrees in creative writing (University of East Anglia and Lancaster University), as of 2008, there were seventy such programs in existence within the UK (Hancock).

The desire to teach students how to become better authors seems somewhat at odds with avant-gardism, especially since avant-garde writers want to establish barriers between themselves and mass readers. Perhaps this is why Jeanette Winterson argued that she was given the especial task of forging better readers. In an essay for *The Guardian* called “Teaching Creative Writing,” she suggests that the best reason for becoming a university instructor lies in the potential to shape new, better readers: “If we are not readers we cannot be writers. Reading widely is necessary. A course that encourages students to read outside their own interests will expand what they have to say.” She goes on to suggest that if creative writing instructors do not challenge their students with difficult, thought-provoking works, then they will merely churn out “homogenized students” who then create “homogenized” works (Winterson). Winterson’s essay is

obviously polemical, as she has written numerous essays on the imperative of reading correctly (which I explore in depth in chapter four). Her assertion that she is doing more than merely teaching—she is crafting better readers and thus helping create a better culture—suggests that she does not consider teaching outside the parameters of a highbrow writer. In other words, her creative writing courses are noble attempts to keep art elite and inaccessible. Regardless, all of the authors studied in this dissertation work, or have worked, in an academic institution as a means to supplement their income. While Winterson has noted in interviews and essays that she is able to make a living from her novels, she has nonetheless attained a position at University of Manchester teaching creative writing. Meanwhile, novelist Gabriel Josipovici has long taught the same subject at Sussex, and fellow writer Will Self teaches “Contemporary Thought” at Brunel University. These positions allow the authors to supplement their incomes, and, in some way, help foster and dictate a particular aesthetic and taste.

To some extent, the rise in creative writing programs suggests that the avant-garde have moved into an ivory tower, where their works will be read by students in an atmosphere that demands attention rather than passiveness. They have ensured that their works will remain relevant at least to students and professors, who, like the graduate student in Atwood’s “Aphinland,” will continue to glean these novels for their meaning. But there is more complexity to this issue than critics previously assumed. In 1996, Erickson claimed that the (then) slow move of writers towards creative writing positions indicated that the academy was merely trying to protect literature, which was futile because readers already preferred other cultural forms (television, film, etc.) (9).

Although the university does harbor avant-garde authors, I am not convinced that this is a signal of literature's demise. Instead, the move towards university positions is endemic of alternate forms of economy that extend beyond even the avant-garde.

In *The Guardian* report on Paul Kingsnorth, the novelist predicts, “The thing that’s going to save the publishing industry in some form [...] is writers being in touch with readers in a way that isn’t just selling them things. It’s talking to them and having some kind of community” (Brown). The influx of writers choosing to teach creative writing courses in universities is not so very different from writers in prior eras who could not afford to merely “write for writing’s sake.” (Erikson 176). The university then assigns literary textbooks to their students, which creates an alternate economy for these writers who otherwise would not have the ability to make a living from their avant-garde pieces. For instance, in 2014, the American fast food chain Chipotle announced it would publish short stories from iconic authors on its cups and bags in a series called “Cultivating Thought.” Surprisingly, the franchise attracted quite notable authors from Jonathan Safran Foer to Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison.¹⁷ Later that year, British novelist David Mitchell declared that he would “tweet” a work of fiction over 280 tweets (Flood). Initially, agreeing to sell stories on Chipotle cups and offering readers the chance to read a novel for free via Twitter might seem like selling out. However, as *The Bookseller* notes in its article “Mitchell, Murakami, and Palahniuk: Further Signs of the Changing Face of Publishing,” these authors are actually turning to forms of self-publishing that are outside the parameters of the publishing industry. David Mitchell will

¹⁷ For more see: <http://cultivatingthought.com/>

hardly make considerable money from his self-published and free-to-read “tweet” novel, but his work will be read by a possibly large audience who otherwise may not have encountered his lengthy, experimental novels. Like Atwood, these writers realize that there are different kinds of readerships that can be forged in the twenty-first century. This suggests, too, that most authors are invested in seeking autonomy and authority outside the typical bounds of the publishing world.

Despite the changes in publishing, contemporary authors actually face new avenues of publishing and dispersing their writing to readers. Yet these very methods often blur the lines between reader and writer. For the contemporary avant-garde, this blurring is problematic, as they do not consider most readers capable of discerning “great” art from its lowly counterparts. As such, these writers have adopted highbrow personas, not unlike the modernists, who wanted to distinguish themselves from those authors who published for the masses. Indeed, whenever there are changes to the reading public or publishing practices, authors respond by trying to recover the authority they perceive is lost. For twenty-first century writers, typical publishing practices have impacted their authority by determining what they can write and how their writing is published. But this is not a contemporary issue, but rather, one that can be traced back to the Victorian era. In this period, authors tried to turn writing into a profession, to demystify writing, and to train the reading public to identify professional writers. modernist writers segmented themselves and retreated from mass culture, all while adopting the same self-promotion tactics that were popularized by mass culture. They created highbrow personas who scorned financial success while being simultaneously

active in the publishing process. Twenty-first century avant-garde authors have resuscitated these literary personas by arguing that contemporary readers are ruining literary practices. These authors are still concerned about literary consumption and use their fiction to castigate readers as a way to restore their authority. Like Collins' "Unknown Public," these writers use their fiction to deplore average readers, as to better appeal to a smaller, more elite audience. Like the modernists, they restore authority, in part, by excluding most of the reading public.

Indeed, understanding changes in the literary marketplace allow us to make sense of those authors who align with Modernism. At the heart of these authorial avowals are concerns about literary relevance, the reading public, and authority over one's work. In my next chapter, I explore how Gabriel Josipivici's fiction depicts the effects of current economic and publishing pressures on contemporary authors. Throughout his careers, he has argued that contemporary authors face unprecedented pressures because they write for wide audiences whom they will never meet. In his literature, his fictional authors fear their readers because they believe their readers have the power and freedom to read/interpret the books whoever they decide. In turn, these author-protagonists paradoxically repel and attract their readers. The protagonists of his novels, almost always novelists or musicians are unable to finish their artistic or literary productions because of their various neuroses. In other words, the author-protagonists imagine the kinds of readers interacting with the work, and often, this reader is configured as lazy and inattentive. Initially, imagining their readers seems fruitless, as the authors fret about the willingness of their readers to actually read the work carefully, and these worries make

the authors unable to finish their projects. However, I suggest that the need to create a reader—a trope that cuts across nearly all of Josipovici's post-2000 novels—is an attempt at making the very kind of community that Kingsnorth mentions in his interview. By creating a face for a reader (even a negative one), the author no longer works with an anonymous audience, and instead, writes for someone he/she *knows*. Creating a small, chosen audience reinforces the author's position, as there are fewer evaluators, fewer voices on what constitutes a great literary work.

CHAPTER III
PHANTOM READERS, THE INVENTED READER, SPACE, AND AGENCY IN
GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI'S RECENT FICTION

In a 2010 article in *The Guardian* titled “Feted British Authors Are Limited, Arrogant, and Self-Satisfied, Says Leading Academic,” contemporary British author Gabriel Josipovici blasts well-known fellow writers like Salman Rushdie and Julian Barnes for catering to wide audiences in exchange for economic security. Josipovici would later lament that this article was published, as he notes in an interview with scholar Marcin Stawarski, because he claims that some of the content therein was taken out of context. However, the article nonetheless illuminates so much about Josipovici’s lengthy career: the fact that the journalist neglects to call him an “author” favoring instead the use of “academic” is indicative of Josipovici’s marginalization as a fiction writer, and the focus on his vociferous comments about “an ill-educated public being fed by the media” highlights a subject that many critics use as evidence as to why his fiction is elitist tripe. As narratologist Monika Fludernik notes in her monograph *Echoes and Mirrors: The Creative Oeuvre of Gabriel Josipovici*, he has long been a marginalized author, even though his novels broach topics such as Jewishness, communication, space, and the function of the novel. To some extent, Josipovici has not helped his own marginalized status as he purposefully writes his novels for the few and refuses to market them, so

much so that he does not even run his own website.¹⁸ In the above *Guardian* article, he is lambasted and made to appear outdated, cranky, and elitist, and while his numerous novels have been virtually ignored over the years or not taken seriously because of his beliefs about publishing and readership, within the last few years, critics have turned back to his work and re-evaluated it within the context of post-2000 literature.

For Josipovici, the lack of “worthy” novels being produced is an issue that has existed for centuries. Indeed, Josipovici, who was born in Nice, France, and later immigrated to England, has produced numerous essays, lectures, novels, and plays that explore how print has irrevocably altered the relationship between the author and his readers. These issues are explored in his non-fiction works *Whatever Happened to Modernism* and *Writing and the Body*, and further explicated in Victoria Best’s essay “The Cost of Creativity in the Work of Gabriel Josipovici,” but I will provide a short explanation of this to contextualize many of his concerns about readership and authorship.¹⁹ In his non-fiction, he posits that “moveable type,” or the printing press, changed writing forever, as it removed the author from his reader in the sense that the work could be widely published to limitless readers. Josipovici suggests that one of the many corollaries of print is its ability to make authors anxious, as now they write for an anonymous audience. He subsequently claims that from this point on, authors faced writer’s block because their work would be read and interpreted by numerous readers they would never meet. While my chapter will not belabor Josipovici’s beliefs about

¹⁸ Josipovici’s website is actually run by Monika Fludernik, a narratologist who has long promoted Josipovici’s work.

¹⁹ Best, Victoria. “The Cost of Creativity in the Work of Gabriel Josipovici.” *La Revue Lisa*. 12:2 (2014). Electronic.

print, I will explore various authorial anxieties felt by his fictional writers. I argue that, because the fictional authors in Josipovici's novels cannot see or interact with their readers, they are forced to create imagined readers. Much like in Winterson's novels, these authors imagine their readers are inattentive, uneducated, and unwilling to seriously read and interpret the book carefully. However, where Josipovici's fiction differs from Winterson's is in his fictional authors' desire to understand their readers' identities. In other words, in the face of an anonymous reader, his fictional authors construct an identity for their readers. This imagined identity assuages the contemporary author's concerns that he can never really know his audience.

Throughout this chapter then, I will investigate how the imagined spaces between the author and the reader in Josipovici's novels force authors to create fantasies about their readers, fantasies that are tinged with concerns about power. At the same time, the chapter will show how these spaces are not clearly defined. The fictional authors both want to repel *and* to attract their readers, and while these urges may seem contradictory, they are resolved in the author's ultimate desire to *know* his readers and to control them. To some extent, the sentiments towards readers stem from a long-standing tradition of avant-garde authors snubbing wide audiences. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu explains that avant-garde authors prefer a smaller audience to ensure they believe that their "literary legitimacy" is ensured by having fewer readers/viewers (40). There is much of this in Josipovici's novels, as the protagonists jeer at readers who lack the education needed to view works of art "correctly." At the same time, what appears to be most problematic in his novels is the space between the reader and the author.

Other critics have already noted how space functions in Josipovici's novels.²⁰ Monika Fludernik suggests that space is at the heart of *all* of his novels. Her exploration of space in Josipovici's work is limited to the characters' mobility in the novels, as she notes that some characters may be locked away, some may be fixed to one location, and some may be incapable of emotionally moving beyond an issue (87). I extend this argument by examining the psychological spaces created by author-figures and relate this to how these same authors discuss their readers. In other words, the authors in this novel make specific assumptions about their readers because they have never met them. They evoke a space then, one in which the reader is interacting with the novel, and this space is always described in negative terms: the reader does not read the work "correctly"; the reader skips pages; the reader abandons the novel. On the one hand, these are imagined spaces, as the writers can only imagine how the readers read their works. On the other hand, these spaces refer to the distance between writers and their readers. I suggest that Josipovici's writers obsess about this distance, so they constantly imagine what how their readers are reading their books. In turn, this creates conflict for contemporary writers who must persist in writing novels in the face of an imagined audience who will not properly read them.

This chapter also looks at the importance of reading in Josipovici's novels and how the writers' failure to control their readers' interactions with his/her novels

²⁰ Josipovici actually made a critical contribution to an edited collection on space called *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Space*. His essay, titled, "When I Begin, I Have Already Begun." In this work, he discusses how explorations of liminal spaces gave him inspiration for works that resisted a "beginning, middle, and end" (174). For more, see *Thinking on Thresholds*. Ed. Subha Mukherji. London: Anthem P., 2011. 173-184. Print.

contributes to his/her sense of dread when writing. While Ralph Yarrow does examine the role of reading in Josipovici's work in his critical essay "Reading and Thinking about Reading," he only discusses it within the context of Josipovici's non-fiction. Notably, Yarrow argues that Josipovici wants reading to be a more participatory act, both on the part of the reader who *must* read the book actively and by the author who must create a text that allows readers and authors to interact with one another. According to Yarrow, Josipovici strives towards a kind of reading that is "psycho-physiological" (287). In other words, for Josipovici, reading is an act that requires both mental and bodily precision. But I suggest that Josipovici's beliefs about participatory reading is more complex than Yarrow assumes. Often, his non-fiction works, *Writing and the Body*, focuses on how readers physically interact with a book, whether they read it too quickly, forget to read a few lines, or skip ahead in the work. His fiction presents a unique tension. On a formal level, his fiction demands active reading. Josipovici's more recent novels often lack plot; there is virtually no character development, and many of them have circular structures. Readers cannot race to the end of the work because there is no end, nor any beginning. They also must fill in the gaps, creating a cohesive story where there is none and piecing together contextual dialog to follow a conversation.

Yet, the content of the novels would suggest that Josipovici wants anything *but* to interact with his audience. Readers are discussed in disparaging terms and authors find that they must teach the masses how to properly interact with cultural artifacts. While Yarrow may limit his discussion of participatory reading to Josipovici's non-fiction, I extend this argument by applying it to Josipovici's later novels. By analyzing the ways in

which fictional authors discuss their readers, I ask questions such as: why does Josipovici's later fiction mull over the role of the reader? Who prescribes this role? What lies behind the desire to disparage contemporary readers? How are the creation of both imagined spaces *and* participatory texts imperative to the preservation of both art and the novel? This chapter breaks ground in many ways. Josipovici's fiction has been practically ignored by critics, even though his writing began in the 1960s. While Monika Fludernik does discuss his fiction in her monograph, because it was published in 2000, it obviously does not discuss his most recent fiction. My chapter accounts for his fiction written post-2000 and thus provides fresh readings of them. Of all of these works, only *Goldberg* had received critical attention, particularly for its discussion of music. His more recent fiction, however, has received little critical discussion to date. Dominique Pernot in the essay "Metaleptic Variations" *does* examine two of Josipovici's recent novels: *Making Mistakes* and *Only Joking*, and explores how these two novels are major departures from Josipovici's other works. Yet, as Vesna Main notes in "Beyond the 'Grammar,'" Josipovici is still a marginalized author, in part because his fiction has been deemed unreadable, overly complex, and too erudite (4).

In fact, even though Josipovici has been publishing for decades, critics working on post-2000 novels have turned to his work as a way to conceptualize the ideology of this century's fiction. For instance, in the introduction to *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard observe that Josipovici produced "one of the most persuasive literary histories" when he published *Whatever Happened to Modernism*. Both Adiseshiah and Hildyard suggest that modernism, by the

twenty-first century, was and continues to be a defining ideology for most authors, the most prominent of whom is Josipovici. Within the same volume, Jennifer Hodgson, in her essay, “‘Such a Thing as Avant-Garde Has Ceased to Exist’: The Hidden Legacies of the British Experimental Novel,” notes that while Josipovici’s definition of modernism is “difficult to locate,” it is a useful guide into the resurgence of modernist ideology at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.²¹ Josipovici, once virtually ignored in criticism, has received so much interest in the last few years, that in 2014, “Zig, Zag, Twist and Turn: Toying with Gabriel Josipovici,” the first international conference on his work, was held in Sweden. Furthermore, the French humanities journal *La Revue Lisa* devoted an entire issue to him in 2014 that covered a range of topics in his fiction, from his exploration of authorship to his musical re-imaginings. This new critical interest in his work, compounded with various critics’ attempts to categorize the novel post-2000, validates my own work on his novels. Thus, this chapter not only provides new readings of novels that have not been discussed critically, it also helps us re-think the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first and provides some reasons for the depictions of authorship/readership found in fiction published in this era.

In my own analyses of his novels, I will explore how participation, control, and anxieties all inflect his fictional authors and their conceptualizations of their readers. I suggest that these themes begin in *Goldberg: Variations*, wherein he contrasts two radically different authorial paradigms: the patronage system and the economic realities

²¹ Josipovici does not see modernism as an era, but rather, a type of writing, music or art that has existed since the invention of the printing press. In his *Whatever Happened to Modernism* and *Writing and the Body* he suggests that any artist/author who feels anxiety about the longevity of their genre or the cultural relevancy of their work is a modernist author.

of the contemporary author. His novel *Everything Passes* further explores the plight of contemporary authorship, and I explore the novel's depictions of a writer who is incapable of moving forward with his work. I further develop these claims by examining *Infinity*, a novel about a manservant recounting his eccentric and brilliant master's assertions about art and audience. In this work, the protagonist is able to rise above the anxieties of his self-created imagined spaces and produce a work of art. His most recent novel *Hotel Andromeda*, is a notable departure from these themes, as the writer in this novel is able to be productive. Thus, I explore the novel to add complexity to the themes that Josipovici develops in his other novels. Critics have largely ignored these concerns, although Victoria Best does discuss how Josipovici's authors and composers all must sacrifice relationships with wives and families in order to write or compose their pieces. Yet Best merely identifies Josipovici's own beliefs about print as the reason why so many of his protagonists are thrown into creative crises, and she further argues that what is at stake for these authors is "the tremendous reward... the meaning of life" (10).

I complicate this argument by suggesting that the "crises" his authors face often center on the perceived power that they forfeit to their readers. The authors want more than just "the meaning of life"; they want the power they believe has been taken from them by readers. In turn, his protagonists discuss readers in disparaging terms. On the surface, these authors merely complain about their non-serious readers. But these remarks simultaneously show that the authors want to understand the reading public and their reading habits. Thus by creating a kind of identity for their imagined readers, authors close the gap between themselves and these readers, which lessens the anxieties they feel

about writing for an anonymous audience and provides the potential for them to finish their works.

Throughout this chapter, I focus on: *Goldberg Variations*, *Everything Passes*, and *Infinity* with briefer discussions of his 2009 novella *After* and his most recent novel published in 2014, *Hotel Andromeda*.²² In all of these works, his protagonists are either writers or musical composers, and all of them are crippled with anxiety. While some of his older novels, like *Moo Pak* (1996), do discuss authorship, I find that the above novels create a more coherent phase of his fiction, as they explore how the audience limits the author, whose role has already been diminished by other cultural forces. By the time he composes *Hotel Andromeda*, Josipovici appears to move out of this cycle because although the protagonist of *Hotel* is indeed an author the novel departs from many of the themes found in his recent works.

Goldberg: Variations

Gabriel Josipovici's 2002 novel *Goldberg: Variations* re-imagines Johann Bach's composition *Goldberg Variations*. In this work, a composer is commissioned to create a masterpiece for a patron. Whereas Bach wrote a musical composition, the composer in Josipovici's novel writes a literary masterpiece for his patron, an insomniac who wants to

²² Josipovici published two other works within this time-frame: *Making Mistakes*, which is often published as alongside *After*, was published in 2009, and *Only Joking*, a novel that was first published in 2005 in Germany and later translated into an English publication in 2010. The former novel is a re-imagining of Mozart's *Così fan Tutti* and the latter is a comedic mystery, and quite the departure from Josipovici's other fiction works.

be lulled to sleep by Goldberg's stories. The novel consists of 30 sections, and these sections are only loosely connected. While the novel begins with Goldberg travelling to meet his patron, Mr. Westin, only a few sections really focus on this part of the novel. Goldberg writes letters to his wife and listens to Mr. Westin's personal woes, but the novel is not really about Goldberg's own stories. Instead, the novel follows tales about incestuous cousins, a short biography of Jonathan Swift, and the many ill-fated wives of Mr. Westin. Such variation makes sense, as the novel *is* a parody of a fugue, a type of musical composition where a theme is developed and transformed by various voices. All these sections are tied together through their explorations of authorship, power, and freedom.

The few critics who have discussed this novel typically focus on its structure. For instance, Werner Wolf in his own analysis of the novel, called, "The Role of Music in Gabriel Josipovici's *Goldberg: Variations*," argues that Josipovici turns to the fugue-format in order to "to transgress the boundaries of fiction's own verbal and narrative medium by referring to media in various ways" (294).²³ He suggests that the desire to blend music with narrative, at least in Josipovici's work, stems from the fear that literature is exhausted and that the author has run out of material to write. Josipovici certainly plays with form throughout the novel and obviously turns to music as inspiration for a new kind of work. The novel itself lacks a straight-forward plot and

²³ Josipovici's affinity for music is well-noted in other scholarly works. For more studies on the role of music in his work see Marcin Stawarski's "Lorsque la redinte ne redit rien: Autour de la Dynamique Musico-littéraire de la Repetition dans L'oeuvre de Gabriel Josipovici" (2008), Brian Macaskill's "Recycling Topology as Topos in Music and Narrative: Machaut, Bach, Mobius, Coetzee, Josipovici, and Composition" and Günter Jarthe's "All Comes Alive and Starts to Dance: The 29th Chapter of *Goldberg: Variations*" (2014).

typical ending. In fact, there are three endings to choose from, none of which provide any real closure to the storyline.

Similarly, Richard Bradford, in his monograph *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, discusses the “genre-weaving” of Gabriel Josipovici’s novels. He claims that Josipovici places the onus of contextualizing the novel on the reader: “Gabriel Josipovici [...] takes up the challenge of [...] experiment in genre-weaving by writing exclusively in dialog, obliging the reader to construct a context and, to some degree, a story from their interaction with recorded speech” (6). In this way, Bradford suggests that Josipovici turns to postmodern techniques in this novel as a way to refresh the genre. However, I find that the novel is not just an experiment in pushing the boundaries of literature as both Bradford and Werner suggest. By examining the narrative threads on the novel, we see how issues of authorship emerge throughout the novel; particularly in the embedded story found in the middle of the novel.

