

ON LONGING

Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic,

the Souvenir, the Collection



S U S A N S T E W A R T

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*Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic,
the Souvenir, the Collection*

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*For my mother and grandmothers—
Delores Stewart, Alice Stewart, and Nellie Brown*

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PREFACE/HYPERBOLE

This essay centers on certain metaphors that arise whenever we talk about the relation of language to experience or, more specifically, whenever we talk about the relation of narrative to its objects. These metaphors—history and stasis, inside and outside, partiality and transcendence—form the focus of the discussion in this work as I ask: How can we describe something? What relation does description bear to ideology and the very invention of that ‘something’? and, analogously, What does exaggeration, as a mode of signification, exaggerate? Narrative is seen in this essay as a structure of desire, a structure that both invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap between signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the symbolic. Therefore my reader will discover that I am particularly interested in the social disease of nostalgia as I examine the relations of narrative to origin and object, and that herein lies the reason I have chosen a kind of ache as my title. For the word *longing* has a number of meanings which, taken together, in fact encompass this study of narrative, exaggeration, scale, and significance: yearning desire, the fanciful cravings incident to women during pregnancy, belongings or appurtenances.

If we look to the first meaning of *longing*, “yearning desire,” we see that, according to the list of examples in the *OED*, it experiences a split in the eighteenth century. In 1713 (Addison) we find: “Whence this pleasing hope, this fond desire, this longing after immortality?”

And in 1748 (*Anson's Voyage*): "Our native country, for which many of us by this time began to have great longings." My point is not to note the death of immortality, but rather to note that the location of desire, or, more particularly, the direction of force in the desiring narrative, is always a future-past, a deferment of experience in the direction of origin and thus eschaton, the point where narrative begins/ends, both engendering and transcending the relation between materiality and meaning. Yet the particular content of this desire is subject to historical formation. A hundred and twenty-seven years before *Anson's Voyage*, Burton wrote: "'Tis a childish humour to hane after home, to be discontent at that which others seek; to prefer, as base Icelanders and Norwegians do, their own ragged island before Italy or Greece, the gardens of the world. . . . All places are distant from heaven alike, the sun shines haply as warm in one city as in another, and to a wise man there is no difference of climes; friends are everywhere to him that behaves himself well, and a prophet is not esteemed in his own country" (*Anatomy of Melancholy*, pt. 2, sec. 3, mem. 4, p. 175). Who is the homesick partner in this dialogue? By the mid eighteenth century he has a name and his own category of insanity, his own refusal of the present.

The second meaning of *longing*, "the fanciful cravings incident to women during pregnancy," takes us closer to an imagined location of origin, be it the transcendent with its seeming proximity to the immortal or the rural/agrarian with its seeming proximity to the earth; for it is in pregnancy that we see the articulation of the threshold between nature and culture, the place of margin between the biological "reality" of splitting cells and the cultural "reality" of the beginning of the symbolic. Out of this dividing—this process of differentiation and relation—the subject is generated, both created and separated from what it is not; and that initial separation/joining has a reproductive capacity that is the basis for the reproductive capacity of all signifiers. Following Kristeva ("Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini"), we might focus here on the "elsewhere" of pregnancy as such a threshold: in French, *enceinte*, "walled in," the enclosure by which maternity is both valorized and made marginal; in English one might say "my confinement." As a place apart, the threshold of pregnancy is characterized by an overabundance of the natural/instinctual at the same time that it is the precondition of the cultural/symbolic. Kristeva writes that "[in pregnancy] this tendency toward equalization, which is seen as a regressive extinction of symbolic capabilities does not, however, reduce differences; it resides within the smallest, most archaic, and most uncertain of differences. It is powerful sublimation and indwelling of the symbolic within instinctual drives. It

affects this series of 'little differences—resemblances'. . . . Before founding society in the same stroke as signs and communications, they are the precondition of the latter's existence . . ." (p. 240).