Goldberg’s tale takes place in the Eighteenth Century, so it makes sense that he would be working for a particular patron.²⁴ In the middle of the novel, however, the story shifts significantly, and we are introduced to a contemporary author who is in the process of writing his novel. I suggest that the relationship between Goldberg and his master is the ideal relationship a writer could have with his reader, as Goldberg has the ability to relay his stories to his audience in person. Here, there are no imagined spaces, as he sees

²⁴ During this time period, many authors used patrons to fund their projects. While Josipovici heralds this kind of economy as ideal, given that the creator only had one “audience” member for whom he produced, this idealization ignores the many problems with the patronage system that was in place during this time period (for more, see Dustin Griffith’s *Literary Patronage in England 1650-1800*); nonetheless many avant-garde contemporary authors prefer this system, as they have an audience who will already value their work.

his sole audience every day. The fact that Goldberg tells Westfield the stories, rather than have him read them, is also important. In a way, Goldberg functions as an oral storyteller because he recites his stories out loud. His words will not be reinterpreted by an anonymous person who will read them at leisure. Goldberg retains much of the authority, especially since Westfield leaves the subject matter of the stories up to him.

Thus, when Goldberg is solitary, his spare time is not consumed with imagining his audience reading the work incorrectly. Instead, he has the ability to construct the story, to control its content, and to witness the reception of it by a sole, selected audience member. This ability gives him transcendence by the end of the novel. He writes a letter to his wife, explaining that he has fulfilled his task and this has left him supremely satisfied: “What I had written and read was not simply a well-made piece of work designed to perform the function required of it, none of the work I have made to order has ever been less than that, but in the longer perspective it was a kind of offering of myself on some sort of altar” (Josipovici 182). The language of sacrifice may not sound uplifting, but as Best points out in her essay, self-sacrifice in Josipovici’s novels is often a positive trope: writers do give most of themselves over to their readers, but because Goldberg completes his task and is praised by Westin, he has the knowledge that his work has provided the ultimate solace to his patron. He has been in control of the work and has been able to bring it to fruition.

In marked contrast, the contemporary author in the middle of the novel, Gerald, has no such luxury, and we see through the comparison of these authors how Goldberg has the preferred position. Gerald’s work will be published by a large publishing firm and

sold to thousands, possibly millions, of readers who he will never see. The result is that the contemporary author exhibits the same characteristics as many other Josipovici authors. Gerald writes in the early 2000s, much like Josipovici himself.²⁵ He and his wife, Edith, are visiting France, and while he should be enjoying the museums and cafes they attend, his energy is devoted to ceaseless worrying about his novel. He admits, “There had been times, in the course of the last three years, when I had wondered if I would ever be able to write the book, and even Edith, whose belief in me and in my work is far more constant than my own, had, I suspected, herself begun to wonder if perhaps this time I had bitten off more than I could chew” (Josipovici 96). Like Mr. Westin, the contemporary author cannot sleep, as his writer’s block keeps him awake at night: “Too often she had turned round in the middle of the night and felt me lying awake and rigid beside her. Are you all right? She would ask. Yes. Are you worrying about the book? Yes. Try to sleep. Yes. But sleep would not come. To me at least it would not come” (96). Eventually, Gerald cannot tolerate her presence anymore, and he asks Edith to leave their hotel so that he can write in isolation: “There were even days when I had to ask Edith to go by herself, when the book called me to return to it in the afternoons, something which had not happened since the start of this particular project. And sometimes, even if I was not at my desk, I felt the need to have the afternoon to myself to wander through at will, free of the obligation of having to talk to another person, even

²⁵ While many of Josipovici’s narrators are writers or composers in some way, they are never strictly metafictional versions of himself. Although they espouse many of his same philosophies about art and literature, Josipovici shies away from the Postmodern play of some of his contemporaries.

someone as close to me and as understanding as Edith” (97). Gerald’s futile attempt at self-sacrifice eventually costs him his marriage and prevents him from finishing his work.

Indeed, after these scenes with Gerald and Edith, readers encounter an entirely new section, a letter that Goldberg’s wife sends to him while he is away. The arrangement of the chapters juxtaposes the two relationships and casts light on the ways in which contemporary authors unintentionally isolate themselves through their own neuroses. Goldberg and his wife have a strong relationship, as evidenced by the letters they exchange while he stays with Mr. Westfield. In the chapter titled, “Mrs. Goldberg,” she notes that he fills the house with words and happiness, which makes her long for his uplifting presence in the house, ending the letter with: “How I love you, Mr. Goldberg!” (Josipovici 110). Mrs. Goldberg’s unfettered love for her husband appears more evident alongside the passage where Edith leaves the contemporary author for his mental absence.

Best notes in her essay that Josipovici’s fiction often focuses on solitary writers who have to sacrifice their relationships, with families and wives, in order to give themselves totally to their fiction (6). In many ways, the contemporary author in *Goldberg* is the epitome of this character-type. He and Edith’s marriage dissolves slowly over the course of the novel until she finally leaves him for another, and similar scenes appear in Josipovici’s later novels as well. The protagonists are so consumed with their work that they cannot see how the obsession breaks down their relationships. What is interesting about this novel, though, is the juxtaposition of authors and their respective wives. Goldberg and his wife write frequently and seem to have a solid marriage.

Meanwhile, Gerald loses Edith over his inability to move forward with his novel.²⁶ This complicates Best's argument that the protagonists forfeit their relationships because the author must sacrifice himself to make great art. Goldberg's relationship with his wife suggests that there was a time when writers were not plagued about the suitability of their readers. Instead, I would argue that the failure of Gerald's marriage indicates that contemporary authors face more pressures surrounding readership and economic security. The major difference between these works is that Goldberg is confident about his writing, as he controls what he writes and for whom he writes. Conversely, Gerald faces an audience who controls the reception of the work, which makes it impossible to complete the work.

In an unexpected turn of events, towards the end of the novel, Gerald reveals that he is working on a novel called *Goldberg: Variations* and that this is the novel that he cannot finish. Whether or not readers are supposed to assume that the novel they are reading is written by Gerald (in other words, Josipovici creates Gerald who "creates" *Goldberg*) is left up to the audience. We do understand, though, that Gerald's feelings of

²⁶ In many ways, Josipovici's protagonists defy a commonly held trope that male authors think of creativity as a bodily process. As Raymond Stephenson notes in *A Yard of Wit: Male Creativity and Sexuality 1650-1750*, Restoration authors and poets frequently believed that writing stems from "virility," and this perception of authorship extended throughout the nineteenth century (see: Sonia Hofkosh's *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author*). Contemporarily, many male authors have created impotent protagonists who cannot father children (Will Self's novels are exemplary of this) or who cannot maintain a stable relationship because they cannot produce works, as relationships are mere distractions. These concerns can somewhat be explained by the Postmodern reevaluation of masculinity. As Richard Bradford notes in *The Novel Now*, many male authors post-1970 (exactly the time when Josipovici began writing) created sexually inept men, and he notes that the proliferation of these kinds of novels suggested that men felt displaced from society (143). While I do not think that Josipovici's protagonists believe that women have co-opted their place in society (indeed, many of the women in the novels are treated as scholastic equals who admirably challenge their male counterparts), I find this discussion is more nuanced than Victoria Best's argument in "The Cost of Creativity in the Work of Gabriel Josipovici" as she suggests that Josipovici's protagonists prefer writing to women. Thus, this is a subject that certainly warrants more critical examination.

inadequacy stem from his desire to locate the authority needed to finish the work. He states that he had initially looked to a painting, *Wander-Artist*, in the hopes that it would give him the “authority” to finish his own work, but it only exacerbates his anxiety, as the isolation of the wandering artist heightens his own sense of solitude. He ends the section by mourning that all authors have become “itinerant, strolling, nomadic” (Josipovici 174). If Gerald is the presumed author of *Goldberg* then what are we to make of this?

Gerald’s inability to finish his work is evident. While he notes that he was often eager to return to the comforts of Goldberg and Westin, he faces crippling doubts: “I sit at my desk and wonder whether my disillusionment with the whole project is only the result of my own inadequacy” (172). Yet if he creates Goldberg and Westin because he needs to be comforted, what kind of comfort can these writers bring him? It is possible that Gerald crafts these characters as a means to create the kind of author-reader conditions he prefers. Goldberg has the “authority” and power that Gerald can only imagine—literally. He creates a character who is not fated to be an “itinerant” artist who is always unsure of who his audience will be, and instead writes one that has the luxury of having one audience member.

It should be noted that Josipovici’s author-protagonists acknowledge that contemporary authors have more flexibility to write their novels, as they are not indebted to anyone financially, especially if they are avant-garde authors. Whereas a more popular author would have to make specific creative decisions as to ensure his/her work’s economic success, an avant-garde author is not so reliant on an audience. As Alan in *Afternotes*, “These new writers of the print culture were [...] beholden to no one”

(Josipovici 44). This freedom overwhelms authors precisely because they cannot guarantee their audience. Hence, while Goldberg may have the same freedom as Gerald because he similarly can create whatever work he wants, he has one “reader,” one whose love for stories is already guaranteed.

Everything Passes

Everything Passes is the most experimental of Josipovici’s post-2000 novels. The story loosely centers on three vignettes. Felix is an author, and the story follows his desire to make people more aware of the work of Rabelais.²⁷ It also depicts how Felix’s inability to move forward with his work negatively impacts his relationships with his wife and children. His wife, who has faithfully stood by his many attempts to write his novels and non-fiction works, can no longer stand his morose outlook and she leaves him for his protégé, Brian, who has the capability to write a great avant-garde novel, but chooses instead to write for a mainstream audience. These stories overlap and blur, making a palimpsest of plot points. Yet what ties all of these stories together is the exploration of physical space.

Through the form and the content of the novel, Josipovici shows how spaces impact both the readers and the fictional characters in the novel. On a formal level, the

²⁷ The French writer Rabelais often serves as a source of fascination for both Josipovici (who often writes about him in his non-fiction) and his author-protagonists, as they believe that he was the first author to face having an anonymous authorship. For Josipovici, and indeed other cotemporary authors (in particular, Czech novelist Milan Kundera), Rabelais is admirable because he chose to “play” with words and print rather than dread them. Contemporary novelists feel akin to this writer who chose to experiment with narrative in the face of a new kind of authorship.

layout of the book is a physical example of the novel's playful exploration of space. In a review of the novel for *The Guardian*, Lee Rourke observes that the novel *looks* like poetry. The sparse paragraphs are spaced far, far apart and a refrain resurfaces in the novel:

Everything Passes
The old the new
Everything Passes

The story is just as fragmentary as the textual layout. The characters in *Everything Passes* are either in states of extreme flux or are wholly static. As the marriage between Felix and Sal crumbles, we see the emotional distance that grows between them.

Critics have noted how isolation is a common theme in Josipovici's fiction. Monika Fludernik in her monograph, *Echoes and Mirrorings*, observes that the typical Josipovici protagonist is a "lone figure in an empty room" (87). She argues that Josipovici frequently returns to such a character due to a "recurring fascination with imprisonment and particularly solitary confinement" (87). Here, Fludernik refers to Josipovici's earlier novels where the characters are physically imprisoned (a character is chained or in a mental institution). But we see this trope occur in his later fiction as well, only his characters are immobilized both psychologically and creatively. In fact, Josipovici seems to suggest the immobility is the de facto condition of the contemporary avant-garde author, as all of the authors in *Everything Passes* are intrinsically incapable of moving beyond their particular issues.

When the novel opens, Felix stands at a window and his memories of his wife and his works collide in a stream of consciousness. A scene continuous to surface: Felix explains to his first wife why the life of a contemporary author is so difficult. This scene recurs because it is one of the reasons why Felix's wife eventually leaves him. Indeed, Felix's story stands in contrast to that of his friend and fellow writer Brian, whom he eventually condemns for "pandering" to the masses (31). Later, when Sally argues that Felix "publishes too little," he counters, "I only write what I feel has to be written. He [Brian] listens to his agent and his publisher's publicist and God knows who else and out goes his standards" (33). Felix believes that he is an "authentic" writer because he works outside the bounds of the economic relationship between author and reader. Yet his inability to finish his own book or to make a living from his novels causes a rift between him and his wife. Thus, he may be a great writer, but he cannot *write*. The reason behind this writer's block can be found in his discussions with Sal.

Often, when Felix describes his concerns with contemporary authorship, he tells Sal that the reason why authors cannot write their works originates from the fact that they cannot see their readers. He notes: "He was alone in his room scribbling away, and then these scribbles were transformed into print and read by thousands of people whom he'd never set eyes on and who had never set eyes on him, people in all walks of life, reading him in the solitude of *their* rooms" (Josipovici 19, emphasis original). Here, Felix refers to Rabelais, but notes that he is akin to Rabelais because he also must face an imagined audience. While he asserts that *all* authors are a part of this kind of authorial tradition, he

notes that it truly plagues only writers “who’ve understood” how detrimental an imagined audience can be.

Why would a reader reading a book in his or her room be a source of anxiety for an author? Such a sentiment is echoed by other Josipovici protagonists like Alan in *After* and Pavone in *Infinity*, and in all these novels, the reader reading a work alone continues to make authors resentful. Why? The space that Felix refers to is more than just a physical one that separates reader from author, and his frustration is more than a desire to know the readers. The issue at hand is that within this space, the author *imagines* that the power to read and construct meaning is transferred to a reader, one who will probably not read the work as carefully as the writer desires. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text* explores how readers have the freedom to read the text in any fashion they desire: “Our very avidity for knowledge impels us to skim or skip certain passages (anticipated as ‘boring’) in order to get more quickly to the warmer parts of the anecdote (which are always its articulations: whatever furthers the solution of the riddle, the revelation of fate: we boldly skip (*no one is watching*) descriptions, explanations, analyses, conversations” (11, emphasis mine). Barthes’ description of the reading process exposes the power that readers are given with a book: they have the ability to read at whim, excising passages they dislike and skimming the entire work. He suggests that such an interaction is made possible because the reader is inherently a bodiless figure for the author: “You address yourself to me so that I may read you, but I am nothing to you except this address; in your eyes, I am the substitute for nothing, for no figure [...] for you I am neither a body nor even an object [...] but merely a field, a vessel for expansion” (Barthes 5). Here,

Barthes asserts that authors, much like their readers, have the desire to *know* their audience, but this desire can never come to fruition; the reader is merely a phantom that the author creates.

But in Josipovici's *Everything Passes*, the fictional authors are plagued by their phantom readers precisely because of the control that they have. Felix worries about his readers because he cannot guarantee that they will read the novel correctly. His work is handed over to a reader who may not appreciate the work put into it. Thus, when he tells Sal that he wants to clarify the obstacles Rabelais faced as a writer, he claims, "I want to make people aware of the issues he faced and so clear the ground for a genuine renewal of fiction writing in our day" (Josipovici 20). *Everything Passes* suggests, on the one hand, that if authors realized that readers were stripping them of their power, that they would be able to take back that power by writing for a small audience or even just writing for themselves. On the other hand, Felix's fate indicates that contemporary authors, no matter how aware they are of shifting authorial power, are damned to writer's block. Towards the end of the novel, Felix finally has the inspiration to write a great work, but he writes so furiously, that he later looks back upon the work to realize: "The page was black [...] It was black with marks. Thick with them. Nothing was legible. And the page underneath was white. With the traces of writing from where I pressed on the page above [...] I hadn't turned the page. [...] Not once (53). Even when Felix is capable of conquering his writer's block, he cannot transcend the anxiety that consumes him. The only work that he produces is a palimpsest of meaningless words and scribbles. Despite the fact that he is consumed with joy when he writes it, he is inherently incapable of

bringing the work to fruition. His own worries about readership and the reception of the work render him incapable of writing, as even when he is utterly alone, he is never *actually* alone because he cannot escape the fantasy that his readers will manipulate and control his text.²⁸

Josipovici would continue to explore his subject in a later novella called *After*. In this work, the protagonist, Alan, is a novelist and a literature professor. Like Felix, Alan speaks passionately about Rabelais and the role of print in the transformation of the author-reader paradigm. When he meets his former lover, Claude, he explains to her his theories about literature: “Print robbed of you of any authority and made anything you said automatically meaningless” (Josipovici 44). Alan does not expound on this, as his following assertions are nearly identical to Felix’s beliefs about Rabelais, but this claim is illuminating. Alan’s comment suggests the power that the author *would* have had under different economic perimeters is transferred post print to the reader. The print itself obviously cannot strip the power of the author. Instead, it is given to the readers who have the authority to read, interpret, and in contemporary times, critique and even change it on online forums. Authors may have the ability to construct the text, but the reader can *deconstruct* it, and even the best reader may not pay exacting attention to it.

The author’s diminishing prestige is a constant theme in Josipovici’s work, one that would surprise almost no reader. In *Everything Passes*, Felix explains to his Sal:

²⁸ Of course, as reader-response critics have shown, no author is able to fully control his readers. Roland Barthes’

“The Death of the Author” notes that once a work is written, readers will make their own interpretations. At the same time, however, narrative theorists observe that authors make attempts to control readership through the kinds of authorial moves they make:

Print, he says, scooping up the froth in his cup, made Luther the power he became, but essentially he was a preacher, not a writer. He knew his audience and wrote for it. Rabelais, though, he says, sucking his spoon, understood what this new miracle of print meant for the writer. It meant you had gained the world and lost your audience. You no longer knew who was reading you or why. You no longer knew why you were writing. (17)

How can a contemporary author, though, who has a much larger audience than an author like Rabelais, have “lost his audience?” What is telling here is that the contemporary author has not “lost” the audience; he has gained a wealth of readers that he does not know. This is important because the author cannot guarantee the *kinds* of readers he will have. Felix hints as much when he continues to tell Sal:

Shakespeare’s audience, he says, paid for the privilege of entering an enclosed space to watch and listen to a play. But it was still an audience he could see, an audience every segment of which he knew intimately, he had drunk with them all, with the bargemen and the chandlers and the barbers and the soldiers, he had attended on the lords and ladies, he was on first-name terms with the aldermen and Justices of the Peace. His words went out to them and their applause came back to him. (Josipovici 24).

In *Everything Passes*, Felix will never know his audience, as this is the fate that all contemporary authors must face. However, both Felix and Alan in *After* try to imagine an audience, and while they *do* imagine one who strips their power and reads incorrectly, this imagined audience nonetheless allows these contemporary audiences to put a face on the unknowable, and by doing so, the authors are able to regain *some* creative abilities. In *Infinity*, however, the protagonist is able to create a great work, which is quite the departure from his other previously mentioned works.

Infinity

Infinity is Josipovici's 2012 novel, loosely based on the eccentric composer, Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988). This novel is, to borrow a term from Fludernik, one of Josipovici's "dialog novels" (95). In this work, the real-life Scelsi is transformed into the fictional Tancredo Pavone, whose views on art and music are elitist at best. Pavone's wild musings are filtered through his manservant, Massimo, who faithfully repeats his master's beliefs to an anonymous interviewer writing a book on the composer. The novel was quite well received despite the often outlandish claims about art and creativity in the book. Lee Rourke from *The Guardian* notes that while the novel obviously took various shots at "contemporary artists [who] have lost their way" that the novel's comedic elements and message about "the role that art, all-encompassing art should play in our lives" is a nonetheless important one.

At times, the novel seems to almost parody Josipovici's own elitism. For instance, while Pavone complains that England has been infected by "American barbarism" and that the French are the only ones who are worried about their culture, which would appear to be in line with other fictional authors' assertions about culture, Pavone also whines that no other culture knows how to clean suits but the English (Josipovici 6). His very real complaints against cultural erosion are peppered with more irrelevant and outlandish concerns about the end of fox hunting and suit pressing, which only undercuts his assertions. While Pavone may argue "We must practice every day [...] in order to eradicate our desire to make the world a better and more civilised place, we must learn to

accept that it will only ever be a worse and more uncivilized place,” his statements lack the anxiety and real concern for the “end” of culture that plagues Josipovici’s earlier protagonists (6). Here, Josipovici appears to mock his own characters’ assertions, undermining serious complaints about culture with surface ones. Pavone, who is dead by the time the novel opens, seems to be an aging avant-garde artist, one whose views on art are already old-fashioned and cranky. At the same time, Pavone’s views on mainstream culture and audience do mirror those found in earlier Josipovici novels.

In *Infinity*, though, Pavone is configured as a dying breed. He warns Massimo early on that they have entered a new era, one in which “No one will know what a stone is any more, no one will know what a tree is, no one will know what a flower is, no one will know what the mathematical symbol for infinity” (Josipovici 6). While the masses have lost the ability to detect finer things, artists have willingly prostituted themselves and their work for money:

Today, he said, very few people know what it means to be an artist. They want to have their photographs taken in order to show off their noses. But we all have noses, he said, and few people are artists. True artists. They want to show off their profiles and tell the newspapers how wonderful they are. But they are not wonderful, they are only human beings and they are worse than most humans because they are prostituting their gifts [...] If they have gifts in the first place [...] The art is incidental, he said, what is important is to show off your nose and to talk to the papers. (Josipovici 15)

Massimo recalls Pavone’s assertions in a dead pan fashion. When the interviewer presses him, Massimo cannot remember if Pavone liked his own works being listened to by audiences or newspaper critics. Although the assertions about “showing” one’s nose seem

comical, at the heart of Pavone's claims is the frustration that being an artist has become a performance, a spectacle for "publicity brochures" and publishing houses (20). At the same time, while all artists should strive to create work purely for themselves, we understand that forces beyond the artists' grasp prevent them from actually being able to compose great work.

When Pavone describes his own composition process to Massimo, he hints that his sense of powerlessness plays a significant role in his writers' block. He recounts, "In this house, Massimo, he said, I am the master because I pay the wages, but at my desk, what am I? Nothing. That devil Scheler tried to make a master out of me in Vienna, he said. He tried to make me master of the art of composition [...] But I could not master the notes. Even then I felt that it was the notes mastering me" (Josipovici 62). Interestingly, he follows his assertion with his passionate explanation of the average audience.

In many ways, *Infinity* seems to be a capstone on Josipovici's themes of authors plagued by their readers. At one point in the text, Massimo recalls when Pavone tried to teach *him* how to be able to detect art from drivel:

I do not want you to look at the scenery, Massimo, he said to me, I want you to concentrate on the pillars on the west front, where we are standing. There are four of them, and on them you will see what is perhaps the greatest sculptural masterpiece of the Italian Middle Ages. Yet here we are alone, he said, while the sheep lie on their backs on their benches, gazing up at the monstrosity of the Sistine Chapel. That is what we have to put up with, Massimo, he said to me, the idiocy of our fellow citizens and of our fellow human beings. (Josipovici 66)

Here is an incredibly elitist remark about how most people are unwilling to devote the time and energy to appreciating particular kinds of art. While Pavone tries to teach

Massimo to glean the majesty of certain works, we understand that he is largely unsuccessful. Massimo, while well-intentioned, is a very naïve character who, as he speaks to the interviewer, often fails to really grasp what his master was saying.

Pavone, himself, often illuminates the intellectual differences between himself and Massimo. He suggests that composers and authors are also imbued with the inherent ability to create art. They have been chosen from birth, tasked with the duty of creating work that will be appreciated and understood by the few. He explains to Massimo what it feels like to know that one has been given the chore of being a composer or writer when he complains:

The composer is not a craftsman, Massimo, he said to me. He is not a genius. He is a conduit, a go-between. A postman. That is what he has been chosen for. It is no reflection on his character that he is chosen, it is simply a fact. I was chosen, Massimo, he said to me, and I had to do what I was chosen for, just as you were chosen to help me with this task. (Josipovici 90)

There are certainly classist and elitist undertones that emerge in this declaration. Massimo, a member of the working class, is excluded from the ranks of artists. In fact, Pavone even claims that the middle-class are the best at creating art because they are ambitious, while at the same time, noting that this class does not know how to “take risk[s]” (91). But at the heart of Pavone’s words is his belief (a belief that many other Josipovici protagonists share) that the artist has a particular role, one as clear cut as a postman’s. While Pavone may not believe authors have especial powers, we certainly understand that he thinks highly of this position, as he can mediate art and the masses.

But if Pavone merely echoes what other characters in prior novels have stated, what makes this protagonist so different? After all, he too, struggles with the desire for isolation. Indeed, in *Infinity*, Pavone recalls how whenever he reunited with his wife, he lost his ability to write music. At one point, this loss becomes so overwhelming, that he is put into a mental institution (Josipovici 83). When she eventually leaves him, his ability to work again comes back, albeit slowly:

I was at work on a huge orchestral piece, still in the serial style I thought was necessary for any serial composition. It was called *The Eternal Silence of those Infinite Spaces*. My body was screaming at me to stop but my will forced me to go on. I had to get someone to help with copying the score. Every day when I woke up all I wanted was to stay in bed, to cover my face with the blankets and shut out the day. But I forced myself to get up. I forced myself to sit at my desk. I forced myself to complete *The Eternal Silence of those Infinite Spaces*. And it was finally done. (85)

Pavone's composition process may not seem to be a positively portrayed one, given the struggles he went through to finish the piece. However, Pavone, unlike so many of Josipovici's other composers/authors, *is* able to finish the work and meets with some success. By isolating himself, he is able to finally focus on his work and complete it.

Thus, isolation is a nuanced space in Josipovici's novels, as it holds the greatest potential for the artist/author: by himself, the writer can either produce the greatest work to date *or* he can be plagued by concerns about future readers. This space is filled with concerns about agency, relevancy, and control. Notably, musicians in his novels fare better, as their interaction with the work will be less "invasive" than with a written text. In *Infinity*, Pavone recalls his friend, Michaux, an author, who felt haunted by the written

word and chose instead to become a painter: “I wanted to escape from words, he said. I wanted to escape from the *control* of words. I wanted my hand to lead me, my pencil to lead me” (84, emphasis mine). Michaux’s desire to escape from words highlights the very issue that Josipovici’s authors all have with the written word: it takes on a life of its own outside of the author’s grasp and control. Meanwhile, although Pavone is certainly struggling with his own art, he does not have to consider the entrapment of the written word, as his music cannot be as misinterpreted as an author’s written text. Or can it?

Pavone *is* able to write the piece. But as it is being performed in front of an audience, he faints: “Then suddenly, the door was flung open and someone was looking at me. He began to shout: *There’s a deadman in here*” (Josipovici 84, emphasis original). Pavone composes himself, and at the behest of his friend, Michaux, he walks on stage and confronts his audience, who praise him for his work. After this, he creates other, even more beautiful compositions. This final scene in the novel, the confrontation of the audience, is significant not only because a Josipovici protagonist sees an audience in person, but also because it appears to close out a cycle in Josipovici’s work. By forcing himself to interact with his audience, who so enjoy his work, his writer’s block is eased, and he becomes wildly productive. But with *Hotel Andromeda*, his next novel, we see how the avant-garde author faces a new dilemma: her own relevancy in times of political turmoil.

Hotel Andromeda

Josipovici's most recent novel, *Hotel Andromeda*, is a marked move away from the anti-reader trope that fuels his earlier novels. While the protagonist, Helena, is an author, the novel does not document her crippling writing anxiety or her hatred towards contemporary audiences. Instead, the novel centers on her fear that her writing should be more political. She struggles to write a book on contemporary artist Joseph Cornell, who created shadow boxes, and she frequently wishes that her work could be more politically relevant. When the novel opens, she sits with her elderly friend who grew up in the Soviet Union. Helena frets that her work should be less artistic:

But there's something between the great scheme of things and pure self-indulgence, isn't there? the old lady asks.

Helena says:

'I know what you mean, but it's hard to keep believing. I mean I believe when I'm at my desk working. I really do. I know it's important to get it right and if it's important to get it right then that means there's a right and a wrong and it's outside myself. Call it truth. Or something. But the rest of the time, away from my desk. (Josipovici 5)

While Helena understands that her work is "outside" herself in some regard, the problem is that her work will not help the political and economic issues surrounding her. This is a surprising departure from Josipovici's earlier works, which often shy away from political concerns. Typically, avant-garde authors do not create overtly political texts; for Helena to worry that her work is not political suggests that the novel must move in another direction if it hopes to remain relevant.

When Helena meets another artist, a Czech photographer named Ed, she is forced to confront her feelings about her writing's relevancy. Ed has just returned from Chechnya where he photographed various refugees and bombed sites. After Helena listens to his tales, she admits, "It seems absurd to be here in my comfortable play trying to write a book about a dead artist hardly anyone has heard of when all that is happening over there" (Josipovici 43). In an interesting reversal, Ed *also* believes his art is inherently useless. He argues with Helena, assuring her that no photograph will aid the "thousands of people. Like rats. In the rubble of basements" (Josipovici 39). Here lies the interesting twist: whereas Josipovici's earlier protagonists are crippled by their lack of physical audience, we understand in this novel that if all art is inherently useless in the sense that it will never *actually* change the world for the better, then all artists are free to write what pleases *them*. Helena can write precisely because she has accepted that there is no audience for her work.

Whereas the author-protagonists in Josipovici's earlier novels struggle with audience and feelings of irrelevancy, Helena, by the novel's end, understands that she must write this work simply because she wants to and for no other reason. When the novel closes, Helena hopes her biographical work revives the life of the artist. She tells her elderly friend, "I want my own book [...] to bring him back into our consciousness in all his oddity and confusion, in all his pain and suffering, in all his cursedness and with all his maddening foibles, but also in his quality as a visionary, an ambiguous visionary, the only kind tolerable in our modern world" (Josipovici 136). Certainly Helena's assertions echo those of Felix and Alan from their respective novels, but the novel ends with a

hopeful tone. If the novel is entirely useless and vestigial, then at least it can bring the writer happiness. Thus, as the novel closes, so too does the quest for the author's purpose. The novel will survive precisely because there will always be authors who are compelled to write them, no matter who reads them or whatever money they earn from them. In some capacity, this sentiment might appear pessimistic. After all, the British novel was once reputed to be capable of refining a nation and its customs and habits, which would suggest that the genre has lost some significance. However, Josipovici's fiction suggests the novel holds its own importance as an artistic production.

At the end of the novel, art for art's sake still prevails despite Helena's understanding that it cannot serve as large a purpose as Ed's work, yet we understand that her authorial calling is culturally significant. Helena learns, like so many of Josipovici's protagonists that she must write for herself and no other. However, we understand that of all his protagonists, she is the most likely to finish her work. She has seen her way through the writer's block and has resumed her work by the end of the novel. Perhaps she fully accepts that she is her own audience and she sheds the desire to know how others' will read or judge her work. In this way, the novel appears to break the cycle and to suggest that the avant-garde writer must disregard all notions of what art should be and who decides what art is worthy, as this is the only way to guarantee the kinds of creativity he or she desires.²⁹

²⁹ In a way, this might explain the level of experimentation in Josipovici's book. By abandoning all readerly desires about the genre (the desire of a plot, developed characters, etc) Josipovici composes novels that appear more like other genres, such as poetry.

Conclusion

In many ways, Josipovici's fiction post-2000 accounts for a new phase in his work. Fludernik's monograph suggests that the two main phases of his writing can be divided into "communication" and "space" novels, but I argue that we can see another phase that begins around the publication of *Goldberg Variations* and perhaps ends with *Infinity*. While his later novel *Hotel Andromeda* similarly discusses authorship, the novel shies away from the heavy-handed elitism that floods the pages of the earlier works and presents readers with an author who can create meaningful relationships with those around her. But what are we to make of these similarly themed novels? Why do they span a decade and why do the same ideas about authorship, space, and readership recur in them? More importantly, what is Josipovici trying to show with these themes and what does he hope to change about our culture?

While Werner Wolf argues that the composers and authors in Josipovici's novels suffer from writer's block because the postmodern era has rendered the novel obsolete, I suggest that the depictions of writer's block have even deeper meaning. There is certainly some strand in his novels that indicates the authors therein believe that the novel is slowly losing its value. However, I do not see this as a uniquely postmodern sentiment. I argue that, upon close reading, most of the scenes of writer's block emerge from the author's own anxiety-driven mind and the imagined spaces that he creates when he invents his reader. Thus, what often inhibits the author from writing is not necessarily the belief that the novel is dead, and therefore, he has nothing new to say. Instead, the

imagined readers that the author creates in his mind often delimit the author's creativity, as the author believes that there are no longer any readers who, given the novel, know how to read it "correctly," independent of the author.

Time and time again, the authors in Josipovici's novels fret about their readers and how these readers will interact with the novel, if left alone. In *After*, for instance, the main character, Alan, sits with his mother and explains how words only gain meaning when others read them:

'The act of writing, the act of the poet or scribe, was a human act, but printing with moveable type, each letter locked in separately and then the whole page multiplied a thousandfold, then the pages folded and stitched together and the covers bound in, and there it is, an object in a room full of views, no trace of the human hand or breath in it, and it's only when someone opens it and begins to read that it thaws and comes to life. Then it's closed again and once more it's just an object in a room.' (Josipovici 28)

On the one hand, then, authors are dependent upon their readers, as their words are "frozen" until a reader strives to make sense of them. This dependency, though, is usually perceived of in negative terms in his fiction. Although the author needs his reader to interact with the words to "thaw" them, Josipovici champions a paradigm wherein the author can relate these words with immediacy to his audience. Hence, in *Goldberg: Variations*, his protagonist tells his story to his audience. By contrast, a novelist needs a reader to interpret and physically read the words on the page in order for their impact to be felt. While a few of his protagonists can overcome their writer's block (Pavone and Helena), this is not without a difficult struggle against feelings of irrelevancy, intellectual incapability, and loss of authority. The authors in these stories believe that they have been

“stripped of their authority” by the very readers who cannot realize the beauty around them. At the height of this cycle, Josipovici’s novels hint at a future in which authors will be incapable of writing, and by the end, they suggest that authors must accept that they can be the only real audience for their work.

If Josipovici’s valiant anti-reader novels seem to wane as he enters 2012, what does he see as the future of the novel? Are we to take *Hotel Andromeda* as a sign that even the avant-garde should move into a political direction? Or does the novel, still a story about an author’s frustrations with writing, suggest that the struggle, in some form or another, will continue so long as the novel survives? Josipovici’s contemporary novels, like those of other self-confessed modernists, such as Jeanette Winterson and Will Self, warrant a more critical eye than they have previously garnered. What are the real-world concerns of these authors? What are the implications of “handing” culture over to the readers? The novels of Josipovici when placed into conversation with the post-apocalyptic works of Self and Winterson suggest that these authors conceive the imbalance of the author-reader paradigm to be problematic. If Josipovici’s authors fear how readers will interact with their texts, then Winterson’s protagonist worries about how the digital age will more radically transform the role of the reader. Josipovici’s writers may be concerned about the distance between themselves and their readers, but Winterson’s novel shows how this distance is complicated by the internet, which simultaneously brings readers closer to authors (through the form of email, hypertextual works) and further distances them because of the sheer number of possible readers.

Thus, my next chapter examines Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook* (2000) and shows how the novel reveals anxieties about authorial control in the digital age. The novel, a parody of hypertextual, collaborative fiction, imagines an author (Ali) who sells her stories online to readers who want a participatory reading experience. While this kind of relationship (one author, one serious reader) should be an ideal paradigm, I show how the fictional author in the text feels conflicted about how much power she must extend to her reader/co-author. Even though the reader wants to be a part of the writing experience, Ali frequently wrenches the control of the narrative back from the reader, only really allowing her to be part of more trivial aspects of the narrative. I contextualize this story in a larger framework that discusses how, around the turn of the century, many authors and critics believed the internet would radically transform authorship, as there would be multiple authors of digital text, thus dispersing the authority and power from a single individual. Winterson's novel, I suggest, grapples with what authorship can and will look like in an era that promotes collaborative authorship in digital settings.

CHAPTER IV
“NOTHING IS SOLID. NOTHING IS FIXED”: DIGITIZATION,
HYPERTEXTUALITY, AND COLLABORATIVE AUTHORSHIP IN JEANETTE
WINTERSON’S *THE POWERBOOK*

In the previous chapter, I explored how Gabriel Josipovici’s fictional authors were anxious about the space between themselves and their readers. The space was created by print, as texts separate writers from their readers because reading books happens in isolation. But if print media created a distance between the author and his reader, digital media blurred what it meant to be an author and/or a reader. When critics first began to theorize the potential impacts of digitization, they speculated that cyberspace would alter author-reader relations. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, critics predicted that hypertextual works would be *the* defining genre of the new millennium. In this kind of work, an author might construct a literary work with various hypertextual links that could shed light on concepts, intertextual lines, or even specific locations. But critics, too, perceived at this time that hypertextual media would be collaborative, or that many authors would contribute towards a literary work in a “round robin” fashion wherein one author started a piece and then another added to or finished the work.

Literary authors similarly anticipated the impact of digitization on literature. American novelist John Barthes published *Coming Soon!!!* (2001) a novel that centers on a young author who crafts a hypertextual novel. Meanwhile, the characters in Martin

Amis's *Yellow Dog* (2005) speak in phonetic text-message speech, which suggests Amis feared the linguistic effect that internet slang would have on language. British novelist Jeanette Winterson also responded to the digital movement in her fiction. Her 2000 novel *The Powerbook* was set in virtual space. An author, Ali, writes stories for a living, and the stories are published online, typically via email. Ali agrees, in a way, to co-write the stories with the readers, as they are supposed to provide Ali with pertinent information, allowing her to shape the story to their tastes and requests. The novel comprises various stories that are "written" by Ali and these stories loosely cover fairy tale re-tellings and fictionalized versions of Jeanette Winterson's own dismal childhood. When *The Powerbook* was first published, critics and scholars faulted the novel for its strange structure. In a review of the work titled "Eternal Triangles" Elaine Showalter argued that it was merely a recapitulation of Winterson's many themes: love, betrayal, and adultery. She further suggested that the novel lacked depth. Showalter's review has been cited in many scholarly critiques on *The Powerbook*, notably by critics who similarly argue that the novel's sections are quite disparate, and that the work provides a shallow treatment of digitization, despite its setting. However, as I show throughout this chapter, when we place this novel alongside various discourses on digitization and hypertext, we understand how it explores authorship in the digital age.

While Winterson often weaves various myths and fairy tales together in her novels, this book is specifically structured as a series of hypertextual stories. Since the work itself is still a novel, Winterson's *The Powerbook* is a parody of hypertextual interactions. Winterson does not actually invite "flesh-and-blood" readers to continue or

finish her stories, but her novel imagines an author who allows any reader to contribute to a piece that she writes, as the protagonist encourages the reader to customize the work to her tastes.³⁰ Early on in the novel, Ali converses with one of her readers, asking her to customize the text:

There was a pause—then I tapped out, “Let’s start. What colour hair do you want?” “Red. I’ve always wanted red hair [...] so what shall I wear?” “It’s up to you. Combat or Prada?” “How much can I spend on clothes?” “How about \$1000?” “My whole wardrobe or just one outfit?” “Are you doing this story on a budget?” “You’re the writer.” “It’s your story.” (Winterson 31)

On the surface, the author appears to invite the reader to work on the story with her, and even informs the reader that “it’s your story” (31). However, in many ways the author still controls the writing process, only allowing the reader to access particular aspects of the text. The reader proposes that Ali set the next section of the story in Paris, and Ali does so, but she completely writes the story to her own end. Eventually, the reader is angered that Ali retains control over the narrative, and she chooses to leave the email thread.

Even though the novel is set in virtual reality, many critics have questioned whether this setting is even significant to the novel’s underlying messages. Ute Kauer in “Literature as Virtual Reality,” published in 2005, states that Winterson’s novel,

³⁰ Wayne Booth uses the phrase “flesh and blood” reader/author in “Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?” to differentiate between implied readers and authors and the *actual*, living audiences or writers. I use this phrase to note when we are talking about Winterson’s actual, living audience versus her implied readers. An author’s implied reader is that person(s) for whom they have written the story. This is an incredibly important distinction to make about Winterson’s work because she has the tendency, in most of her novels, to metafictionalize herself into the text. Thus, the flesh and blood Winterson is different from the fictionalized Winterson, who may speak about writing in a different capacity than her real-life counterpart.

“promoted as an example of 21st century fiction,” can hardly be considered this kind of fiction (90). Kauer first critiques the critical assertion that the novel represents this new era: “what exactly is it, then, that marks the text as representative of the new millennium?” (91). She then argues that critics have too hastily come to this label because the work is set in virtual reality (92). However, I find that Winterson’s work does broach many of the issues and concerns of twenty-first century fiction. Thus, this chapter re-examines Winterson’s novel and indicates that in the context of the growing and deeper understanding of Post-2000 literature, we can now better understand the kinds of tensions that Winterson presents in *The Powerbook*. Hence, I find that returning to this novel in light of the new discussions on twenty-first century literature can help illuminate the relationship between author and reader that Winterson imagines in the work. As Adiseshiah and Hildyard note in *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, in many ways, the beginning of the twenty-first century can be defined by its search for authority (4). I argue that in *The Powerbook* Winterson uses digital space to critique ideas of authorship and readership. More specifically, she foresees that digitization encourages a kind of collaborative authorship. Winterson’s protagonist struggles against collaboration, even as she invites it, as she realizes that she wants to retain control over the various narratives that she constructs. Largely, these shifts in power are described spatially, but this is not the same space that Josipovici’s writers invent. In *The Powerbook* Ali feels as if she lives in a state of flux. But as I show, understanding this fluidity and why Ali fears it is essential to understanding her shifting authorial role. Both characters (Ali and her reader) try to compose various narratives, not the least of which is the actual text both want to

write. The text(s) they write become highly contested sites that take place in cyberspace. Why would contemporary authors fear digitization, though? In my second chapter, I note that many were concerned about the ways in which digitization would alter print media, as print would be replaced by electronic books. However, I find that Winterson's novel in particular depicts how writers' authority would shift, as the internet provides a democratic atmosphere.

Authorship under Threat: Hypertext and Collaboration

When I say that the internet initially presented itself as a democratic atmosphere, I mean that the internet allows people to participate in various forms of authorship outside of the typical publishing and marketing practices. Online, anyone can contribute a story or build a blogosphere. Furthermore, the internet often promises equal access to knowledge. Of course, this can be an overly idealistic view of the internet's capacity to offer a free exchange of ideas. As Astra Taylor notes in *The People's Platform* the internet now is heavily mediated by advertising, corporations, and news agencies that "believe the claim of a more democratic culture" (108). Taylor's analysis, of course, comes after the last several years/decades of the internet and thus accounts for the sharp increase in social media, alongside the corporate interests in keeping the internet expensive. Even though critics such as Taylor dispute the belief that the internet can be democratic, there are still some ways that the distinctions between author and readers are leveled in the digital realm.

In 2000, when *The Powerbook* was published, there was a critical discourse about the power of the internet and its potential to produce a widely democratic medium, so much so that in 2000, Peter Ferdinand argued in *The Internet, Democracy, and Democratization* that the internet was going to provide “a more genuine, and more profound form of deliberative democracy” (6). Ferdinand’s assertions were part of a larger critical debate in the 1990s and early 2000s about authorship. In *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in the Era of Globalization*, first published in 1992, George Landow claimed that the internet would create substantial impacts on authorship even though other scholars suggested there would be little impact on the author/reader paradigm. He argues that hypertextual texts “d[o] not permit a tyrannical, univocal voice” (56). But how could print provide a “tyrannical” voice, especially since critics argue that the novel is a site of “a multiplicity of social voices” (Bakhtin 263)?

Both print *and* digital novels allow for a “multiplicity” of ideas and voices. But the form of the novel—its actual print layout—reinforces certain kinds of authority the writer can exercise. In *Literacy and Orality*, Walter Ong notes that print “represents the words of an author in definitive or ‘final’ form” (132). He contrasts this to oral culture, wherein oral traditions and even manuscripts allowed a closer relationship between readers and authors: “the readers of manuscripts are less closed off from the author, less absent, than are the readers of those writing for print” (Ong 132). According to Ong, the materiality of the codex itself serves as the ultimate paratextual force: once the reader reads all the works on the page and closes the book, they are “finished” and cut off from the text and the author. In many ways, hypertextuality and even just the internet,

generally, removes this finality. In *The Powerbook*, the author attempts to end various conversations and narratives: she tries to wrap up the fantasies for her customers, but she is frequently interrupted; she tries to re-write the narrative of her relationship with her lover, but her lover intervenes when she adds her own commentary. Towards the end of the novel, a frustrated Ali states, “Nothing is solid. Nothing is fixed,” suggesting that fluidity is compromising her ability to remain in power over her story and her reader (Winterson 53). Thus, digitization and hypertextuality pose real dangers for those authors who *do* want the finality that print offers. Books will eventually come to an end, but online, readers can continually make contact with and even shape aspects of the text through various means (hypertextual stories, fan fiction, etc.). In the novel, we see Ali’s constant struggle with power and narrative. At first, she is confident in her ability to control the story, but slowly, she realizes that she must continuously exert her power over the reader, as he/she wants to co-author her various texts.