The instinctual "cravings" of maternity are "fanciful" (cravings/carvings), for as symptoms of ingestion they represent both the generalized and the internalized longing that the very adjective *fanciful* seeks to naturalize as a longing for biological perpetuation. Maternity's generation of the series—that is, the generation of the object and object relations—is an incorporative gesture; and it is in the interdependence of the elements of the series that their regenerative power resides. Hence the derivation of the second meaning of *longing*—"the longing mark," or impression, left by the mother's desire. Trace or scar, this impression finds its synonym in the generative metaphor of writing, which here is an unconscious inscription upon the developing consciousness of the child and the eruption of the mark that before had no name.

The third meaning of *longing*, "belongings or appurtenances," continues this story of the generation of the subject. I am particularly interested here in the capacity of narrative to generate significant objects and hence to both generate and engender a significant other. Simultaneously, I focus upon the place of that other in the formation of a notion of the interior. Here we might remember the meaning of appurtenance as appendage, the part that is a whole, the addition to the body which forms an attachment, transforming the very boundary, or outline, of the self. The function of belongings within the economy of the bourgeois subject is one of supplementarity, a supplementarity that in consumer culture replaces its generating subject as the interior milieu substitutes for, and takes the place of, an interior self. Thus in the beginning of this essay I focus upon certain conventions of description as they developed in postindustrial genres, particularly conventions of point of view, "exactness," distance, and temporality. The reader who arose from the mechanical reproduction of literature is a reader acutely aware of the disjunction between book as object and book as idea. And the solitude of his or her reading takes place within the milieu of the bourgeois domestic, a milieu of interior space miming the creation of both an interior text and an interior subject.

These conventions of description are intimately bound up with the conception of time as it is both portrayed in the work and partaken of by the work. By means of its conventions of depiction, temporality, and, ultimately, closure, narrative here seeks to "realize" a certain formulation of the world. Hence we can see the many narratives that dream of the inanimate-made-animate as symptomatic of all narra-

tive's desire to invent a realizable world, a world which "works." In this sense, every narrative is a miniature and every book a microcosm, for such forms always seek to finalize, bring closure to, a totality or model.

The miniature is considered in this essay as a metaphor for the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject. Analogously, the gigantic is considered as a metaphor for the abstract authority of the state and the collective, public, life. In examining narratives of the miniature and the gigantic, I attempt to outline the ways in which these discourses of the self and the world mutually define and delimit one another. The problems uncovered in such narratives—problems of inside and outside, visible and invisible, transcendence and partiality of perspective—point to the primary position the body must take in my argument. The body is our mode of perceiving scale and, as the body of the other, becomes our antithetical mode of stating conventions of symmetry and balance on the one hand, and the grotesque and the disproportionate on the other. We can see the body as taking the place of origin for exaggeration and, more significantly, as taking the place of origin for our understanding of metonymy (the incorporated bodies of self and lover) and metaphor (the body of the other). It is this very desire of part for whole which both animates narrative and, in fact, creates the illusion of the real.

At the conclusion to the essay I look at two devices for the objectification of desire: the souvenir and the collection. The souvenir may be seen as emblematic of the nostalgia that all narrative reveals—the longing for its place of origin. Particularly important here are the functions of the narrative of the self: that story's lost point of identity with the mother and its perpetual desire for reunion and incorporation, for the repetition that is not a repetition. The souvenir seeks distance (the exotic in time and space), but it does so in order to transform and collapse distance into proximity to, or approximation with, the self. The souvenir therefore contracts the world in order to expand the personal. I go on to examine the ways in which the collection furthers the process of commodification by which this narrative of the personal operates within contemporary consumer society. A final transformation of labor into exchange, nature into marketplace, is shown by the collection. Significantly, the collection marks the space of nexus for all narratives, the place where history is transformed into space, into property. Whereas the first part of this essay examines narratives that are generated by objects, the second part examines the ways in which the souvenir and the collection are objects generated by means of narrative. The creation of such narrated objects depends upon the fictions and abstractions of the bourgeois

self on the one hand and the exchange economy on the other. In the final phases of late capitalism, history itself appears as a commodity.