The internet allows for more collaboration because digital texts are more easily co-authored. In *Radiant Textuality*, Jerome McGann observes that the millennium ushered in questions of the codex’s relevancy: “Until now the book or codex form has been one of the most powerful tools for developing, storing, and disseminating information” (55). He notes that digital technology eased the “time and labor” associated with finding various sources, as the “information superhighway” made it easier to locate texts (55). At the same time the internet made it vastly easier for inquisitive readers to find the works they wished to read; digitization impacted the ways in which these readers *accessed* texts because “[a]esthetic forms recreate—they ‘stage’ or simulate a world of human discourse

and conversation” (McGann 172). In many ways, the digitization of texts led to a different pattern of communication between authors and readers. So much so that critic Alan Kirby suggested that twenty-first century literature should be labeled “digimodernist,” as authors had to contend with new interfaces and publishing paradigms after the increase in digital media. Kirby qualifies that digimodernist texts are those works that are written by anonymous or unknown authors (such as Wikipedia entries, the creators of video games, chat room administrators, etc.), wherein the

text [...] is made up to a varying degree by the reader or viewer or textual consumer. This figure becomes authorial in this sense: s/he makes text where none existed before. It isn't that his/her reading is of a kind to suggest that meaning; there is no metaphor here. In an act distinct from their act of reading or viewing, such a reader or viewer gives to the world textual content or shapes the development and process of a text in visible form. (Kirby 51)

In other words, on a site like Wikipedia, readers who read through an entry on Jeanette Winterson could add their own knowledge to the description of her and/or her biography, literary works, or social media presence. Thus, the readers of the entry also become the author of the page, since they contribute to the text.

Kirby's insistence that this style of authorship is not metaphorical stems from his clarification that reader-response critics often claim that texts cannot exist without readers, as there is no one to actually make meaning from the text (61).³¹ In this case, he

³¹ Kirby undoubtedly refers to Roland Barthes “Death of the Author,” in which Barthes states “The Reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but its destination” (148). In other words, the reader makes meaning, and the author cannot have any role in shaping the text beyond its reception. Of course, other authors have taken up this issues, most famously Michel Foucault in “What Is an Author,” wherein he argues that the author does serve as an economic force. However, narratologists such as and have further critiqued this theory noting that in some small ways authors *can* control a text's reception through various narrative

notes that the text literally cannot exist without the reader because there is not a clearly defined author of the work; the only authors of Wikipedia, for instance, are those who seek out the page and add their own knowledge to the entries (Kirby 62). However, he notes that the rise of digital media and the popularity of publishing online material means that all models of authorship have been dramatically impacted by digitization: “today, authorship is the site of a swarming, restless creativity and energy; the figure of the disreputably lonely or mocked or dethroned author of postmodernism and post-structuralism is obsolete” (60). Kirby’s assessment of contemporary authorship is correct in one regard: authorship has seemingly become a more de-centered process, given that any author of a self-published book can easily sell his or her rights to Amazon for a modest return.³² According to Kirby, these new avenues of authorship (creating blogs, becoming a popular book reviewer on a site like Goodreads), mean that the internet has dismantled the previous notion that once an author creates a text he/she no longer has any purpose or lasting imprint on the work’s meaning. Although the divisions between author and reader are certainly blurred online, I find that his assertion that authorship is a site of swarming creativity a hasty generalization. If anything, this new paradigm has exacerbated concerns that authors had about their already waning power. Readers have gained new agency in the digital age, and the authors that I study in this dissertation

techniques. For more see Wayne Booth’s “The Return to the Implied Author: Why Bother?” or Jeremy Hawthorne’s *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator*.

³² According to Amazon.com’s self-publishing policies, any author can self-publish. However, these terms are heavily regulated. While authors have the ability to select between print or digital formats, self-published authors only are paid if buyers read more than 10% of the book, which is tracked by Amazon.com’s own e-reader, the kindle, as it documents the reader’s progress. Certainly, this is not the most ideal form of authorship, but it does offer, in some capacity, the ability for *anyone* to publish their work.

express anxiety about what it means to be an author when a reader can more easily assume an authorial role.

If the digital realm promises a metaphorical “equal playing field” between author and reader, then Winterson’s novel suggests that there are still methods by which the author can make herself an invaluable and privileged component of the reading experience. Of the scholarship that treats Winterson’s depictions of authors/readers, few scholars have questioned why Winterson returns to these issues in the context of email, digital media, and hypertextuality. That is not to say that Winterson’s exploration of digitization and the internet have gone completely unnoticed. Indeed, Vesselin Budakov’s “Emails and Fiction,” Sonya Andermahr’s “Cyberspace and the Body in Jeanette Winterson’s *The Powerbook*,” Ulf Cronquist’s “Hypertext, Prosthetics, and the Netocracy: Posthumanism in *The Powerbook*,” and Carla Arnell’s “From the Middle Ages to the Internet: the Medieval Courtly Love Tradition in Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* and *The Powerbook*,” are only a sample studies on this topic. Many of these essays focus on the work’s depictions of bodies, as the fictional narrator and reader in the text are continuously placed in different bodies by the author who sells “fantasies” for a living. Critics have also suggested that Winterson depicts the digital realm as a positive space, as women and men can abandon their identities online and construct new ones. Yet I would argue that Winterson critiques, rather than embraces, digitization. The internet may offer people the ability to shed/adopt new identities, but it also ensures that readers themselves can adopt new authorial positions.

Indeed, the fact that Winterson raises issues of authorship in a digitized atmosphere has always been taken for granted, despite the fact that Winterson took a lengthy break in discussing authorship when she published those novels prior to *Powerbook* (which consist of two novels that do not deeply discuss authorship, *Gut Symmetries* and *Sexing the Cherry*, the nonfiction *Art Objects*, and a book of short stories, *The World and Other Places*). I argue that understanding why Winterson places these conversations in this setting is vital to understanding an aspect of the text: she interrogates authorship in the digital realm because a new, different author/reader paradigm emerges in digitized fiction. According to Winterson, this paradigm has the potential to negatively impact authorship, as it displaces some of the author's power by transferring it to the reader.

Winterson and Reading: An Alternative Theory

Jeanette Winterson's concerns about readership extend well beyond the rise of digitization. While these concerns are more apparent when she places them in virtual reality, Winterson has long had a tempestuous relationship with her flesh-and-blood readers. When Winterson published her first novel, *Oranges Are not the only Fruit* in 1985, she began this confusing, somewhat contemptuous relationship with her readers. The semi-autobiographical novel centers on a young girl named "Jeanette," who is adopted into a Pentecostal family in Manchester. She realizes eventually that she is a lesbian and is cast out by her fearsome mother, who performs an exorcism on her in the

hopes of making her “normal.” In many ways, the novel mirrors Winterson’s real life: Winterson *was* adopted into a Manchester, ultra-fundamentalist home and she *was* rejected by her mother for being a lesbian. Significantly, Winterson has claimed, and still claims, that the novel was in no way autobiographical. She argues that the novel was a kind of experiment akin to the “Indian Rope Trick,” as the work “makes possible a total escape from Self,” meaning that by fictionalizing herself and her biographical information, she escapes reality by transforming it into fiction (188). But in interviews and other essays, Winterson is not so kind to those critics/scholars/readers who want to read her work biographically. In 1993, Catherine Bush from *BOMB* magazine asked Winterson about why her readers so consistently read *Oranges* autobiographically despite Winterson’s own affirmations, to which Winterson responded, “you can never guard yourself against absolute stupidity” (Bush). Furthermore, when Winterson was interviewed by *The Paris Review* in 1997, she claimed, “I think I spent the better part of ten years saying, ‘This is not autobiography in the way that you understand it. It is simply the re-using of raw material’” (Bilger). Here, Winterson tries to shape the way that readers interpret her work. Several decades after she published and promoted this work, Winterson *still* tries to make audiences and critics read her novel in a particular way.

In her non-fiction, Winterson frequently claims that she is a modernist author, and she expresses incredulity that scholars categorize her work by using other labels such as postmodernist or even Romantic. Notably, Winterson’s own justifications for being a modernist writer are vague. In *Art Objects*, she argues that she is a “stylist” in the same vein as poet T. S. Eliot, but she also compares herself to Virginia Woolf and Ezra Pound.

Scholarship on Winterson critiques this self-identification, as her novels outwardly address many postmodern ideas about narrative, history, and time. Furthermore, critics like Ute Kauer and have posited that Winterson's fiction upholds Romantic notions of authorship, as authors are figured as exceptional. Indeed, Winterson *does* position authors as superior. Her essay "Writer, Reader, Words," in *Art Objects* argues that when education improved in the early 1900s, the novel was negatively impacted, as readers had not been taught how to read "correctly." She states, "mass literacy was not a campaign to improve the culture and sensibility of the nation, it was designed to make the masses more useful. The writer faced another new problem: his public were no longer his educated equals" (32). Winterson's elitist beliefs about authorship have garnered some critical scorn. John Carey in *What Good Are the Arts* claims that Winterson exemplifies the worst kind of author: the elitist who champions outdated, if not politically incorrect, ideas about art:

The novelist Jeanette Winterson is a good example of a high art advocate, deriving her ideals from Clive Bell and the Bloomsbury Group. Like them, she scorns realism, and equates art with 'rapture' and 'ecstasy.' Like them, she disdains 'mass education.' Her critical writings reveal that she lives in a world of absolutes. There are 'true' artists like Virginia Woolf and herself and there are non-artists [...] True artists are spiritually and also, she implies, socially superior. (32-3)

These contradictions are important to note because Winterson's exact notions of authorship are fraught and paradoxical. This is especially evident when one examines the dichotomous way that critics approach her fiction. According to some critics, Winterson believes herself to be entirely in control over her readers. Scholars point to the many

instances in which Winterson keeps her “flesh and blood” readers at a distance. We see this especially in the edited collection, *I’m Telling You Stories: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, a work that was devoted to exploring the function of reading in her earlier novels. In “The Emotional Politics of Reading Winterson,” Lynn Pykett, in reference to Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body*, suggests that Winterson (here referring to the actual author, and not a fictionalized or metafictionalized version of her) purposefully rejects her audience members by constructing a narrator who lacks a name, a gender, and an age: “Unable to participate in the narrative of the text by aligning myself with the main protagonist, I am left floundering without a clear intra-textual reader-positioning” (Pykett 34). Thus, Pykett maintains that Winterson takes an antagonistic stance towards her readers, as she continuously denies them any information about her narrator. Ute Kauer in “Narration and Gender” concurs with this assessment, noting that in *Written on the Body* “the reader is kept in constant ironic confusion. The reader is addressed as an intimate friend and mocked” (50). Like Pykett, Kauer claims that Winterson wants to keep her readers’ expectations at a distance, but in this case, Kauer argues that Winterson does this in order to prevent readers from connecting the beliefs in the text to her real-world self. Although Pykett and Kauer thoroughly explore the role of Winterson’s “flesh and blood” reader, few critics have explored the fictionalized authors that pervade her novels. This lack of critical attention is surprising, given that Winterson’s fiction grapples with notions of contemporary authorship.

At the same time, other critics have venerated Winterson for championing “feminist notions” of authorship. In “Dissolving the Reader/Author Binary,” Michael

Hardin examines the blurring of author and reader in Winterson's *Written on the Body*. This novel, published in 1993, is told in second person. Throughout the work, an unnamed/genderless speaker addresses "you," a figure that we eventually realize is the speaker's lover, Louise. Hardin notes that Winterson metaphorically associates the narrator's body with the text itself, as Louise reads both the work and the narrator, and that the narrator eventually imagines herself physically blending with Louise, such that "The narrator states that each is the other. Author/reader, self/other, object/subject all become interchangeable. As readers ourselves, though, we can now insert ourselves into the relationship since the boundaries have been removed." Hardin reads this exchange as a positive interaction: he asserts that Winterson follows "contemporary reader theories," by creating a novel wherein the reader is tasked with making meaning from the work the author creates. He thus conceptualizes *Written on the Body* as a novel that "condemns the reader who does not engage and continue the text."

Even though these scholars use *Written on the Body* in their respective discussions about Winterson's treatment and depiction of readers (both real and imagined), I find that these arguments are still critical to understanding Winterson's work, even if I am discussing *The Powerbook*, for two reasons. First, Winterson in *The Powerbook* returns to the same cat-and-mouse game that she uses in *Written on the Body*. Her narrator is just as ambiguous: we never really know if Ali is a woman or a man, especially since "Ali" re-writes herself continuously into different worlds where she can be a man or a woman or even a trans-man, as in one of the stories "Ali" assumes male genitalia both because she needs to appear male and because she has always felt masculine. We have a name for

Ali, but she tells her story to “you,” and while we eventually realize that “you” is female (as she is married to a man at this time), we are not privy to other details. Second, although these critics published these findings from roughly 1998 to 2002, critics *still* ponder the reasons why Winterson taunts readers.

While Hardin’s explication is illuminating (there are definitely aspects of author/reader blurring in the novel), I find that this explanation is perhaps too simplistic. In Hardin’s paradigm, Winterson’s reader would have equal power, if not slightly more so, than his/her author because the reader would be the one who constantly makes meaning. He further argues that Winterson arranges this paradigm because she wants to undermine the critical perception that female readers are passive. Even though Winterson’s readers are not passive, I find that she does not idealize the relationship between reader and author. In other words, her fiction expresses concern about the amount of power being eked from authors; thus, I am skeptical that her fictional authors/storytellers want to give more power to the readers by having *them* construct and shape the text.

If anything, Winterson’s novels fear that the author has already been relegated to a position of non-power by society. But scholarship on the roles of authors in her novels tends to follow two lines of argument. According to the first paradigm, Winterson is in a powerful position over readers because she prevents them from creating a bond with the protagonist. In the second, her authors happily share their authorial power by yielding the textual meaning over to the reader. My argument, though, offers a third possibility for reading Winterson’s reader depictions. Winterson’s authors are inherently powerless:

they have already been stripped of their power in some shape or form. Thus, they attempt to take back authority from their readers who are already in an empowered position as these readers *expect* a collaborative role. This issue comes to a head in *The Powerbook* because of turn-of-the-century authorial concerns about the ways in which the internet would reconfigure author and reader relations.

Notably, Winterson has elsewhere voiced concern about the fate of the author in contemporary culture. Indeed, the function of story and story-telling is a common trope that she explores in most of her novels. Whether Winterson metafictionally yearns to “tell the story again,” at the end of novels like *Weight* (2005), *Stone Gods* (2007), and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), or protagonists learn the master craft of telling a complex, layered tale as in *Lighthousekeeping* (2004), it is clear that, in her fictional worlds, stories have the ability to transcend and redeem. Often, a character’s distaste for reading is what makes him/her an antagonist. For instance, in several of Winterson’s novels, there is always a character who is notable not only for her cruelty but also for her resistance to reading. In *Oranges*, “Jeanette” is adopted by a woman who only owns two works: the Bible and a catalog. Her adoptive mother’s refusal to read serves as one of many great flaws in her character, and Jeanette feels superior to her mother’s lack of interest in reading and art. Winterson’s fiction often contains several iterations of this character-type: an older character, often cruel, who disapproves of reading, tries to break the spirit of the especial storyteller who uses these stories, in turn, to triumph over the dour character. Although she admits in her non-fiction work, *Art Objects* that this character is based on her actual adopted mother who did not allow fictional works in the house because of her religious

beliefs, it nonetheless sheds light on the fact that Winterson's antagonistic characters are defined by their inability to recognize the transcendent powers of literature that her protagonists innately understand (144). Furthermore, this divide runs deeper than a simple dichotomy of passionate readers versus resistant ones. Characters who disapprove of reading fictional works are typically embittered, lonely, backwards people, while Winterson's "enlightened" protagonists are empathetic, intelligent people. Furthermore, although she chastises the real-world reader for his/her inability to truly connect with a work, in her fiction, we see this same tension in the concern about society's ability to properly revere its culture.

Winterson's storytellers and authors thus hold privileged roles in her fictional worlds. Her novel *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) often uses metaphors of light and dark/darkness in order to reinforce the superiority of authors. In this work, a young orphan, Silver, is apprenticed to the lighthousekeeper, Pew. While he assures her that he can teach her "what the instruments are for, and [that] the light will flash once every four seconds as it always does," the much harder task for Silver to learn is "how to keep the light" (Winterson 40). Pew qualifies this task by telling Silver that to really learn how to keep the light she must learn how to "keep the stories" (40). He explains that for centuries, the fishermen have depended on the stories that lighthousekeepers have told, and that the tales "went from man to man, generation to generation, hopped the seabound world and sailed back again, different deck maybe, but the same story" (39). In fact, these narratives are so meaningful that they became just as important as the physical light: "every light *was* a story, and the flashes themselves were the stories going out over the

waves, as markers and guides and comfort and warning” (41). Pew’s lighthouse thus creates a network of future storytellers who are inspired by “the light.”

Eventually, the lighthouse is condemned and later mechanized, which displaces both Pew and Silver. Readers understand that what is lost here extends far beyond the lighthouse’s illumination; what is really lost are the stories exchanged between Pew and the sailors. In a move that Winterson would eventually re-invoke in her post-apocalyptic novel, *Stone Gods*, she shows that society has moved past the need for story—not because the society no longer has need for them, but rather, society has *regressed* by thinking stories do not hold a privileged role in society. In *Lighthousekeeping*, however, she begins to set up the binary of culture/progress. Everything that is positive in the novel: Pew, Silver, the Lighthouse, and stories, are on the side of art storytelling. They represent the very best elements of “culture.” Conversely, characters like Ms. Pinch, who tells Silver that the lighthouse must be mechanized in the name of progress, and the many tourists who come to see the mechanized lighthouse, not for its beauty, but for its antiqueness, are pitted on the unfavorable side of progress. When Silver returns to the lighthouse many years after leaving and having to create a new home, she sees “the tour [...] filing dutifully down the stairs. The guide looked back to make sure we were all following” (Winterson 227). Those on the tour fail to recognize the power of the lighthouse, as they are all being shepherded through the site. Silver notices that the tourists are awed by the “wood burning stove” and the lack of microwave rather than the lighthouse’s beacon (227-228). Winterson draws a deep distinction between the masses who cannot access the lighthouse’s beauty (as they only care about the fact that the

lighthouse is not modernized) and Silver, who could realize it even when she was a small child. Here, readers and non-readers are deeply divided just as culture and progress are similarly divided. The novel ends with Silver begging the reader “don’t wait” to “tell the story later,” but to “tell it now before it’s too late” (Winterson 143). Initially, it seems that with this plea, Silver wants readers to continue to spread “the light” and to tell stories. However, the plaintive tone of the plea matched with the fact that, in the novel, the storytellers have the *innate* ability to share stories, suggests that Winterson does not believe that people will be able to properly continue this tradition.

Even novels that outwardly address other issues like environmentalism and witchcraft (*Stone Gods* and *The Daylight Gate*, respectively) still glamorize story telling while impugning those who do not read. Arguably, though, of all her works, *The Powerbook* is the most focused on authorship. The email interactions between Ali and her prospective reader/co-author serve as the story’s *diegesis*, but the novel radiates outward into numerous side-stories that re-envision the tale of Lancelot, that re-inscribe Ali’s gender as masculine, and that reveal Ali’s own painful former relationships. Even though Ali sells these stories, she offers her reader the ability to be a co-author, as the reader is invited to shape the text. However, as I show throughout the chapter, this control is heavily mediated and quite tenuous. In this way, Winterson situates concerns about contemporary authorship and cultural relevancy and places them within the context of the digital world.³³

³³ In 2015, Winterson published *The Gap of Time*, a re-telling of William Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*.

The Powerbook and Collaboration

As previously mentioned, Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook* actually consists of numerous stories that are pieced together by Ali, a fictional author who sells her stories online. Even though the novel covers many topics and includes a plethora of vignettes, I focus on two key sections in the novel because they both depict the author's desire to bar the reader from the composition process. The first group of passages focus on Ali and her reader interacting and deciding on how the text will be created. The second selection of stories illuminate Ali's failed relationship with her lover. In both segments, Ali tries to control the composition of a narrative. When Ali tries to co-write the text, she and her reader are literally composing a digital hypertextual, collaborative text. This work (like *The Powerbook*) is made up of various stories, but by the end, Ali has fashioned them into an actual novel. In her relationship, Ali tries to gain control over how her love story is being written by her married lover, who also wants control over the story so that she can assuage her own guilt about her love triangle.

Although it would appear that Ali stays in control of the story (or stories, rather) throughout the entire novel, I argue that she actually has less power than her collaborator (whomever this may be). In many instances, Ali actually has to write herself into privileged roles. For instance, when the novel opens, Ali writes a story called "Open Hard Drive," wherein she envisions herself as a woman in 1634 who transforms herself (with the help of an embalmed and affixed tulip) into a man. Initially, she must become a man because her father prefers a son to a daughter. Her mother gives her an androgynous

name and helps Ali conceal her feminine attributes. When she is old enough to leave, Ali chooses a predominately male profession by becoming a sailor. After boarding a ship that is eventually taken by pirates, she is then sold as a concubine to a Princess. Ali, whom everyone believes to be a boy, is forced to teach the Princess “sexual congress” (Winterson 22). In this scenario, Ali is supposed to be powerless, as the Princess assures her: “You are only a boy and can do me neither hurt nor insult. You will be gentle. You will be slow. If I do not like you I shall behead you” (23). However, Ali does not allow the Princess to govern her actions: rather than be subjugated by the Princess, Ali seduces her, boasting that “I am always there with her, or if not, I, the imprint of myself—my fossil-love and you discover it” (24). In this paradigm, Ali is initially in a powerless role. At the very least, she is born female, which would automatically exclude her from various power positions in the 1600s. When she is given to the Princess, she is threatened with death and is forced to be her prostitute. However, Ali refuses to fit into these narratives: she selects her own gender and then again decides that she will not follow the Princess’s mandate. Instead, she embodies the more powerful gender and actually teaches the Princess how to be a better lover.

Even though the stories are sold to readers, Ali always positions herself as the protagonist, and often uses what we understand to be facets of her “real” life story to shape the text. As stated above, when Ali does invite the reader to help her shape the stories, this collaboration is illusory. The reader never substantially contributes to the overall story. As Kauer notes in “Literature as Virtual Reality,” Ali “determines the conditions for reader participation,” meaning that there is no real collaboration, as Ali

creates the specific role of the reader and then forces her to conform to these tenets (98). In other words, the reader's role is prescribed. We understand that Ali already knows what she wants to write. She may offer readers a collaborative role, but she fundamentally excludes them from the text. On the surface, this power struggle suggests that Ali holds more authority. After all, if she grants the power to the reader then she must already be imbued with authority. But the novel complicates this idea. In the most simplistic way, the digital space blurs what it means to be an established writer. As Vesselin Budakov observes in "Emails and Fiction," "the novel suggests that in screen to screen communication everyone is a writer" (63). Of course, there are gradations here; Ali is a writer because she sells her stories online. But the reader, too, is a kind of writer because she will collaborate with Ali on the text.

This is not to say, however, that one must sell one's work to be considered an author. In fact, Winterson mostly downplays the economics of authorship in the novel. Other critics who have written on the novel have focused on the economics, however. Ginette Carpenter in "Reading and the Reader" finds the relationship between Ali and her reader contentious, and claims that Ali is forced to "prostitute her work" for an audience: "The writer 'prostitutes' her craft, repeating a tried and tested formula to make a living. This model not only positions writing and reading as a process of supply and demand but also an act that has a clear relationship to the physical performance of desire and its attendant discourses of power and privilege" (78).³⁴ Carpenter's assertion that Ali must

³⁴ The author as prostitute is a fairly common trope. In this paradigm, the author must sell their body of work for others' pleasure. This conceit has been prevalent for centuries. Given the state of contemporary authorship and how difficult it has become for authors to sell literary works in general this would be a

“prostitute” her work is problematic, though. The novel never outwardly discusses payment and this would mean that Ali was in a subordinate position because she would have to craft her work to meet the expectations of the client.

In many instances in the novel Ali actually subverts her client’s expectations. Although Ali is, in some way, dependent on her readers, she is quick to note that she is in control of her work. When a client initially rejects the story that is written for her, the client protests, “Come on! This is your job! Write me a story” (Winterson 29). The “customer is always right” mentality that the client assumes is quickly shot down by Ali, who assures her that the story that will be told is the one that Ali will write *for* her. But her insistent assertion of her authority extends well beyond trying to curtail the reader’s involvement. Ali wants to ensure that she controls the text because of what is at stake: her identity. Kauer argues in “Litearture as Virtual Reality” that Ali wants to shed her identity in virtual reality so that she can construct a new “self” at whim (91). Virtual reality thus gives her the anonymity to create a new identity while the stories provide her with optional “selves.” But I suggest that Ali wants more than a new identity: she wants complete control over how this identity is constructed *and perceived* by the reader. In this

poignant authorial metaphor. Winterson herself has railed against the commercialization of art in essays for *The Guardian* such as “What Is Art for?” (2002) where she blames capitalism for prompting artists to make commercially popular art works. But her fiction presents a different perspective on art and economy. In *Stone Gods* (2007), for instance, artists living in the dystopian “Post-3” world are prevented from being able to sell their works. The implied author does not find this beneficial to the art world. In fact, the artists’ inability to sell their work actually makes the society *worse* because it reduces their exposure to fine art. Thus, I find it reductive to say that Winterson believes art and profit (or at least the ability to sell one’s work) are mutually exclusive, or worse, on the same level as prostitution. To date, there have been few articles that explore the role of economics in Winterson’s fiction, which suggests there is ample room for discussion here, especially since two of the three novels she has published within the last eight years are heavily invested in the depiction of the economy and its impact on creativity.

way, she curtails the reader's suggestions and involvement to ensure that her ideal identity is guaranteed.

Ali notes frequently that she uses her fictional stories to escape the weight of real life. At any point in the story she writes for her client whenever Ali feels as if she has lost control of the story, she stops and begins a new one (63). She reminds herself that she has the capacity to "tell the story again." Arguably, Ali states this many times in the text as to empower her position. While the reader is offered "freedom from just one night," we realize that the reader never experiences this freedom: Ali does. Indeed, we discover that Ali re-creates cities and situations as a way to hide from her concerns about love and acceptance: "Another city. Another disguise" (Winterson 41). If Ali allowed the reader to have freedom, she would not be able to use literature to hide from her doubts and anxieties. Thus, the internet presents a particular problem: if authorship is shared between an author and a reader through hypertext or even digimodernist texts, what do these new forms of authorship possibly offer traditional authors? Although readers understand that Ali makes some kind of living from her novels, Winterson de-emphasizes the monetary aspect of the exchange. Instead, there is a different kind of exchange that happens in this work. Ali promises each reader that he/she will experience the ultimate freedom, "freedom for just one night," as he/she can guarantee that Ali constructs the story only for them, and this personalized experience will ensure the ultimate reading experience (Winterson 29). Conversely, Ali gains the intoxicating feeling of being in complete control over her narrative: "What is it that I have to tell myself again and again? That there is always a new beginning, a different end. I can change the story. I am the story"

(5). Ali prevents her readers from gaining a more authorial role and in the process derives a kind of escape. Through storytelling, Winterson's protagonist gains insight into herself, which cannot be obtained when authorship is shared.

We see an instance of this when Ali re-writes a moment from her childhood. In the middle of the novel, she decides to tell her lover a bit about her life and we again receive a fictionalized version of Winterson's actual background. Ali is raised by two religious people in the North of England who lack imagination. She recalls being a young child, staring at the dwindling fire on her family's farm. Her mother chides her for day-dreaming, asking her what Ali sees in the fire. Ali responds, "Another world" (Winterson 170). Her mother becomes angry, telling her, "There's nothing in the ashes but ash" (170). Ali informs the reader that in the fire she also saw "the stories that no one would read to me" (170). We see again the kind of division that Winterson creates: we know to judge these parents harshly because they do not read. Conversely, Ali allows her imagination to run wild, so we are prompted to read her as exceptional. As she ends this section of the hypertextual fantasy, she affirms, "I had to look in the right place. I had to keep the fire going. I had to believe in the treasure. I had to find the treasure too," meaning that she must continue to be imaginative even though her parents wanted her to re-direct the imagination into productivity (171). Ali may tell this story as an example of her personal experiences to her lover, but she really does it to empower herself. The story serves as a reminder that she is special, different to those who will not be imaginative. Not unlike "Open Hard Drive," Ali envisions herself in a superior role, even as others try to re-direct her narratives and experiences.

Significantly, Ali also uses this story to gain leverage over her married lover. While the aforementioned story shows us how Ali writes herself into more powerful roles, the relationship vignettes in the novel illuminate how Ali refuses to let others “compose” her narratives. This composition can come in various forms. She obviously will not allow the reader to be a collaborative writer on the hypertextual novel that she creates, so the composing process here refers to the literal process of Ali crafting the stories. On a less literal level, Ali tries to control the ways in which characters describe her or their shared love. We see this especially in the romantic relationship that Ali frequently mentions. It becomes clear that Ali uses *The Powerbook* to mull over her failed relationship with a married woman. Most of the story’s non-diegetic layers depict Ali and her nameless lover bickering about various issues. This relationship is highly mutable, and Ali actually writes several alternative “endings” where she imagines the various possibilities for their loves (they run away together, the nameless lover returns to her husband, they break up). But when she recalls their actual interactions we see how each woman fights over her relationship’s narrative.

In the imagined scenario “New Document,” Ali recalls meeting her lover for the first time. When her girlfriend asks about the kinds of works that Ali creates, she teasingly states, “[b]oundaries. Desires”; when her lover asks what the new book is about, Ali again notes, “[b]oundaries. Desires” (Winterson 40). Ali refuses here to give any details or depth about the kinds of works that she creates, which frustrates her lover who then snaps, “can’t you write about anything else?” to which Ali merely replies, “No” (40). In many ways, Ali toys with her, only relaying a little information. She thus

prevents her lover from actually being able to guess what kinds of work she creates. We see this again then Ali mentions a friend who left her lover when she realized her girlfriend was having an affair. Ali notes that the friend left everything, leaving no trace of her behind; her lover asks, “‘You’re an absolutist then?’ ‘What’s one of those?’ ‘All or nothing.’ ‘What else is there?’ ‘The middle ground. Ever been there?’” (Winterson 47). Her lover further needles Ali once she realizes that Ali boasts about never compromising, as she tells Ali, “‘You just want what everyone wants—everything” (47). Her girlfriend rightly points out that Ali is inflexible. But we also understand that when Ali notes that she “wants—everything,” that this has far-reaching claims beyond defending a friend’s behavior. She wants to be the only person in control who is allowed to make the decisions. Initially, this desire seems to be granted as she appears to be in control of the situation, but she eventually loses this authority, as her lover becomes more forthright and empowered.

Each partner (Ali and her married lover) eventually tries to “write” the story of their relationship. This writing is both literal and figurative. When Ali meets her girlfriend she is writing a novel, and she admits that she will write about their love affair in this work. After the pair have a fight about whether or not they should continue to see one another in secrecy, Ali attempts to give a history of their affair, but she is cut off and redirected by her lover:

‘Where shall I start?’ I said, ready for my defense.
‘Not at the beginning,’ she said, feeding me crumbs.
‘Why not?’

“We both know the usual reasons, the unwritten rules.
No need to repeat them.’ (Winterson 56)

The squabble illuminates a recurring conflict: the lover wants to be able to manipulate the way that her past is stated and viewed. Even after Ali admits that she will probably use their affair as fodder for the novel, her girlfriend tries to control how the story will be told:

‘Suppose I put it in my book?’
‘You write fiction.’
‘So?’
‘So you won’t lash me to the facts’
‘But I might tell the truth’
‘Facts never tell the truth. Even the simplest facts are misleading.’
(Winterson 43)

At first, Ali finds these power struggles alluring, as she is charmed by her girlfriend’s confidence and bluntness. But later, Ali realizes that she cannot stand the feeling of powerlessness. When her lover tries to better understand Ali’s past relationships, Ali relays only partial information, to which her girlfriend replies, “that’s not how the story ends” (Winterson 62). Notably, Ali abruptly ends their conversation, and she thinks, “At a certain point, the story gathers momentum. It convinces itself, and does its best to convince you, that the only end in sight is the only possible outcome. There was a fate-fulness and a loss of control that are somehow comforting. This was your script, but now it writes itself. Stop” (62). Ali stops the conversation because she loses authorial control over her own life and narrative. She ends her story about her

lover's interest in her backstory and moves on to a new memory, as to indicate that she still has power over the narrative.

Thus, in the *diegesis*, Ali exercises her authority by deciding how the story of the relationship will be relayed. The reader's input on the story is negated because she might take the story in new direction. Ali needs to believe that she has power over the story because she can then try to control its ending. She is repeatedly frustrated by both fluidity and mutability. When she crafts a story about a time when she and her lover vacationed in Paris, she reflects, "Nothing is solid. Nothing is fixed. These are images that time changes and that change time, just as the sun and the rain play on the surface of things" (Winterson 52). On one level, Ali refers to their tumultuous relationship, as each woman cycles through guilt and happiness. On another level, both the story that Ali writes *and* the narrative of her relationship are in constant flux, as the co-writers (the reader, the lover), try to re-shape their respective paradigms. Ali cannot gain total control over her lover, who wants to be the one to "write" their relationship.

As Ali tries to maintain control over the story, she becomes convinced that her own writing has been tainted by her various collaborations. In the *diegesis* she questions whether or not the story is even hers now:

Did I write this story, or was it you, writing through me, the way the sun sparks fire through a piece of glass? I see through a glass darkly. I cannot tell whether the moving shapes are on the other side, or whether they are behind me, beside me, reflected in the room. I cannot give my position accurately. The coordinates shift. I cannot say, "Where," I can only say, "Here" and hope to describe it to you, atom and dream. (Winterson 247)

We see here the ultimate digimodernist text in the novel: the relationship has been co-authored and neither Ali nor her lover can determine to whom the story belongs. Her collaborator has contributed too much and has ruined Ali's initial vision for the story. After Ali has this realization, she tells herself, "Here's my life, steel-hitched at one end to my mother's belly then thrown across nothing [...] What keeps the tension is the tension itself—the pull between what I am and what I can become. The tug of war between the world I inherit and the world I invent" (248). After this self-affirmation, Ali digresses into four completely different stories. When she finishes, she discovers that her reader and co-author has vanished from the email thread and no longer wants to communicate.

By the end of the novel, we realize that the reader and tentative co-author of the story may be the very lover who leaves Ali. The novel hints that this may be true, but never confirms it for the flesh and blood readers. If this is true, the tensions of power, control, collaboration and composition would appear even stronger. Ali alienates her reader by the end of the novel. As the novel closes, Ali informs her reader that she has taken "off [her] watch and dropped it into the water. Time take it" and clarifies, "Your body is my Book of Hours. Open it. Read it. This is the true history of the world" (Winterson 288-289). While this ending can be read as Ali extending the power of reading and making meaning to her reader, I find that these commands are quite restricting. If Ali has finished the "true history of the world" she has only done so after excluding her collaborator from the composition process. The book now is in its final form, which as Ong notes, suggests that Ali has a more powerful position because *she* has determined the novel's end. She has further guaranteed that the flux she despises will

end, as she has unilaterally decides that the text must come to a close. Ali achieves control over her narrate and peace of mind in isolation by re-composing various narratives until she is positioned as the most powerful figure. While her power assumes various forms (sexual dominance, exclusive rights to compose a story, etc.), Ali is ultimately more powerful because she has the ability to exclude and invite the reader into specifically selected moments of various narratives.

Conclusion

Thus, even though critics continue to question whether Winterson's novel can be considered a "quintessential twenty-first century" piece of literature (although even these critics observe that such a label is nebulous at best), the novel *does* explore many issues that are unique to this century's concerns. Many critics have taken the novel's setting for granted by either minimizing it or by merely exploring how the novel talks about bodies in the virtual world. I argue that through a historical and cultural contextualization of the internet's potential to democratize authorship, that we see *The Powerbook* raising various concerns about the author's relevancy in the digital age. Ali reinforces and re-affirms her cultural prestige by asserting her own desires over those of the reader. Although critics like Kauer and Pykett suggest that Winterson "teases" the readers of her novels in order to ensure that they cannot accurately locate her—an argument that is upheld by her own assertion that she performs an "Indian Rope Trick," I instead suggest that she does this in order to amplify superiority. Ali's reader may want a co-writing experience, but Ali

disregards this, and instead firmly places herself as the subject and sole creator of the text.

Although Winterson's fiction has been read as an alternative to paternalistic notions of authorship, and critics have suggested that her works seek a reader who wants to be an active participant, these studies often ignore that Winterson privileges the author's experience over the reader's. Indeed, it is too simplistic to suggest that her fictional authors want to share the reading/composition process. The authors/storytellers in her novels re-write the story in an effort to maintain control over those reading it. While Winterson argues in her nonfiction that she wants active readers, her fictional authors prefer passive ones: they clamor for those readers who will merely be transported by the experience rather than making their own meaning from the text. After all, if they create their own meaning, then they are having an experience that is not dictated by Winterson. In this way, Winterson often appears to be in line with various beliefs about the avant-garde: she shuns lived experiences in exchange for the transcendence of "beauty," and she continually alienates readers.

Winterson's protagonist fears that she lacks control over her reader. This reader, thanks to the internet and to the collaborative nature of hypertextual fiction, is elevated, and tries to assume some authorial role in the text's formation. In turn, Ali tries desperately to write and re-write the text until she can escape from this reader. For Winterson, the author's need to control her identity is privileged over the reader's desire to make meaning from the work. Thus, the anxieties and ideas expressed in the fiction are quite similar to those found in Gabriel Josipovici's works. Both authors are concerned

about the space between themselves and their readers. Winterson's protagonists, though, want there to be *more* space between themselves and their audience, and in a way, digitization impedes the author's ability to be autonomous, as the finality of print is removed.

In my next chapter, I show how Will Self's fictional creators similarly struggle with the finality of print, albeit in a different manner. His novels are often read through a highly biographical lens. In essays and interviews, Self bemoans the state of the contemporary reader and in this way his views coincide with the other authors I explore in this dissertation. However, oftentimes critics merely transfer these same sentiments onto his novel and argue that his fiction is quite shallow, as the various stories and their messages are subordinated to his use of "art speech." Critics point to his use of complicated and even antiquated language to argue that he tries to assert himself over his flesh-and-blood readers. I instead argue that if we look at his fiction outside the context of his many assertions about authorship, we see how the authors struggle to maintain control. While Winterson's protagonists envision control as necessary and desired, as it offers them a means to total control, Self satirizes those authors who believe that control is even an option. His fiction thus works within an avant-garde framework to critique the very tenets of this kind of writing.

CHAPTER V
CRITIQUES OF AESTHETICISM, AUTHORIAL CONTROL, AND THE AVANT-
GARDE IN WILL SELF'S POST-2000 FICTION

The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work...as for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the father (Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," 1977).

In 2016, Matthew De Abaitua's "tell all" memoir, *Self& I* will be published. The work covers the six-month period during which De Abaitua worked as an assistant for contemporary British novelist William (Will) Self and is intended to both "celebrate" a period of authorship that refused to be "subservient" to its readers and expose the issues that arose when working alongside a notoriously difficult writer.³⁵ Anyone apprised of Self's novels would hardly be surprised that De Abaitua is "exposing" Self's lack of concern about readers. There is little doubt that Self purposefully courts the image of being a "difficult" author. During an interview published in *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel* (2009), Self explained to critics Vanessa Guignery, Didier Girard, and Françoise Gallix that if a novelist "write[s] for a reader, you are trying to market the text, and that would be inimical to what I am trying to do" (29). Furthermore, his two latest novels, *Umbrella* (2012) and *Shark* (2014) are explicitly advertised as modernist works because they employ stream-of-consciousness. In essays like "I Don't Write for

³⁵ For more, see "Will Self's 'Amanuensis' to Publish Memoir of Working for the Novelist" by Alison Flood in *The Guardian* (published May 21, 2015).

Readers”(published in *The Guardian* on August 5, 2012) and “The Fate of Our Literary Culture Is Sealed” (in *The Guardian*, October 3, 2014), Self is forthright about his refusal to make his fiction accessible for his readers. His novels are lengthy (each one exceeds several hundred pages), he indulges in archaic diction, and his fiction lampoons everything from Postcolonial strife to religious beliefs.

In his other non-fiction pieces, Self identifies as a Modernist author. As Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard note in their introduction to *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*, Self has sworn “allegiance to modernist principles” and to formal “radicalism” (5). Despite Self’s ties to modernism, his work is often read through a myriad of “Post”-lenses. Richard Bradford in *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (2007) finds Self’s early novels exemplary of Postmodernism, as works like *Cock and Bull* explore issues of gender identity and often depict explicit sexual references that blend “low” and “high” brow art forms (51). Self’s work is often compared to that of fellow British novelist Martin Amis’s, as both men create novels that are self-reflexive, profane, meta-fictional and experimental. At the same time, critics Madelena Gonzales and Daniel Lea posit that Self’s fiction reflects Post-Real concerns in their respective essays, “The Aesthetics of Post-Realism and the Obscenification of Everyday Life: The Novel in the Age of Technology” and “Queen of Hearts: *Dorian*, Princess Diana and a Sign of the Authentic.” Maylis Rospide moves Self criticism in a different direction by arguing in “When Experimentation Becomes Ethics: A ‘Duty Dance,’ with Literature in Will Self’s Work” that Self’s fiction is invested in post humanism and suggests that it engages with “question[ing] Humanism and expos[ing] it as a master narrative,

undermining the naturalization of what it takes to be human and revealing the constructiveness of such tenets” (175).

Self’s ability to straddle numerous literary movements is but one example of his tendency to move between seemingly disparate schools of thought. While Self has overtly aligned himself with other avant-garde authors who champion a return to authorial agency, his status within the literary elite is somewhat tenuous. When Jacques Tetard interviewed him for *The White Review* (2013), he asked Self if he considered himself an avant-garde writer, to which Self responded, “Ooh no. I don’t think so. Well, yes, slightly. Maybe a bit [...] I think I’ve been engaged in my career in a kind of permanent revolution.” Self’s “revolutionary” career extends beyond his fiction, as well. Other than teaching “contemporary thought,” at Brunel University in London, Self contributes essays to *The Spectator* and *The Guardian*. He has also earned the title of “television personality” in part because of his frequent appearances on television programs to discuss politics, film, and art (Hayes 20). His public persona is surprising given that other authors who claim modernist ties and write equally experimental works often reject other forms of entertainment like television, and typically shirk from public appearances.³⁶

While Self may not completely identify with his contemporaries, such as Jeanette Winterson and Gabriel Josipovici, the subject matter of his most recent novels

³⁶ While Postmodern art often combines the “low” and “high” brow in order to create an experimental or avant-garde work, television is still considered “low” brow art by many avant-garde novelists, especially those with elitist ties. In *Art Objects*, Winterson spurns television as she believes that the medium encourages viewers to tune out, while art works and novels offer people a kind of transcendence that resists apathy (155).

nonetheless addresses similar concerns. Many of Self's novels are filled with inattentive readers. In his 2006 novel, *The Book of Dave*, a futuristic society stumbles upon the psychotic ramblings of a taxi driver (Dave), and they take the work at face value, so much so that they re-order their society around the book's misogynist, racist rants. Self satirizes readers again in his 2009 novel, *The Butt: an Exit Strategy* as the protagonist travels to a fictional country wherein he is jailed for accidentally flicking a cigarette butt onto the husband of an indigenous woman. Tom, the protagonist, is repeatedly faulted by others for failing to read thoroughly about the nation before traveling there; natives chastise him for not being accustomed with the nation's many absurd bureaucratic policies, and his wife criticizes him for failing to do proper research on their vacation destination. He eventually realizes that if he had only read about the nation's history, he could have avoided jail altogether. In Self's non-fiction essays, he has further criticized audiences for either reading too hastily (in "On Writers, Readers and Losing Our Minds"), or for not reading/viewing critically (in "We Are the Passive Consumers of the Pornography of Violence").³⁷ Of course, his fictional depictions are often humorous and absurd. Tom could have never predicted the country's Kafka-esque bureaucracy, and Self mocks all those with religious beliefs in *Book of Dave*. But the tensions between creator and reader nonetheless prevail in his novels. However, this chapter does not belabor the topic of Self's fictional readers. Instead, it focuses on his authors and creators, who are

³⁷ The former was a lecture that Self gave for the Chelthem Literature Festival on October 4, 2014, wherein he expressed concern about the ways that readers were reading (as in physically reading, and the preference of e-versions over print). The latter was in *The Guardian* (published December 24, 2014), and the essay suggested that violence prevailed all over the world because we were choosing to be desensitized rather than thinking critically about the ways in which violence was depicted/presented in the media.

often just as flawed and problematic as their readers. I use both writer and creator in this chapter in particular instances. For instance, Dave Rudman is a writer because he writes a book. The protagonist of *Dorian Grey*, however, is a creator because he constructs Dorian's image. I also use this term because of it connotes deity-like language, as the creators fashion their human creations in their own image. These authors/creators often create works because they believe they are cultural experts and that others would benefit from their especial views on art and beauty. Ironically, these same writers/creators always spawn monstrous works that cannot be controlled, despite all attempts to cauterize their works' catastrophic effects on society. Self's fiction thus critiques authorial attempts at reinforcing superiority and suggests that authors who believe themselves to be exceptionally creative are both misguided and dangerous. His fiction also indicates that writers have a responsibility to their culture by crafting projects that are meant to better society rather than further their own authority or superiority.