Thus this essay is an exploration of the meaning of exaggeration, but in saying so I do not mean to privilege any given notion of the normal. Under a use-value economy, exaggeration takes place in relation to the scale of proportion offered by the body. Although this body is culturally delimited, it functions nevertheless as the instrument of lived experience, a place of mediation that remains irreducible beyond the already-structured reductions of the sensory, the direct relation between the body and the world it acts upon. Yet once the abstractions of exchange are evident, exaggeration must be seen in relation to the scale of measurement, and thereby the scale of values, offered by a more abstract domain of social convention—and that social convention achieves its ideological force by virtue of the powers of authority. Although we must acknowledge, as Marx did, that the senses and the very notion of “lived experience” are the products of social history, it seems worthwhile to distinguish between levels of abstraction within this given formulation of the direct and the mediated. Furthermore, to distinguish between such levels begins to give us an account of the process by which the body itself can become a commodity. This process of alienation further emphasizes the legitimacy of a social notion of an “authentic body”; in other words, we must take into account the fact that the possibility of an unalienated subject and an unmediated relation to nature can find expression only within an equally ideological, even utopian, sphere.

If authority is invested in domains such as the marketplace, the university, or the state, it is necessary that exaggeration, fantasy, and fictiveness in general be socially placed within the domains of anti- and nonauthority: the feminine, the childish, the mad, and the senile, for example. In formulating the loci of authority and exaggeration in this way, we necessarily and nostalgically must partake in the lost paradise of the body and the myths of the margin, the outside. Exaggeration always reveals the cheap romance that is reality, but then it must move on.

This essay focuses upon a Western tradition because I wanted to limit what is already an interdisciplinary scope and because the modes of exaggeration discussed relate to a particular set of historical developments. Yet the essay itself is a collection and not a chronicle: I am more concerned with presenting a display of heterogeneity than with accounting for a model of causality. Except for some remarks on tourist art, I have left out any discussion of the rich non-Western tradition of experiments with scale and the fantastic. Forms such as the Japanese netsuke, the Persian and Indian miniatures, the Indone-

sian and Chinese giants, and the miniature genres of Somali poetry could not be discussed without doing extraordinary violence to their meaning in context.

The notes and bibliography that follow this essay are meant to be an acknowledgment of intellectual and, at times, pragmatic debts, but I would like to note that in particular the works of Bakhtin, Bachelard, and Baudrillard have broken ground for a semiotic analysis and critique of the relations between narrative and "the system of objects."

Parts of this essay were read at the international semiotics conference "Il linguaggio del gioco" held in Montecatini Terme in October 1979; at meetings of the Modern Language Association, the American Folklore Society, and the Temple University English Department's Journal Club in 1981 and 1982; and at the Tudor and Stuart Club of the Johns Hopkins University in 1982. The comments of the participants on those occasions were inestimably useful. Funds from two Temple University Summer Research grants and participation in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar in the sociolinguistics of literature, led by John F. Szwed at the University of Pennsylvania, provided valuable resources. I would like to thank the following colleagues in particular for various kinds of help, from preliminary encouragement to final revision: Tim Corrigan, Amanda Dargan, Stanley Fish, Edward Hirsch, Philip Holland, Debora Kodish, Gary Saul Morson, Craig Schafer, Amy Shuman, Alan Singer, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, John Szwed, Jane Tompkins, and Ana Cara Walker. Nadia Kravchenko typed the manuscript with a sense of grace and precision, and my editor at The Johns Hopkins University Press, William P. Sisler, once again served as diplomat and ally. Nora Pomerantz gave the proof her careful attention. Finally, I want to thank Daniel Halevy and Jacob Stewart-Halevy, who were happy to help me see this book to its conclusion.

ON LONGING

PROLOGUE

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

—Wittgenstein

Back toward town we glided, past the straight and thread-like pines, past a dark tree-dotted pond where the air was heavy with a dead sweet perfume. White slender-legged curlews flitted by us, and the garnet blooms of the cotton looked gay against the green and purple stalks. A peasant girl was hoeing in the field, white-turbaned and black-limbed. All this we saw, but the spell still lay upon us.