My reading of Self's fiction departs from most criticism on his novels. Many literary critics, book reviewers, and journalists have critiqued Self for his "controlling" persona and his domineering texts. In this way, Self's persona and his literary purpose are collapsed. Reviews of his novels often poke fun at Self's relationship with his readers. For instance, in a book review of *The Butt* titled "Smoked" for *The New York Times*, David Kelly begins his essay, "Will Self hates you. No matter who you are, no matter who you profess to be, he can't stand you." Similarly, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek review called "Self Abuse," *Spectator* journalist and critic Lloyd Evans grapples with Self's authorial persona. Evans observes that in interviews and television appearances,

Self has “an easy eloquence and, more importantly, an absolute mastery of image,” and suggests that this “mastery” extends to his fiction, where he tries to exert his knowledge over his readers. Evans states, “Some of his [diction] choices are just the spasm of a professional maverick; irrupt, introject, assay and ascription rather than erupt, interject, essay and description. But words like hispid, moue, [and] frass [...] throw obstacles in the way of understanding. [...] As a writer, whose purpose is to communicate, using fancy hieroglyphics is self-crippling indulgence.” Evans is not the only critic who refers to Self’s body of work as indulgent. Frequently, Self is lambasted for his tendency to use antiquated language and critics argue that he uses such language in order to emphasize his power over readers.

Self’s work is often discussed within the context of his level of difficulty and as a result, literary scholars have explored the ways in which his fiction reinforces his own authorial privilege. To that end, several critics have focused on the tension between demotic and Mandarin language in his novels. In “Not Everyone Knows Fuck All about Foucault: Will Self’s Dorian and Post-Gay Culture,” David Alderson notes that although Self has claimed that he “appl[ies] Mandarin language, the language of the intellectual classes, to demotic language and popular culture subjects and conversely [...] appl[ies] demotic language and popular language to some of the same concerns and ideas to the Mandarin intellectual classes,” Self actually “relies strongly on a conventional, Romantic, notion of the creative writer’s specific wisdom” (310).³⁸ In other words, although

³⁸ Here, Mandarin refers to the second definition of the term: “a member of an elite of intellectual group” (*OED*). Furthermore, when Alderson suggests that Self evokes Romantic notions of authorship, he refers to the tendency of Romantic writers to depict themselves as creatively exceptional. As Anthony John Harding

Selfbelieves that he can move between “high” and “middle” brow art by blurring these categories, he keeps tight control of the reception of the work, which suggests he has no desire to make the work accessible. Meanwhile, Jeremy Scott in “The Demotic, the Mandarin, and the Proletentious: Martin Amis, Will Self, and English Art Speech” similarly illuminates how Self’s use of Mandarin language foregrounds his own authorial role, as his novels do not privilege character growth, but rather, Self’s use of “art speech” (155). Scott further argues that Self’s novels often eschew plot for discourse:

The use of linguistic deviation in these texts, whilst foregrounding the narrative discourse itself, also foregrounds the role of the author as the ‘source’ of this discourse, to the point where, arguably, linguistic deviation or stylistic exuberance become almost an end in themselves rather than a means of accessing the text or abetting the creative re-imagination in the mind of the reader. (155)

Thus, Self is often perceived as an author whose principle literary purpose is to showcase his own extensive vocabulary and ability to create arabesque texts. Meanwhile, Richard Bradford in *The Novel Now* suggests that the purpose of Self’s fiction is often obscured by his desire to shock and repulse readers, and like many of the aforementioned critics and scholars, he finds Self’s fiction indulgent (156). Although it would be hard to ignore the many ways that Self’s novels delight in archaic diction and frustration, I would argue that the critical tendency to focus on Self’s “indulgence” and “domineering” persona prevents us from examining the ways in which his works frequently critique authorial control.

notes in “Authorship, Genre, and Copyright in the Romantic Period,” Romantic writers emphasized the “creative originality of the author” (25). By arguing that Self aligns himself with Romantic authorship, Alderson asserts that Self prefers a model of authorship that privileges his creativity rather than his readers’ capacity to understand his fiction.

Indeed, even though criticism of Self's work tends to align with the central argument I have developed throughout this dissertation--that contemporary avant-garde writers desire to take the control from their empowered readers to better reestablish their own authority--I suggest Self's fiction does *not* always argue that authors should create elusive, inaccessible texts that serve no other purpose than to repulse. In fact, I argue that Self critiques both "art for art's sake" and authorial control in a few of his novels and suggest that these works show how attempting to control a work's reception is futile. While Self often espouses his lack of interest in making mainstream works in non-fiction essays and obviously crafts complex works, his novels nonetheless critique various forms of authorship and the lasting effects that literature can have on cultures. In this way, I call for a re-reading of Self's *oeuvre*, as his own authorial persona perhaps looms over his work, tempting critics to collapse his personal views with his fiction.

Few critics have noted how Self's novels engage with ideas of authorship and narrative. However, Brian Finney in "The Sweet Smell of Excess: Will Self's Fiction, Bataille, and Transgression" notes that Self's earlier set of novellas, *Cock and Bull*, probes the limits of narration and the texts' ability to manipulate others. Finney observes that although critics typically have "focused on the outrageous sex change that overtakes the protagonist of each novella," they have overlooked the novellas' investigation of the limitations of narration. Thus, according to Finney, language and narration become barriers that also can be transgressed. My own argument builds on Finney's to some degree. His essay only covers *Cock and Bull* and Self's short story collection, *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys* (1998) and does not delve into ideas of authorship.

This chapter addresses the critical need to discuss Self's fiction in the context of narrative limitations and expands on this by exploring how his novels grapple with both the functions and limitations of narratives (and by narrative I mean both the artistic products that the "creators" craft and larger meta-narratives like racial identities and national mythologies) and the functions and limitations of creators.

The lack of scholarship on Self's depiction of authorship is surprising given that many of Self's protagonists and antagonists are creators. His novel *Great Apes* (1997) focuses on Simon Dykes, a contemporary painter who upon waking one morning, realizes that everyone except him has turned into an ape. In *Dorian, an Imitation*, Self re-imagines Oscar Wilde's sole novel, but re-fashions Basil/Baz into an avant-garde video installation artist. Dave Rudman in *The Book of Dave* writes a sprawling, psychotic text intended to display his "knowledge" of life, London, and love-making. Meanwhile, Self's 2009 novel, *The Butt: An Exit Strategy*, presents a different kind of creator: a British colonizer who weaves various myths in order to subjugate an indigenous population. While he is not an artist or a writer, the antagonist in this story, Von Sasser, is a creator because he consciously crafts narratives that will bring a populace under his control.³⁹

These fictional authors and creators typically lack the bravado of Gabriel Josipovici's author-protagonists and the self-importance of Jeanette Winterson's storytellers. Instead, his author-protagonists are often arrogant, lazy, and self-assured.

³⁹ It is worth noting that most of the time these creator-protagonists are failed fathers. With the exception of Dykes in *Great Apes*, these men struggle to engender children (whether they are homosexuals, fathers who lose custody, or in the case of Tom in *The Butt*, their wives suffer grotesque miscarriages) and thus they often turn to artistic projects as a way to give "life" to something. While this chapter does not go into the specifics of this line of interpretation, it is notable that this aspect of Self's fiction has gone virtually unnoticed in scholarship. Yet there seems to be a persistent tie between creation of artistic works and fathering in many of his novels.

While such a critique might suggest that Self uses negative examples of authorship in order to promote his own more regimented authorial role, such a line of argument would be limiting, as examples of overly controlling creators/authors often are treated with the same level of criticism as those who care little about the ramifications of their texts. Thus, these works condemn various forms of authorship for their failures and suggest that presumably disparate models of authorship are more alike than assumed: the avant-garde create works for themselves, as art for art's sake has no other end than to please the author, and those who produce low-brow or pulp works similarly create to satisfy their egos.

While these topics are evident in several of Self's works, I will focus mainly on his novel, *Dorian, an Imitation* (2002), but I will extend my argument to his two other novels, *The Book of Dave* (2005), and *The Butt: An Exit Strategy* (2009). Of all Self's works, *Dorian* is the novel that attracts the most critical interest, as it discusses issues of homosexuality, reality, and drug abuse. Bradford notes that when the novel was published it was impugned for its "bigoted, homophobic, misogynistic, [and] racist" undertones while at the same time he acknowledges that critics often struggle to find the novel's "broader purpose" (157). Since Bradford's claim in 2007, many have tackled Self's profane novel, but none has talked about the twin issues of creation and artistic purpose that underlie the work's graphic content. Typically, critics cover two main aspects of *Dorian*. The first category of scholarship often places his novels in a Post-Realist framework. Madelena Gonzales provides a useful explanation for the "Post-Real world" in her essay, "The Aesthetics of Post-Realism and the Obscenification of

Everyday Life: The Novel in the Age of Technology.” She argues that in a Post-Real culture, digital technology and reality television have sullied our conception of the “real,” as phenomena such as these “mak[e] a mockery of mimesis and replac[e] it with an obscene, if interactive, peepshow” (Gonzales 113). According to Gonzales, Post-Realist works suggest that the “real” has further been compromised by replicating and copying the original (117). She uses Self’s *Dorian, an Imitation* as examples of this Post-Real replication, as Self first copies Wilde’s plot and style (as he often intertextualizes Wilde’s epigrams), and also “overexposes” historical figures like Princess Diana. Conversely, in “Queen of Hearts: *Dorian*, Princess Diana and a Sign of the Authentic,” Daniel Lea suggests that Self turns to the Post-Real in order to critique the lack of “formal and intellectual experimentation” in twenty-first century literature. (196). Lea notes that many exemplary postmodern authors like “A. S. Byatt, Julian Barnes [...and] David Mitchell” had turned away from narrative play and turned towards historical fiction. Lea speculates that the demise of highly experimental novels was due in part to a lack of audience: experimental novelists had become so interested in “post-structuralist cultural theory” that they unintentionally “produc[ed] what Jim Collins calls ‘Lit-Lit’ for a class of educated reader smitten by the cultural capital of the worthy contemporary novel with its eyes firmly on the Booker Prize” (196). Historical fiction, then, offered an “out” to authors who could retreat into history rather than represent the present (Lea 196). Lea interprets *Dorian, an Imitation* through this concern for the representation of the self and a search for authenticity as the novel relies on another established narrative for its source material and its characters cannot locate their true selves.

My chapter thus takes criticism on *Dorian* in a new direction. In Self's novel, Lord Wotton's "creation" of Dorian is highlighted and exaggerated in such a way that Dorian becomes Wotton's construction, and I suggest that Self calls into question whether artists and novelists should create art that is merely meant to be beautiful or to reinforce their own superiority. For instance, in *Dorian* Wotton "creates" Dorian because he believes himself to be an expert in beauty and culture and his "authorial intent" is to create the most perfectly beautiful man. But all of the writers and/or creators in Self's fiction fail to realize that they are not cultural experts on the social fabric. Their monstrous creations escape from their creators' grasps and have drastic impacts on the social fabric. To that end, Self uses Wilde's novel, itself a testament to Aestheticism (yet, as I show, this relationship is often over-simplified), to inspire his own critique of it. I then extend my argument to *The Book of Dave*, a novel that focuses on a schizophrenic man's desire to share his "knowledge" through a book of racist rants. The novel moves between the past (roughly 1987-2005) and the distant future, where a society has found Dave's book and structured their society around it, believing it to be a creation story. In this novel, Self satirizes those authors who believe they have special "knowledge" about the world. This idea is further amplified by *The Butt*, wherein a colonizer uses stories to manipulate the indigenous population through crafting new myths for their civilization. In all these works, Self raises ethical concerns about authorship and argues for a kind of that the purpose of literature should be to write works that expose a society's flaws. By exploring these issue, I complicate the critical assertion that Self's work privileges his own authorial voice over larger socio-cultural and political issues. In turn, this

examination refutes claims that avant-garde works always ignore political and social issues.

While scholars typically condemn avant-garde writing for its apolitical nature, or they examine very radical forms of avant-gardism in relation to particular political movements (like Surrealism), they still rarely think of contemporary avant-garde works having any social or cultural messages.⁴⁰ In Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau's collection *The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction* the pair observe that fiction focused on "morality" fell out of fashion Post-1960 "despite the turn to political correctness that swept over the 1990s and the emergence of historicist methodology and feminist or postcolonial studies" (2). At the same time, Onega and Ganteau show that authors turned to satire as a way to deal with "ethics," rather than "morality," which was deemed old-fashioned. Thus, the pair problematize the belief that avant-garde/experimental literature deviates from social issues, as they show that the amount of satirical works written by experimental authors (here they use Martin Amis, Jonathan Coe, Will Self, Jeanette Winterson, John Fowles and Anthony Burgess as evidence of this) indicates that experimentalism *can* intersect with ethics. However, Onega and Ganteau observe that although many postmodern works are interested in ideas of ethics

⁴⁰ In his lecture, "Political Position of Today's Art," (1935) Surrealist André Breton notes that politics and art typically were viewed as dichotomous, until the "leftist" movement, which "brought intellectuals together in close association to fight back against fascism and war" (213). While Breton notes that Surrealist art has the potential to undermine political movements, he argues that the avant-garde must remain stalwart against commercialization. He further cautions the avant-garde writers against being annexed into the bourgeois: "Those among the modern poets and artists [...] who realize that their work confuses and baffles bourgeois society, who very conscientiously aspire to help bring about a new world, a better world, owe it to themselves to top swim against the current that is dragging them into passing for entertainers" (Breton 215). In other words, while avant-garde art can have far-reaching political effects, the artists must keep their art "pure"; otherwise, their work is indistinguishable from entertainment.

and moral, critics ignore these issues, as experimentation is viewed as a-political, a-moral, and/or a-ethical. They note that critics such as Andrew Gibson (*Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel: From Levinas to the Leavises*), Zygmunt Bauman (*Postmodern Ethics*) and Drucilla Cornell (*The Philosophy of the Limit*) all investigated the possible ethical issues that arise out of postmodern experimentations and that these critics, to varying degrees, voiced concern over the lack of ethically-driven experimental novels. Ganteau and Onega's study works to undermine these beliefs, and while it does not directly address issues of authorship and readership necessarily, it nonetheless shows how perceptions of an a-political avant-garde prevail.

These critical assumptions began, in part, from a decades old debate among philosophers and artists like Theodor Adorno, Berthold Brecht and Georg Lukács. In his essay "Realism in the Balance," Lukács argues that the failure of avant-garde art (here, he is explicitly referring to the work of Surrealists and Expressionists) was that it failed to address social issues, and that it always remained "abstract and one-dimensional" (37). He observes that while other critics such as Ernst Bloch praised avant-garde literature for its "artistically progressive" work, he instead preferred traditionally realist authors, as they did not create "purely aesthetic" art that functioned outside the concerns of the "petty bourgeois" (Lukács 36).⁴¹ Conversely, Theodor Adorno in "Reconciliation under Duress" champions avant-garde literature because he finds it portrays "negative knowledge of the world. In analogy to a current philosophical phrase

⁴¹ Lukács would go on to revise his own comments about realism and avant-gardism in his work, in the introduction to *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958). In this text, he admits that critics, whether they advocated for or against avant-garde art, had created "a strict polarization" that eclipsed the various (and numerous) literary works that often failed to fit the perimeters of either style of literature (Lukács 16).

we might speak of the ‘aesthetic distance’ from existence, can the work of art become both work of art and valid consciousness” (160).⁴² While Adorno praises the avant-garde he nevertheless upholds the assertion that Realist art tends to be morally based whereas avant-garde art does not concern itself with social or political issues.

As Peter Bürger notes in his *Theories of the Avant-Garde*, critiques of the avant-garde continually fall into these two lines of argument: the avant-garde creates “pure” art that functions outside of social concerns *or* the avant-garde is willfully out of touch, choosing to discuss “abstract” concepts (Bürger 7). Although Bürger’s study was published in 1987, critics still uphold this dichotomy. At times, this critical condemnation comes in the form of faulting authors for not writing political works. Indeed, the authors that I study in this dissertation have been faulted at times for their a-political novels. Critic Lyn Pykett, for instance, blasted contemporary novelist Jeanette Winterson for “back[ing] off from engagement with political and material constraints,” and claimed that Winterson chooses to construct “alternate realities” rather than address contemporary social and cultural issues.⁴³ Critics are not alone, though, in their belief that experimental art has drifted too far from social and political issues. In a 1989 *Harper’s* essay ‘Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto of the New Social Novel,’ American writer Tom Wolfe claims that “serious” writers have foregone “big, rich slices of

⁴² Meanwhile, in her essay ‘Semiotics and Sex,’ Winterson seemingly validates Lukács’ beliefs about avant-garde work when she declares, “The rebellion of art is a daily rebellion against the state of living death routinely called real life” (108).

⁴³ Winterson’s refusal to make her work political often extends to her political persona as well. In *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, Winterson notes that her work is often labeled “queer,” as she is a lesbian: “In any discussion of art and the artist, heterosexuality is backgrounded, whilst homosexuality is foregrounded” (103). She shuns this label, and wants critics to instead view her work outside the bounds of her sexuality. In this way, Winterson appears to resist the idea that she could be a political writer in any sense.

contemporary life” (47). He notes that many writers with “serious literary ambitions” turned a blind eye to catastrophic world events like the Vietnam War in favor of abstract experimentation. Wolfe’s primary concern is that journalism will replace fiction as a site of social justice, and the essay is obviously polemical as Wolfe champions a form of realism he employs in his fiction. Nevertheless, the essay was exemplary of a real concern in the 1980s and 1990s that art was not socially or morally progressive enough. Onega and Ganteau similarly note that even though many authors were engaged in ideas of authorship, voice, and authenticity (indeed, even Jeanette Winterson’s fiction questions subjectivity, history, and exclusion), the consensus was that postmodern fiction was concerned about narrative and not the socio-political atmosphere of England (7). Self’s fiction tends to critique avant-garde literature for its tendency not to engage with socio-cultural and political issues. In his novels, the authors/creators do not consider the effects of their creation on society as they create artwork to reinforce their superiority. Often, though, these works have negative impacts on their surrounding cultures, as the racist, misogynist, and amoral beliefs are perpetuated by a public that does not critically think about the messages. Self believes authors should consider the long term effects that art can have on culture and should invest their time into making art that has bettered the society for which it was written. Thus, his work helps us understand that avant-garde work can have social and cultural functions as well.

The tension between control and creation emerges in many of Self’s post-2000 novels. In 2002, he published a parody of Wilde’s novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. His version, *Dorian, an Imitation*, is set in the 1980s and this novel does not merely hint

at homosexuality or hedonism. Instead, these aspects of Wilde's novel are wildly exaggerated. The premise is more or less the same as Wilde's -text: Basil "Baz" Hallworth meets a young Dorian and is enraptured by the man's beauty. He creates not a picture, but a video installation, celebrating both Dorian's beauty and the end of video installations as important art pieces: "Baz waved at the televisions. 'It's called *Cathode Narcissus*, and it'll be the last video installation I make. The whole fucking medium is dead" (Self 13, emphasis original). Self's Lord Henry Wotton is a seedier, more sinister version of Wilde's, and he revels in hard-core drugs and anonymous, un-safe sexual relations. The plot of the novel is, again, quite similar: Wotton corrupts Dorian by forcing him to realize that his beauty is ephemeral. In Self's *Dorian*, the titular character allows Wotton to expose him to highly addicting drugs, endless male partners, and even the AIDS virus. In an interesting departure from Wilde's novel, however, the story ends abruptly as Wotton dies of AIDS, and we realize that Dorian has been reading a novel the entire time; the work was written by a vengeful Wotton, who finishes the book shortly before his AIDS-related death. However, the Dorian of the epilogue is neither corrupt nor ill, and he struggles to understand why Wotton has created such a tale. As the novel closes, Dorian begins to blur his reality with Wotton's alternate reality, believing in the final scenes that he is being murdered by one of Wotton's fictional antagonists.

Self's choice to use Wilde's original text to critique issues of authorship is better understood by illuminating the literary context of Wilde's novel. Michael Patrick Gillespie's "Ethics and Aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" clarifies the relationship between Oscar Wilde's novel and the Aestheticism movement at the end of

the nineteenth century. Gillespie observes that “The Pre-Raphaelites laid the groundwork for the view of art as aesthetically and ethically self-contained, summed up in the single phrase—art for art’s sake—that impelled the Aesthetic Movement” (Gillespie 142). He notes, though, that the relationship between Wilde’s novel and the movement is one that critics typically take for granted. Gillespie ultimately argues that Wilde’s novel tackles other moral and ethical concerns, such as New Hedonism and the kind of earnest work ethic that undergirded Victorian culture (140). Although Gillespie’s article shows how Wilde’s novel does not neatly align with Aestheticism, Self nonetheless stated that his interest in the novel came, in part, from a mutual interest in Decadence. In a 2002 interview in *The Guardian* titled, “Self-Analysis,” Self explored the inspirations for his re-writing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He claimed that his reasoning for setting *Dorian, an Imitation* in the 1980s was “this dyadic proposition: the decadence of the 1880s and the decadence of the 1980s.” When the journalist questioned Self about whether or not the novel is intended to be a postmodern “state of England novel,” Self assented. Most scholarship on Self’s critiques of decadence and aesthetics have focused on his depictions of England as a place beyond redemption. For instance, Marie-Noëlle Zeender’s “In The Stinky, Inky Heart of Tentacular London,” examines *Dorian, an Imitation* and illuminates the decadence of Self’s London. Zeender’s essay points to the many descriptive passages of rotting and excess, and the ways in which London is described as: “an urban sea, and sometimes a putrefying corpse, oozing with the miasma of decay” (Zeender 70). She suggests that Self’s depiction of London stems from concerns about the state of England, noting that the characterizations of Wotton and his

cohorts reveal that London has been permeated by people who are “reckless of the consequences of their acts, indulge in the pursuit of artificial paradises”; notably, these same people are oblivious to the “threat of social violence in the air” (67). Like Wilde’s text, Self’s revision depicts hedonism, albeit through the acts of anonymous sex and rampant heroin use. While Zeender’s exploration of *Dorian* focuses on its depiction of London and Self’s warnings about the corollary of such hedonism, my own argument narrows in on Wotton’s “recklessness,” particularly in regard to his creation of Dorian. Indeed, I argue that the novel critiques those who “create” literary works to emphasize their superiority. Self also mocks those writers who believe they can exert control over the reception of their works. While critics may argue that Self’s fiction advocates for authorial control, I show how the novel suggests that authorial control is an illusion: in every case (*Dorian*, *The Book of Dave*, *The Butt*), the creators fail to exert any control over their creation once it has been shared with the public.

While *Dorian, an Imitation* may not address authorship explicitly, it nevertheless critiques forms of creation. The principle creator in the novel arguably is not Baz, who creates the fateful art installation, but rather, Henry Wotton, who is described as “a Mandarin intellect who has callouses from annihilating the Space Invaders and a social climber who reveled in the most dangerous class potholing. He professed no politics other than revolutionary change—for the worse. In the context of such a comprehensively contrary temperament, his conflicted sexuality was almost superfluous” (Self 40). Wotton’s aimlessness—he cannot commit to a political party, or even a preferred partner—is dangerous. He decides to re-shape Dorian into his image at whim, without

taking into consideration either the aim of such a task or the end result: “what Wotton sought was moral clay to be moulded and shaped with a degree of definition he felt lacking in himself” (40). The problem with this decision is not so much that he decides to make Dorian into a new, “better” form of himself but that Wotton comes to this decision both out of idleness and the belief that he (Wotton) is exceptional. Rather than “writ[e] a brilliant book about the life and times of ... Henry Wotton,” he decides instead to focus his energy on “creations [...] such as Dorian, whom he met and manipulated” (41). His decision to “create” Dorian in lieu of a book is comical. Yet Wotton sincerely believes that he has a unique perspective on the world that should be shared with others. As Wotton drives Dorian to his mother’s home, he informs Dorian that:

You, my dear young friend [...] are condemned to a seventy-millimetre, windscreen view of the city. You are a mere corpuscle, traveling the arteries, whereas I have a surgeon’s perspective. I float above it all, and see Hyde Park as but a green, gangrenous fistula in London’s gray corpse. (Self 26)

Wotton privileges his knowledge over Dorian’s, as he believes that he has the unique ability to “see” Hyde Park for what it really is. Here, he presents himself as an expert in culture, as a “surgeon,” over the “body” of London. Self satirizes Wotton’s self-assured belief that Dorian needs his guidance to be able to access the culture’s more important artifacts and traditions. In this way Self criticizes the idea that creators have an especially kind of privilege that has to be extended to others. Indeed, Wotton does not “see” anything more clearly than Dorian, and he cannot foresee the tragedy that his creation

will unleash on this very city. However, his unwavering belief in his own exceptionalism leads him to destroy Dorian's former self and to re-fashion him in his own image.

At first, Dorian merely assumes Wotton's style of speaking, but soon Baz realizes, "Dorian had achieved more intimacy with Wotton in a two-week relationship than Baz had managed in two years" (Self 51). In part, this has to do with the fact that "Dorian was so easily influenced [...] He took on other people's styles, modes, and even habits the way kitchen toweling sopped up spilt milk" (43). Indeed, Dorian is all too willing to enjoy his newly constructed self. Although he initially fears injecting drugs but he is assured by Wotton that, "no cultured man ever refuses a new sensation, and no uncultured man ever knows what one is" (67). Dorian believes that Wotton understands "culture" better than he does, and so he allows Wotton to completely rebuild him in his image. But readers are never convinced that Wotton is the bastion of culture. Regardless, Dorian looks to him as a superior and thus allows himself to be shaped by Wotton's worst behavior. The danger of Dorian's transformation, however, lies in his timelessness. Since Dorian never ages (the video installation instead grows older), he can influence multiple generations, all of whom absorb his hideous behavior and beliefs with a similar lack of awareness. Wotton and his egregious habits may die, but Dorian will live well past him.

The problem with idle creation is that once the work is exposed to the mainstream, the creator cannot un-do the work's influence. As Wotton's impact on Dorian continues, the video installation of Dorian reveals the effects: "Dorian's face. Wotton's face. Herman's face [...] Eyes wide open. The reels came to rest. Vomit on Herman's chin [...] Three of anything paid generously in the coin of Misfortune" (Self

70). Wotton easily loses control over Dorian within mere weeks of his re-creation. When Dorian decides to bring Herman, his recovering drug addict, prostitute lover, to a party, Wotton warns him, “Are you sure you want to expose Herman—sensitive rental flower that he is--to the burnt out likes of Baz, and flame grilled Alan, on an evening that I trust will be more than *outré*?” (Self 59). Dorian decides not to listen to Wotton’s advice, however, and when Herman attends the party and sees a “conga line of buggery” and the rampant use of heroin, he commits suicide (70). Wotton slowly realizes that he no longer has any input in Dorian’s direction, and he notes, “I might have wanted to view Dorian as my protégé, but he far exceeds anything I could have *dreamed* of creating” (Self 129, emphasis original). Wotton is indeed unprepared for the ramifications of his creation. Dorian is infected with HIV/AIDS, but cannot die from it, as his installation takes the brunt of the disease. Nevertheless, he spreads it to hundreds of other men and women.

As Jose Yerba notes in “The ‘Moving’ Lines of Neo-Baroque in Will Self’s *Dorian, an Imitation*,” Dorian himself becomes a kind of virus spread throughout London (22). Thus, Wotton’s irresponsible creation spawns a catastrophic epidemic. Dorian moves among various circles, those of the degenerates in night clubs and the aristocrats at various events. He is figuratively consumed by the masses, who are ravenous for his *blasé* attitude, his beauty, and his addictive drugs. In the middle of the novel, aptly titled “Transmission,” Baz visits an AIDS-riddled Wotton, and informs him that Dorian continues to flourish even while he corrodes those around him. In a way, Wotton’s creation is too perfect, too infectious. Wotton admits as much when he states, “Dorian was perfectly tailored for this off-the-peg youth cult, with its pre-millennial cocktail of

stimulant drugs and dance music. How he cavorted, how he smarmed, like a cat in a thicket of knees...So much of a fixture did he become on this 'scene' that its other tenants imagined he had no other" (Self 128). Despite the fact that, at this point in the novel, Dorian is nearly thirty, he nevertheless infiltrates younger men's social circles. When Baz questions whether or not the adolescents are repulsed by Dorian's age, Wotton assures him that Dorian appears young as "[t]ime may have etched our faces, like acid burning into copper, but Dorian's visage is an Etch-a-Sketch; no smear of dissipation or leer of venality—let alone marks of ageing—remains upon it for long" (128). Herein lies much of Dorian's appeal and danger: because he does not age, he is timeless. Like literary works, musical compositions, and artistic pieces, Dorian will shape the culture for many generations.

While Wotton's friends urge him to censor Dorian, he continually fails to check Dorian's tendencies because he lacks control over him. After Dorian murders Baz because he will not give Dorian the *Cathode Narcissus*, Wotton is approached by Cal Devenish, a novelist familiar with Dorian's tendencies. Cal warns Wotton that Dorian has become too destructive; thus Wotton decides that the only recourse is to kill Dorian, although he qualifies that murder "shouldn't be considered one of the fine arts; rather it's one of the wilder forms of popular entertainment" (Self 216). Even his decision to murder Dorian is flippant, as he notes the death "isn't so much retribution we're after [...] no, it's a kind of symmetry, a rounding off" (218). Wotton believes he can kill Dorian because he has constructed him, but he fails to realize that once created, he has no influence or control over Dorian at all. Furthermore, he reveals that his anger over Dorian has less to

do with Dorian's homicidal tendencies, and more to do with Dorian's ability to "be *the* icon of an era" (220, emphasis original). Wotton is dissatisfied with his creation, as his original intent (to make an object in his image, just as flippant and sinister as he is), is ignored. Dorian is no mere bored aristocrat and others have found meaning in him well beyond Wotton's authorial intentions. Of course, Wotton cannot kill Dorian: he is seemingly immortal. But Wotton also has some discomfort about killing Dorian because he believes that Dorian was created out of his desire for beauty. Near the end of *Self's Dorian*, Lord Henry Wotton declares:

I loathe the so-called 'art' of the twentieth century with a particularly rare and hearty passion. Would that all that paint, canvas, stone and bronze could be balled up and tossed into that fraud Duchamps' *pissoir*. With a few notable exceptions—Balthus, Bacon, Modigliana—the artists of this era have been in a headlong flight from beauty or any meaningful representation of the human form. (Self 220)

Wotton's declaration is highly ironic: his own artistic contribution (Dorian) is anything but beautiful. Yet this assertion is reminiscent of the Aesthetic belief that art should only reflect beauty. I do not take Wotton's argument as a metafictional assertion that shows us that Self believes art should be beautiful. Instead, I suggest that this outcry is meant to be critiqued. Wotton's creation is neither beautiful nor meaningful nor does the construction of Dorian serve any larger purpose. Self skewers Wotton's diatribe about beauty, but it is important to note that the most straight-forward depiction of the avant-garde (Baz) is similarly satirized and treated with contempt.

Baz may be an avant-garde artist, but he never stands up for his artistic creations, as he often acquiesces to others' artistic demands in exchange for money or prestige. He

is particularly condemned for his tendency towards commercial art and is humorously blamed for the annexation of avant-garde art into commercial ventures. Frequently, Wooten reminds Basil that he is the “great artist,” but even Basil is tempted by Dorian. Baz tries desperately to remain sober amid the debauchery by going to rehab and by physically separating himself from Dorian, “At the end of the table, grouped by Wotton, were the Ferret, Alan Campbell, Bluejay, Dorian and Baz. The latter—for reasons of self-preservation—was keeping an empty place between himself and the rest, but really the Urals could have done the job better” (147). For all his attempts, Baz cannot separate himself from Dorian, whose beauty and debauchery are at once alluring and repulsive. Furthermore, he often compromises his art in order to please Dorian, whose own conception of art consists of copying great works, churning out copies for high prices. Eventually, Dorian wheedles Baz by telling him, “You should let me look after you, Baz [...] I have the money, I have the time” (154). After Dorian suggests that he and Basil should combine their abilities (Dorian’s ability to pay for their ventures, Basil’s ability to create art) to “create a scene” together, Basil’s limp agreement is eviscerated by the narrator:

Hard to imagine that this inauspicious beginning (“I suppose we could give it a try”) will nonetheless become the rallying cry for disaffected youth [...] or that this downbeat encounter will, in time, come to be deemed as significant as the first meeting between Rimbaud and Verlaine. Hard—because it won’t. By the early 1980s the avant-garde was busy being franchised and sold off to a series of designer labels and purpose-designed emporia. Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci. Only somebody as staggeringly ill-informed as Dorian Gray could have imagined there was still a “scene” to be created in Manhattan. (Self 91)

In *Dorian*, art and creations have the ability to leave lasting negative impacts on society. Dorian's infectious behavior plunges London further into its morass. Both men, regardless of their artistic and aesthetic beliefs, contribute towards the construction of a deadly art work that wreaks havoc for many generations.

Will Self would return to this theme in his 2006 novel, *The Book of Dave*, wherein a futuristic England is in shambles because everyone worships the text of a schizophrenic cab driver. *The Book of Dave* is both a condemnation of organized religion and a critique of self-published works. In the work, the futuristic society has organized its governance around the eponymous Book of Dave, written by a British taxi driver in the year 2003. The work is highly misogynistic: men and women are not allowed to live together, and women are only allowed to see their children for a half week, bi-monthly. Furthermore, Dave's blend of taxi slang, Received Pronunciation (R.P.), Cockney, and racial slurs serve as the basis of the Hamsters' own language.⁴⁴ These men and women do not question anything about the Book of Dave, and those who speak out against the customs are tied to a wheel (reminiscent of Dave's taxi wheel) and brutally murdered.

Dave did not intend for his diary to be a spiritual guide for a future society. Instead, it was intended to guide his son through the later years of his life. However, when the Hamsters discover the book, they find meaning in the diary. Because the work only consists of directions around London, advice about cars, and deplorable beliefs about women/minorities, the Hamsters take the work at face-value. As a result, their own culture is formed around violence and misogyny. The children of Ham grow up with

⁴⁴ The sections of the novel that take place in the future are literally written in this linguistic blend. As a result, there is an appendix that clarifies many of the more obscure or nonsensical terms.

humanoid beasts called motos, who have, as the appendix notes, the “functional intelligence of a two-and-a-half-year-old human child,” and have generally placid natures (491). Every year, the children are required to slaughter their childhood moto, so that they can consecrate themselves with “moto” oil, which marks a significant rite of passage in each boy’s life. The Hamsters’ behavior is guided both by the Book of Dave, and the Drivers, who are clergymen in charge of ensuring that everyone follows the strict rules prescribed by the Book, and they can be fatally punished for breaking the smallest rule, like seeing their child outside the regimented half week. For all its dismal violence, the novel is a comedy. The Hamsters follow the teachings of an enraged, mentally ill man embittered by losing custody over his son. His hatred towards his ex-wife, Michelle, informs the work that he writes. After he writes his diatribe he buries it in the back yard for his son, Cal, to find later. Dave then slowly descends into a psychotic state, and when he is being evaluated, readers discover that the Book of Dave is only a list of all the roads and short cuts in London combined with his distorted view of women and minorities. But to Dave, these ramblings constitute his “knowledge,” and he relishes the information that he believes that he holds over others.

Most of the characters in *The Book of Dave* are “knowledgeable,” in some way or another, and all forms of knowledge are lampooned. On one level, Self plays with the slang phrase “knowledge,” which typically encapsulates a cab driver’s understanding of all the roads and highways in London; on another, Self often puns off this use of “knowledge,” as a way to wholly critique how we think of knowledge or knowledgeable people. Dave’s arrogance is obvious and ridiculous. When he picks up fares in his taxi, he

bristles at the person's own attempt to convey their knowledge. Although Dave occasionally condescends, and acknowledges that others "got their own Knowledge, that's true enough," he nonetheless believes that no other knows the city as well as he does (Self 91). Like Wotton, he positions himself as a cultural expert, assuming that all others can only know a fraction of his own "knowledge." In reality, Wotton is an abusive, racist, misogynist man who drives away all friends and family.

Self's satirical treatment of knowledge extends to most other characters in his novel. Other characters are equally mocked. Dave's ex-wife Michelle desperately adopts Middlebrow traits in order to erase her working class background. She alters her language, dress, and choice of lovers, hoping to blend seamlessly with middle-class life. But these attempts are always pitiful. At one point, when she meets with her lawyer to discuss custody plans, she struggles to maintain her guise:

'I think he's mad,' Michelle had said to the lawyer, whose name was Blair. 'There's already a restraining order to prevent him from coming near the house.' She felt comfortable with the 'honestly'; it sounded right for this dark wood paneling and thick, turquoise carpet. (Self 144)

Michelle's desire to appear more educated extends to her choice of lover, Cal Devenish, who produces television shows and appears as a "panelist on arts review shows and current events forums, a wag and a wit."⁴⁵ He'd skillfully blended his waning creativity with orange foundation cream, then slapped it all over his face so that it didn't shine under the studio lights. He bestrode the steadily narrowing gulf between high culture and

⁴⁵ Cal resurfaces in many of Self's novels. The fictional Dr. Zach Buchner is another figure that Self recycles in many of his short stories and novels.

low entertainment like a credible, shrinking colossus” (Self 150). Cal and Michelle’s respective desperate attempts to participate in the cultural elite make them seem pathetic.

The Hamsters, too, struggle with knowledge. The protagonist in these sections, Cal (not to be confused with Dave’s son), questions the Book of Dave. His own father, Symun, was cast out of the society when he found a “second” book (clearly a parody of the New Testament), one that disavows many of the proclamations in the first *Book of Dave*. This clearly mocks religious adherence but it also calls into question both publishing and authorship practices. As Didier Girard notes in “Radical No-Saying. The Contradictions and Paradoxes of Will Self,” Self’s novel critiques the “multiplicity of voices [and what it] means in contemporary fiction” (12). Certainly, Self’s novel mocks the publishing industry. Although Dave does not publish his novels, he does write one, and this work becomes accessible to readers. Dave appears to be the worst kind of writer; he is uneducated (he specifically rejected a chance to go to university), his work is a rant against everything he hates, and there is so little thought put into the work that he barely remembers he wrote it later in the novel (279). Thus, Self exposes potential dangers of publishing without intent. Here, the works are mythologized: the Hamsters find in the rambling “book” a secret to the world. Of course, this is mocking readers, as they are incapable of discerning their own way of life. At the same time, Self shows us how textual works can be manipulated and used for the future.

When Dave realizes that his diary consists of nothing more than directions and misogynist/racist rants, he tries to re-locate the book so that it cannot be found.

Unfortunately, he cannot remember where it is buried. In an attempt to ameliorate the situation, he decides to compose a revision:

A new Book took shape. As Dave trudged along the laborious biro furors, he turned up a new EPISTLE TO THE SON, which told the lad to RESPECT MEN AND WOMEN BOTH, to strive always for RESPONSIBILITY, to understand that WE MAKE OUR OWN CHOICES IN LIFE, and that BLAMING OTHERS is not an option [...] The new Book's composition was evidence of this harmoniousness. (Self 420)

Dave buries this revision in a different location than the first half, and he genuinely intends it to help create a "new London" that will be better than the one he originally envisioned. Of course, because Self splits the novel between the future and the past, we understand that the Hamsters have *not* located the second half. Symun understands that it exists, but by then, the violence and hatred is too ingrained in the culture. When Symun's son Cal and a fellow sceptic, the teacher, Antonë Bom, leave Ham to search for the lost book, the very act of leaving the society causes the other Hamsters to label them "liars," or heretics. Even when Cal presents the second book to the highest ranking Driver, the Supreme Driver explains that people have no need for "the truth," and that these people clamor for "the Book and the Wheel, the Drivers, and the Inspectors, the King and his servile lawyers" (Self 450). Indeed, the Supreme Driver understands that presenting another narrative, one steeped in forgiveness and love, would result in chaos. The religious hierarchy would be rendered useless, and the traditions of the Hamsters would appear archaic and vicious. Like his father before him, Cal is then punished at the wheel, condemned for suggesting that the written word of Dave is short-sighted and irrelevant.

Like Wotton, Dave cannot control his text once it is dispersed into the culture. While he is dead by the time the text has been discovered (we are never sure when this is as the Hamsters view time in A.D. or after Dave), his attempts at reining in the work once it has been buried also fail. Self suggests in this work that narratives have the potential to be mythologized. *The Book of Dave* takes this to the extreme but nevertheless Dave's beliefs are venerated to the point that they are sacred, and his authorial intent matters here. His "revision" would have had a better impact on the future, if found, but unfortunately, his initial project results in the death of all those men and women who refuse to conform to the book's absurd tenets.

In *The Butt* Self continues his exploration of the impact of narratives on civilizations. The work is a satirical novel that mocks, at the very least, anti-smoking laws, colonial reparations, legal systems, and marriage. The protagonist, Tom Brodzinski takes his family on holiday to a fictitious, unnamed country. At the precise moment that Tom decides to give up smoking, he flicks the cigarette butt onto another man's head, which comically leads to the aforementioned man's demise. Tom is immediately apprehended; he cannot leave the country and he must make financial reparations to the man's family, even though the latter is also "an Anglo." He is then forced to undergo a lengthy trip through the desert with a pedophile, Brian Prentice. Tom's family, who have flown back home (presumably to the United States, although this is also never made explicit), fail to understand the charges he faces, and thus he becomes estranged from them. When Tom and Brian finally reach the site of the reparations, they meet an Anglo anthropologist, Van Sasser, and Tom realizes that Van Sasser is responsible for much of

the turmoil and inanity, as he has given many of the native people lobotomies as to better exploit them.

The lobotomies are not the only method that Von Sasser uses to control the population, however. We slowly understand at the novel's conclusion that Von Sasser's father created various myths and used them to his advantage. Von Sasser admits to Tom that his father tampered with the culture, creating origin stories and heroes:

He taught them, that's what he did. He distilled all of his study of other traditional peoples, all of their myths and songs and dances, into a new and viable belief system for these terminally deracinated souls. He devised an entire new vocabulary for them, then grafted this onto a stump that remained where their own language had been amputated. Then he taught this to them as well. Of course, such instruction would've been impossible for a mere rabble, so Papa gave birth to a new kinship system, while inculcating them with the beginnings of a hierarchy. (Self 306)

Here, Von Sasser's father assumes the role of ultimate *pater*: he "gave birth" to a new kind of culture, a culture mired in bureaucracy and pointless laws. Long after his death, his son continues to manipulate these tales. While he has not merely created a text that is then swallowed by large swaths of the Tayswengo population, he instead builds on and transforms the cultural narratives of the local people. Ironically, Von Sasser believes that he has "helped" the population. While he assures Tom that the area is "peaceful" because weapons are not allowed, he fails to realize that the strongest weapon of all is the creation of narrative (Self 297). Von Sasser's mastery of oration and writing are continually referenced, as Self suggests that the ability to sway people with language is

just as dangerous, if not more so, than the ability to rule by weaponry. Even though Tom is privy to Von Sasser's various atrocities he finds himself:

Free to lose himself in the wisps and curls of blue and gray [smoke], to aesthetically appreciate the subtle brush strokes on the glowing canvas of the chalet's interior—a painterly rendition of the very timeless present itself, which from one moment to the next altered irrevocably. Even Von Sasser had acquired an air of benignity. He was no hawk—but an elegant Audobon heron, his streamlined form garbed in silky, smoky plumage. (300)

Von Sasser is a charlatan, but he also represents the kinds of false superiority and control that allow others to believe he is their superior. He is a master storyteller, so much so that he inscribes himself as the authorial *pater* of an entire nation. His father's efforts to create a new populace appear similarly self-serving. Even though the indigenous population already had a system of governance, his father assumed that *he* knew the right way to rule over them. He used his power to create a new country, one mired in bureaucracy, meaningless laws, and systematic abuses. In turn, Van Sasser uses his linguistic skills to ensure his father's rhetoric will be further memorialized.