—W. E. B. DuBois

L*et me begin with the invisibility and blindness of the suburbs. Between classes, a fundamental slippage—the absence of the landscape of voyage. The suburbs present us with a negation of the present; a landscape consumed by its past and its future. Hence the two foci of the suburbs: the nostalgic and the technological. A butterchurn fashioned into an electric light, a refrigerator covered by children's drawings, the industrial "park," the insurance company's "campus." The celibacy of the suburbs articulates its inversion of nature: the woman becomes a sun, the man a revolving moon. Here is a landscape of apprehension: close to nature, and not consumed by her; close to culture, close enough to consume her. In the topography of the suburbs is revealed the topography of the family, the development, a network of social relations and their articulated absences. To walk in the suburbs is to announce a crippling, a renunciation of speed. In the suburbs only outsiders walk, while the houses are illuminated as stages, scenes of an uncertain action. In these overapparent arrangements of interior space, confusion and distance mark the light.*

The countryside: space ideal, space of childhood and death. The forest remote, water mirroring not ourselves but the infinite distance of sky. Within patterns of nature, we search for traces of the human: a tiny rowboat pulled up to shore, the oars folded and asleep. Perhaps a figure, but microscopic, and on the edge of some oblivion—a cliff, or the other side of the painting. Everywhere signs of cultivation and wilderness: the plowed field of poetic lines, the ax left leaning against a colossal tree. The countryside unfolds, maplike before

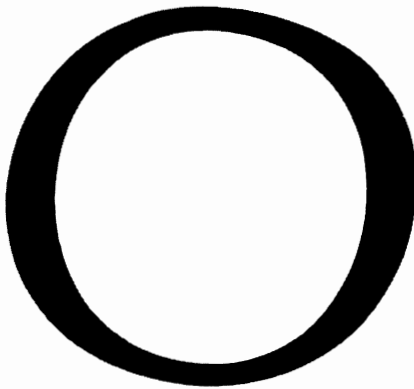
us, simultaneous and immediate. And yet always the problems of horizon and distance, the problems of depth and breadth. As we begin to traverse the field of vision, the tragedy of our partial knowledge lies behind us. The distance becomes infinite, each step an illusion of progress and movement. Our delight in flying comes from the revelation of countryside as sky and sea, from the transcendence we experience over vast spaces. Yet to see the thin and disappearing signature of the jet is to see the poverty of this flight to omniscience; in each photo appears the grim machinery of the wing. In the notion of return, of cycle, of the reclamation of landscape, lies the futility and productive possibility of human making.

To walk in the city is to experience the disjuncture of partial vision/partial consciousness. The narrativity of this walking is belied by a simultaneity we know and yet cannot experience. As we turn a corner, our object disappears around the next corner. The sides of the street conspire against us; each attention suppresses a field of possibilities. The discourse of the city is a syncretic discourse, political in its untranslatability. Hence the language of the state elides it. Unable to speak all the city's languages, unable to speak all at once, the state's language becomes monumental, the silence of headquarters, the silence of the bank. In this transcendent and anonymous silence is the miming of corporate relations. Between the night workers and the day workers lies the interface of light; in the rotating shift, the disembodiment of lived time. The walkers of the city travel at different speeds, their steps the hand-writing of a personal mobility. In the milling of the crowd is the choking of class relations, the interruption of speed, and the machine. Hence the barbarism of police on horses, the sudden terror of the risen animal.

Here are three landscapes, landscapes "complete" and broken from one another as a paragraph is. And at the edge of town, the camp of the gypsies.

1. ON DESCRIPTION AND THE BOOK

Still Life



ut of these landscapes, the distinction of point of view. In a world where access to speed is access to transcendence, point of view is particularly a narrative gesture. The point of view of landscape is no longer still, is instead a matter of practice and transformation. Modernism's suspicion of point of view can be seen as a critique of omniscience, but a critique rooted in a self-consciousness that pro-

claims an omniscience of its own ontology, its own history. Point of view offers two possibilities: partial and complete. What remains silent is the third and anonymous possibility—blindness, the end of writing.

In allegory the vision of the reader is larger than the vision of the text; the reader dreams to an excess, to an overabundance. To read an allegorical narration is to see beyond the relations of narration, character, desire. To read allegory is to live in the future, the anticipation of closure beyond the closure of narrative. This vision is eschatological: its obsessions are not with origins. For Bunyan at the end of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, the reader's failure at closure will result in repetition, a further inscription of the narrative upon the world. For Bunyan, repetition proclaims the cyclical and identical patterns of history. Each turn through the text will result in the same reading. The locus of action is not in the text but in the transformation of the reader.¹ Once this transformation is effected, point of view is

complete, filled out to the edges. And wherever we look, we see the work of this closure—the image is indelibly stamped upon the world.

This confidence in the circularity of history and the complete vision of closure is broken with the advent of the industrial revolution, the advent of a new kind of realism and a novel kind of “psychological” literature. As Ian Watt has told us,² two shifts in the concept of realism took place at the beginning of the eighteenth century. First, from the Renaissance onward, a tendency to replace collective experience with individual experience had evolved. And second, the particularity of everyday life and the individual’s experience in *this* world became the locus of the real.³ Thus the realism of allegory has been displaced, has moved from the reader’s “quickening,” an internal recognition of signs through reading, to the reader’s apprehension of an immediate environment that is nevertheless external and continually changing. The reader is in an observer’s position, yet his or her vision remains partial because of this externality of time and space. The eschatological vision of allegory makes the reader the producer of the text in the sense that closure can be achieved only through conversion. But the production of the eighteenth-century novel is divided between the author and his reader, and the reader’s production is subsidiary to, and imitative of, the author’s work. We may see the picaresque on the interface between these two forms, the picaro an outsider, a “reader” of a set of locations on the one hand, yet, on the other hand, simply another character, whose partial vision as an outsider makes him or her ridiculous. In this generic progression, the convention of the “wandering viewpoint” has emerged,⁴ a convention whereby the reader is situated *within* the text, moving alongside a diversely coordinated set of textual time systems. Thus a new process of reading evolves from this new form of realism, a reading which gives the reader the status of a character. The reader comes to “identify with” the position of Tom Jones, Pamela, Joseph Andrews, with the “proper name” and not with a lesson, a signified. The reader becomes a character, a figure who looks for signs or clues—not a reader of signs and clues that fit together into a moral puzzle solved through the eschatology of closure, but a reader of signs for their own sake, a reader of correspondences between the signs of the world, the immediate environment of everyday life, and the signs of the novel. Thus the sign in the realistic novel leads not to the revelation of a concealed meaning uncovered but to further signs, signs whose signified becomes their own interiority, and hence whose function is the production and reproduction of a particular form of subjectivity.

In this productive mapping of sign upon sign, world upon world,

reality upon reality, the criterion of exactness emerges as a value. And exactness, always a matter of a concealed slippage between media, is moved from the abstract, the true-for-all-times-and-places of allegory, to the material, the looking-just-like, that sleight of hand which is the basis for this new realism. The allegorical figure who moves in a binary fashion within a world by means of correct and incorrect actions is replaced by a member looking for signs. Exactness is a mirror, not of the world, but of the ideology of the world. And what is described exactly in the realistic novel is "personal space," the space of property, and the social relations that take place within that space. We must remember that Crusoe sees the social as a mark upon, a tainting of, his private space, and greets the trace of the human with "terror of mind": "Then terrible Thoughts rack'd my Imagination about their having found my Boat, and that there were People here; and that if so, I should certainly have them come again in greater Numbers, and devour me; that if it should happen so that they should not find me, yet they would find my Enclosure, destroy all my Corn, carry away all my Flock of tame Goats, and I should perish at last for meer Want."⁵ Yet the illusion of the emperor surrounded by his riches, the illusion of Crusoe, lord of the island, is the most inimically social of all illusions.

The movement from realism to modernism and postmodernism is a movement from the sign as material to the signifying process itself. The reflexivity of the modernist use of language calls attention not to the material existence of a world lying beyond and outside language but to the world-making capacity of language, a capacity which points to the arbitrariness of the sign at the same time that it points to the world as a transient creation of language. Like the first juncture between pre- and post-eighteenth-century fiction, this shift toward the sign itself can be linked to the development of the political economy. The exchange value of language, a value we see at work in oral genres even in modern society (e.g., the reciprocity of puns, the joke-swapping session), is replaced by a form of what we might, in analogy, call surplus value. Literary discourse is performed not within the ongoingness of conversation but in the largely private production and apprehension of the text, and the relationship between literary production and consumption becomes one of increasing distance in time and space. The forms of alienation arising from preferences for difficulty and the exotic as qualities of the modernist text reflect an increasing distance between the forces of literary production and those of literature's general consumption. At the same time, they reveal the concentration of those productive forces resulting in and from the hegemony of mass culture.