Indeed, Self's fiction demands that writers treat authorship as a responsibility because their work will affect and influence society. Aimless authors create dangerous narratives that shape cultures and warp beliefs. Self repeatedly skewers those creators who make art purely for their own interests. Furthermore, he criticizes those authors who are specifically using art/creation as a means to emphasize their own authority. While critics have argued that Self's fiction privileges his own authorial role over his readers' ability to interact with and make meaning of a text, I find that his later fiction actually

questions whether authorial privilege is even beneficial. All of the creators in the aforementioned novels are convinced that they are more capable of understanding the world than those surrounding them and they create works specifically to solidify this superiority. Whether Wotton believes that he knows culture better than Dorian or Van Sasser's father believes he should engender a new nation, all of these men create narratives and/or art works to express their superiority. In every case, their arrogance has detrimental side effects. Although the creators attempt to rein in the work after it becomes destructive, their efforts are futile as society has already internalized the works' messages. Self's creators cannot imbue their perceived privilege into their work because it will always be re-shaped by future generations.

In this way Self's work does not promote authorial privilege. In fact, his novels argue against a kind of paternal authorship that tries to re-inscribe its own importance at the expense of more ethical concerns. If authors should not create self-serving art then what is their task? Fundamentally, Self's fiction points to the idea that fiction should ideally work to expose a society's ills. In *The Book of Dave*, Symon, Cal, and Antonë are among the few who escape Self's acerbic tone. They use their intellect and efforts to critique the Hamsters' social fabric. This is not to say, of course, that Self's fiction is not problematic. Certainly, Self's depictions have some elitist overtones: Dave is largely uneducated and Wotton lacks the ambition to see his project through, but Self appears to criticize various models of authorship, from avant-garde Aestheticism (Wotton's comical assertion that he made Dorian out of a desire for beauty) or self-published nonfiction (Dave's "knowledge"). I find that Self's fiction does not promote a kind of author,

despite the ample criticism that suggests otherwise. Instead, I posit that Self reminds both authors and readers that authorship is a complex, heavy task, one that cannot be taken lightly. If a work cannot be controlled after its reception, then authors must, in the formulation stage, take care to create an ethical work that better serves its society. After all, narratives can be misconstrued, elevated to metanarratives, and ingested by large populations as “fact,” rather than fiction. While these warnings maybe comedic in some way, they nonetheless suggest that authors—even avant-garde authors—need a better literary purpose than control, self-indulgence, or beauty. In some ways, Self’s liminal status as an avant-garde allows him to make these claims. However, Self’s fiction also helps us understand how even some avant-garde authors take issue with the very tenets of avant-gardism and question its own longevity. In other words, in an era where there *are* global terror events, national surveillance, and widespread “knowledge” via the internet, can avant-garde authors continue to just make “beautiful” art, and in what ways will they have to compromise their visions to make their works relevant and meaningful?

CHAPTER VI

“OUROSBOROS”: OR, THE FUTURE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

We, the Gutenberg minds have no future, and our art forms and our criticism of those art forms will soon only belong to the academy and the museum. Bracing, isn't it? (Will Self, “*Hatchet Job* by Mark Kermode—a Review”).

The 2014 independent film *Frank* centers on an avant-garde band who search for the perfect, unattainable sound. In the movie, Frank, played by Michael Fassbender, wears a large wooden mask that he never removes, even though it impedes his daily habits. His band members slavishly follow Frank because they believe he has the most dedication to his art, as evidenced by his willingness to shroud his head in the mask. When the film's protagonist, a struggling musician/writer from the suburbs named Jon, discovers Frank and his band, he joins them, following them to a remote German cabin where they spend over a year on a concept album. Eventually, Jon quits his job, abandons his parents, and pours his life savings into the project, which continues to be stalled as the band searches for its ideal conceptual sound. Jon is enraptured by Frank, who pushes him to join the band and he spends a year starving in a cabin alongside Frank's band, as they try to re-invent the music scene.

In many ways, *Frank* mocks avant-garde artists and their relationship with audiences. When Jon starts promoting the band (without its knowledge) on social media sites, a popular music festival, South by South West (SXSW), offers the band a place in its lineup. Initially, Frank's band (titled the Soronprfbs, a name so confounding that even

the band's leaders cannot pronounce it), rejects this idea, as the members want to resist the commercialization of art. However, Frank believes the festival's judges must already appreciate their art, so he consents. Once there, he realizes that that he must perform for a mass audience and he collapses on stage after hyperventilating and crawling under a table. While Frank's mask seemed initially enchanting to Jon when they all lived in the remote cabin, the same mask now appears absurd when they are all in public. Jon, disillusioned, taunts Frank until the latter runs away; as he does so, he is hit by a car, and the mask is shattered, revealing a middle-aged man with bald spots, cuts on his face, and all the indicators of a real mental illness. As the film closes, Frank and his band, reunited after their numerous squabbles about whether or not they should conform to reach more audience members, sing in a dive bar, as Jon slowly walks away. We understand that he has done nothing but sully their sound, and by making them accessible and amenable to wider audiences, he has made them lose what made them so initially alluring.

Frank exemplifies how most scholars view the contemporary avant-garde and illuminates two misconceptions about these kinds of artists and novelists. First, the avant-garde are positioned like Frank's band at the end of the film: alone, performing/creating for themselves, separate from the mainstream "art" scene. Certainly, avant-garde writers tend to place themselves on the extreme end of culture by distancing themselves from "low" and "middlebrow" art. Typically, this bifurcation has been reinforced by many critics who have deepened the perceived rift between "avant-garde" and "mainstream" art and literature. When Peter Bürger published *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in 1984, he noted that critics had created a "dichotomy between high and low literature," not only by

separating out “high,” “middle,” and “low” brow works, but by treating each group with critical distinction. Since the publication of Bürger’s work, critics have tried to rectify this scholarly divide, but they have tried to resolve it by suggesting that there are no critical distinctions between the avant-garde and mainstream works. For instance, Dominic Head’s *Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* argues that because experimentalism is mainstream, critics should not distinguish between experimental and non-experimental works. While the avant-gardism of modernist authors has been well noted, the avant-gardism of postmodernism and beyond has been largely minimized, as many critics merely suggest that all fiction is experimental to some degree. Hence, as John Ganteau and Susan Onega note in *The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction since the 1960s* postmodern and post-Postmodern experimental and avant-garde literature has been under-researched (4).

This is not to say that avant-gardism has been wholly ignored. Within the last few years, narrative theorists have published a plethora of studies that explore avant-garde and highly experimental narratives. Brian Richardson’s *Unnatural Narrative* (2015), Joe Bray, Allison Gibbons, and Brian McHale’s anthology *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2013) and Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson’s collection *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* (2013) are only a few of these works. These scholarly works are important because they explore the various aims of contemporary experimentalism and argue that avant-garde and experimental works function differently from their “natural” or non-experimental counterparts. However, these texts largely present different styles of narrative and explore how these styles

subvert our understanding of how narrative works. As Bray, Gibbons and McHale note in their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, experimental and avant-garde literature shocks and even repulses its readers while simultaneously challenging the boundaries of genre and form (2). Bray, Gibbons and McHale's introduction provides us with a fuller understanding of experimentation by showing us that different kinds of narratives have particular aims. If we collapse experimentation and non-experimentation together, we ignore how authors are pulling on the conventions of experimentation to evoke a response in readers. Certainly, authors have themselves combined experimental elements with non-experimental, as to some extent experimentation became mainstream by the late 1980s and 1990s, but if scholars take this collapsing for granted, they will not be able to fully account for experimental works.

My dissertation thus makes the critical intervention of exploring avant-garde issues while also placing them in conversation with other authorial and economic concerns. By historicizing authorial anxieties about the literary marketplace and the reading public (at various stages in history), I show how avant-garde concerns about authority, readers, and publishing concessions have emerged out of fears surrounding literary professionalism, mythologies about creative insight, and fears about the growing power of the reading public. At the same time, I clarify how twenty-first century avant-garde writers face new issues of reader empowerment and digitization. That being said, critical undertakings of contemporary avant-garde novels are few and far between, as evidenced by the lack of scholarly research on most of the authors that I discussed in the dissertation, with the exception of Jeanette Winterson. While I have explored

contemporary avant-garde fiction and have worked towards complicating critical assumptions about the contemporary avant-garde, there is still much work to be done here, both on post-2000 novelists and on non-British authors who similarly are reacting to great changes to reading, publishing, and interacting with readers.

One aspect that could use further research is how contemporary avant-garde writers have co-opted popular media to promote highbrow, elitist works. Over the last few years, literary writers have created their own cultural phenomena in response to the shift towards reader-driven book sites and the growing popularity of literary awards. An example of this would be the literary application or “app” that was created for iPhones and iPads by David Mitchell, Ali Smith, Peter Carey, and Julian Barnes in 2015. When users download the app called “Alexi™” they have access to carefully selected lists of books crafted by each author. For instance, David Mitchell’s page champions classic and undervalued Japanese novels like Jun’ichiro Tanizaki’s *The Makaoika Sisters*, while Ali Smith merely posted the name of the novel she “wish[ed] everyone knew: Merdardo Frail’s *Things Look Different in the Light and Other Stories*.” The Alexie™ app differentiates itself from other forms of social media by presenting users with curated lists of books. This app differs considerably from the more popular site, Goodreads: on Goodreads, anyone can create an account, access their favorite author’s page (if the author is a subscriber) and discover what said author has read or is currently reading. Users can then purchase books through linked pages to Amazon.⁴⁶ Conversely, Alexi™ refers to its app as a “curator,” meaning that the items are selected for the reader. The

⁴⁶ Amazon bought Goodreads in 2013. For more see, Allison Flood’s “Amazon Purchase of Goodreads Stuns Book Industry” published April 2nd, 2013.

literary moderators choose the works to curate, letting the user merely see the options rather than interact with them. In this way, the app serves to shape the users' tastes, as it defines the best works and also excludes the user from the selection process.

In addition to creating alternate social media sites, avant-garde writers have also created their own literary prizes. The best example of this is the Goldsmiths Prize, founded in 2013. Avant-garde novelists were concerned that the Booker Prize had become too commercial, and thus they created the Goldsmiths, a literary prize that awards £10,000 to the best experimental work.⁴⁷ The first year that the prize was awarded Irish novelist Eimear McBride won it for her highly experimental novel *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. The novel, which focuses on the travails of a young girl who endures incest, her brother's chronic illnesses, and her mother's abuse, breaks many boundaries, even at the sentence level. *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* prompts its readers to navigate lines like: "For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you" (McBride 1). McBride spent nine years searching for a publisher who would take her work, and in a sense, the Goldsmiths' Prize rewarded both her novel's masterful play with language *and* her refusal to re-work the novel into easily readable prose.

At first, the Goldsmiths Prize was heralded as a literary "breath of fresh air." The panel of judges, which included Gabriel Josipovici, seemed to select obscure, challenging works that lacked the mainstream appeal of a Booker Prize winning novel. However, in 2014, they awarded the prize to Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*, a novel that would later be

⁴⁷ For more, see: www.gold.ac.uk

short-listed for the Booker Prize. Smith's novel is divided into two parts the "eye" and the "camera." In the "eye" section, a 15th century artist is flung up from the underworld in time to see a young girl and her mother encounter one of his paintings. He muses on his life as a painter and then returns to the dead. Conversely, in the "camera" section, this same young girl grieves her mother, who has just died, and berates herself for treating her mother so poorly. Readers are invited to read either section first, and in order to reinforce this freedom, some copies were printed with the "eye" section preceding the "camera" section, which suggests there is no "right" way to read the text. Smith's novel is innovative and was highly regarded in the press. But some critics were unhappy with her winning the Goldsmiths Prize, not because the novel was not experimental enough, but rather, there were so many overlaps between the two lists (Paul Kingsnorth's *The Wake* being another) that the Goldsmiths Prize seemed redundant. As Nikesh Shukla noted in "The 2014 Goldsmiths Prize Shortlist: Why It's Neither 'Creative' nor 'Daring,'" the overlap suggested a kind of literary exhaustion, and even called into question the need for the Goldsmiths in the first place: "I'm not ashamed of getting excited about literary awards, I don't mind admitting that I scan the lists to look for new books to buy. So I'm disappointed to discover that despite the vast quantity of brilliant fiction published over the last year, the same few books are in contention for all the literary prizes. What's the point of a book prize anyway?"⁴⁸ Notably, the Goldsmiths was not the only panel created in spite of the Booker. In 2014, the Folio Prize was created by a panel of authors including J.M. Coetzee and Margaret Atwood. Unlike the Booker, it was made available

⁴⁸ Shukla's article ran in *The Guardian* on October 2, 2014.

to *all* authors, regardless of their political affiliation (or lack thereof) with Great Britain. Like the Goldsmiths, the Folio Award was formed out of a distaste for the popular works promoted by the Booker Prize. This award similarly awarded Smith's *How to Be Both* with its prize, and had other titles that overlapped with both the Goldsmiths and the Booker.

While's Shukla's question about the relevancy of the Goldsmiths Prize suggests an authorial scene glut with too many prizes, these awards are nonetheless incredibly important, as prizes give authors the opportunity to make a living from their work in economically difficult times. In this instance, though, I would argue that the Goldsmiths both funds authors *and* re-enforces authority. The Goldsmiths panel, unhappy with the direction of the Man Booker Prize, created its own standards for literature, and also attempted to re-direct literary taste. Even Shukla notes in his article that literary prize short-lists drive sales. By fashioning a literary prize that rewards avant-garde novelists, the Goldsmiths panel have tried to ensure the experimental novel's continued relevancy. As I noted in my second chapter, twenty-first century writers engage in self-promotion, even if they promote themselves through abstention. Avant-garde writers refuse social media presences and popular literary prizes to reinforce their literary personas. Like the modernists, these authors are not removed from marketing practices, but rather, subvert them.

The creation of alternate forms of popular media indicates that the avant-garde are not trying to isolate themselves completely from mass culture and the reading public. However, the second critical assumption often made about the avant-garde is that

they have a necessarily antagonistic stance towards their audience, and they would prefer to repulse their audience than embrace them. Non-experimental novelists are figured as authors who produce accessible works that please wide audiences in exchange for economic security. In this way, avant-garde novelists do have a different relationship with their audience than their non-experimental peers, as they purposefully flout economic security by making inaccessible works. As such, these authors have had to find alternative sources of income, as their novels sell to a narrower audience. These avant-garde novelists cannot support themselves through these kinds of works, and often take jobs in universities to supplement their income. In some instances, creative writing positions help these authors supplement their income, as writers are paid to teach courses and their works are assigned to literary students. But this model of authorship is somewhat limiting. In his essay, “The Novel Is Dead (This Time It’s for Real),” Will Self notes that this paradigm is not unlike that of the *ouroboros*, the ancient Greek image of a dragon swallowing its own tail. The avant-garde produce novels for the academy, who hire them and sell their books to aspiring students who take their creative writing courses, allowing the avant-garde to fund their literary works.⁴⁹ However, as I have argued, university teaching jobs also allow the avant-garde to create niche audiences, who purchase and appreciate their work. Thus, Self’s image ignores the ways in which the avant-garde benefit from this structure.

At the same time, I have shown the belief that the avant-garde simply reject all audiences is too simplistic. While Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the avant-garde produce

⁴⁹ Published in *The Guardian* on May 2nd, 2014.

work for themselves, I posit that these novelists carve an audience out of the millions of readers that can interact with their work. In my chapter on Gabriel Josipovici's post-2000 novels, I examined his highly theoretical novels wherein his author-protagonists bemoan the state of the contemporary reader. The typical protagonist in his fiction suffers from writer's block because he/she cannot conceptualize how the reader is reading and interpreting the book. In turn, the writer comes to dread mass readers and instead desires a small reading community, as this paradigm allows the writer to know his/her readers face-to-face. Josipovici's fiction shows us how avant-garde writers' relationship with their readers is complex. The avant-garde are not merely producing other works for other avant-garde writers, but rather, for a select reading group, whom they believe is capable of appreciating highbrow literature.

By contextualizing authorial concerns about readership, we can better understand a host of twenty-first century literary tensions. Scholars have noted that many authors are aligning themselves with Modernist aesthetics. These writers not only use Modernist literary techniques but they also adopt the language of literary exclusion to better distance themselves from mass readers. According to some scholars, the return to Modernism occurs alongside authorial concerns about authority (Adiseshiah and Hildyard 4). At the same time that avant-garde authors turn back to Modernism, other authors have returned to omniscient narration, which suggests that authors are using established aesthetics and techniques to imbue their works with authority. The belief that authors have been stripped of their relevancy helps us understand why there has been a surge of authors who identify themselves as modernist authors. Indeed, the curious turn back towards modernist

ideology in the twenty-first century can best be understood when we examine how the aforementioned changes have compelled authors to adopt a fraught relationship with their readers and why these authors believe that they need agency. Avant-garde writers have turned back to Modernist ideology as a way to re-establish the cultural barriers that have been arguably eroded by publishing practices and an empowered reading public. By disempowering their readers, authors in turn empower themselves and restore their authorial agency.

Authorial concerns about authority and readers are further exacerbated by digitization, as popular media blurs the lines between author and reader, user and content generator. As Alan Kirby notes in *Digimodernism*, authorship is shared, communal, and even anonymous. “Amateur” writers can easily sign up with Amazon and self-publish their works and sites like Wattpad allow users to contribute stories online alongside respected literary professionals like Margaret Atwood.⁵⁰ The authors that I have discussed approach these changes with dread, as they signify to them, not so much the death of the novel but rather the death of the writer, because readers assume writerly positions. In my fourth chapter on Jeanette Winterson’s work, I show how the democratization of authorship online re-fashions this process, as online writing, hypertextual novels, and social media sites blur the distinctions between readers and writers. Social media may seem inconsequential as it is meant to be a hobby, but it is already enmeshed in reading habits in some form or another. Sites like Goodreads come

⁵⁰ Notably, Amazon’s site emphasizes the ease in which authors can publish online and offers them 70-80% royalties (depending on whether they publish via e-book or print book, respectively). For more see: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/seller-account/mm-summary-page.html?topic=200260520>

embedded on popular e-book tablets because Amazon.com bought the site.⁵¹ When readers finish novels on their Kindle products, Goodreads prompts readers to post their thoughts on the book right after they finish reading it. On social media sites and online retailers, novels are given to advanced readers, who are specifically chosen because their reviews are reviewed favorably by other customers.⁵² These reviewers can read the book, rate it, write about it, and post said review weeks, sometimes months, before the novel is published. These advance copies are free and the reviews have the potential to influence future buyers' decisions. The move towards advance copies and the increasing importance of social media sites places some power (albeit quite limited) in the hands of readers. Goodreads in particular encourages readers to dabble in high literature, to dilute literary works into short, concise reviews, all while offering polls that chart people's preferences for genre and "goals" that urge readers to read more frequently.⁵³ Social media about books thus offers critics invaluable insight into reading communities, tastes, and desires and indicates that readers expect participatory roles in the publishing and reviewing processes.

Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated how avant-garde writers respond to cultural and economic phenomena, like digitization and publishing changes to show how these writers respond to the same cultural forces as non-experimental or mainstream writers. Such cultural context is necessary because, as I discussed in my

⁵¹ In 2013, *The Atlantic's* Jordan Weissman reported in "The Simple Reason Why Goodreads Is so Valuable to Amazon," that the online retailer purchased Goodreads for "\$150 million" in order to ensure that other book-selling rivals could not capitalize on the social media's site.

⁵² On Amazon.com's website, they note that reviewers are selected for "the helpfulness of their reviews as judged by all other customers." For more see: Amazon.com/gp/vine.

⁵³ In 2015, Goodreads encouraged its participants to track their yearly book totals. For more, see: goodreads.com/challenges.

chapter on Will Self, critics have long praised/condemned the literary avant-garde for making art that does not reflect “real” concerns. Yet contemporary avant-garde literary works do reflect real concerns about power, money, and privilege. In this way, the avant-garde are not out of touch, but in fact, very aware of their cultural surroundings. While these concerns may be literary growing pains as authors adjust their understanding of authorship in this era, I would argue that as we continue into the twenty-first century, there is no sign that the emphasis on reader participation and reader empowerment will end, especially since these issues are neither particular to contemporary literature nor the literary avant-garde. Issues surrounding authorial agency, the role of the reader/viewer, the difficulty of making a living from one’s work because of digital changes, and the rise of the internet have made substantial impacts on other forms of media as well. The film industry has seen similar changes that have re-worked the ways that movies are produced as filmmakers are pressured to create “blockbuster” movies both because test audiences clamor for them and because producers want “sure hits.”⁵⁴ Video games allow players to project their faces into the game and to build the worlds for themselves, uploading them online for others to play, edit, and critique.⁵⁵ On the surface, this kind of participation *should* be appealing to avant-garde creators who have noted their preference for “active” participants. But really, they merely desire those readers who can recognize the inherent value in their works. As art and entertainment forms continue to give readers and audiences more power, the avant-garde will be continuously pushed to the margins by

⁵⁴ For more see: “The Reason Why Hollywood Makes So Many Boring Superhero Movies,” by Derek Thompson in *The Atlantic* on May 13, 2014

⁵⁵ For more see: Josiah Renaudin’s *Tearaway Unfolded Review* published on *Gamespot* September 2, 2015.

publishing practices, and these writers will have to decide if they want to continue or destroy the *ourosboros* they have created. In turn, as media invite readers to adopt writerly roles, critics must continue to conceptualize the ways in which author-reader dynamics have been blurred to better understand reader desires and expectations in the twenty-first century.

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