In his essay *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean MacCannell suggests that we see the relation between commodities as a "semiotic" one: "In Marx's treatment of it, the system of commodity production under capitalism resembles nothing so much as a language. A language is entirely social, entirely arbitrary and fully capable of generating meanings in itself."⁶ Yet to say that the system of commodity production "resembles" language is not enough; it is necessary to outline the nature of that resemblance, to note the symbolic nature of the commodity once it is transformed from use value to exchange value and defined within a system of signs and their oppositions. "It is possible to consider the exchange of commodities as a semiotic phenomenon not because the exchange of goods implies a physical exchange, but because in the exchange the *use value* of the goods is transformed into their *exchange value*—and therefore a process of signification or *symbolization* takes place, this later being perfected by the appearance of money, which *stands for something else*," writes Umberto Eco.⁷ Hence the notion of a "pure semiotic" realm of exchange; a realm analogous to the most reductive accounts of a pure "poetic language" (Hugo Ball, for example) would find its locus in the gift shop and in the deliberate superfluity of "tokens of affection."

If we consider the relation between commodity production and the organization of fictive forms as part of an entire semiotic system, we can posit an isomorphism between changes in genre and changes in other modes of production. Not the least important implication of this relation is the influence of generic changes upon the prevailing notion of history as narrative. In other words, the distances between audience and performer in a culture's genre repertoire outline the place of the self as agent, actor, and subject of history.

Just as genre may be defined as a set of textual expectations emergent in time and determined by (and divergent from) tradition, so history may be seen as a convention for the organization of experience in time. Yet historical and generic conventions cannot be mapped upon the real; rather, these conventions are emergent in the prevailing ideological formations that are the basis for the social construction of the real. Here we might take our position from Vološinov:

Genres are definable in terms of specific combinations of features stemming from the double orientation in life, in reality, which each type of artistic "form of the whole" commands—an orientation at once from outside in and from inside out. What is at stake in the first instance is the actual status of the work as social fact: its definition in real time and space; its means and mode of performance; the kind of audience presupposed and the relationship between author and

audience established; its association with social institutions, social mores and other ideological spheres; in short—its full “situational” definition.⁸

Rooted in the ideological, the literary genre determines the shape and progress of its material; but, at the same time, the genre itself is determined by the social formations from which it arises. The relation between literary producer and consumer will be reflected in the form of the genre. Consider, for example, the rule of turn-taking, which plays such an important part in our concept of “conversation” and in the various “conversational genres”: repartee, verbal dueling, riddling, punning, telling proverbs, telling jokes and joking, and constructing narratives of personal experience. The reciprocity of the utterance underlies both fictive and nonfictive forms in these conversational contexts. But with the creation of fictive worlds that are removed in time and space from the context of situation, an increasing distance is placed between producer and consumer and the symmetry of conversational reciprocity is replaced by the specialized values of performer and spectator. The spectacle, the stage play, the novel, exemplify this increasing distance between performer and audience.

In his careful exploration of these distances in relation to folkloric forms, Roger Abrahams has suggested that

at some arbitrary point in the unarticulated—but obviously unconsciously sensed—spectrum of performer-audience relationships, folklorists decide that there is too great a distance between the performer and his audience to call an enactment folklore. . . . A similar and equally arbitrary cut-off point is observable in the realm of material folklore. In this case, however, the relationship with which we are concerned is between *maker* and *user*, not performer and audience. At some point of the maker-user relationship spectrum, the removal between the two becomes so pronounced that we call it a product of technology, not material folklore.⁹

We might go on to address the historical and ideological formations underlying these shifts in genre. For example, in a reciprocal-exchange economy, performer and audience are functions of situation, functions into which (if only theoretically) any social member can step. But in a society in which these roles are specialized, the role becomes larger than the member who assumes it; the role is determinate. The mysterious power of our metaphor of “the person behind the mask, the person underneath all this ‘role playing,’” arises from the stratification brought about by the latter phenomenon. Rather than being in time, in history, these latter and increasingly fictive genres are viewed as being outside time and unmodified by the