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"Oh, Must We Dream Our Dreams And Have Them Too?": Transformation Through Reading In Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions Of Travel," Carol Shields' Swann, And Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck's The Lives Of Others

Carissa Anne Green

"OH, MUST WE DREAM OUR DREAMS AND HAVE THEM TOO?": TRANSFORMATION THROUGH READING IN ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL," CAROL SHIELDS' *SWANN,* AND FLORIAN HENCKEL VON DONNERSMARCK'S *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*

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Carissa Anne Green
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Sheryl O'Donnell, Ph.D., Chairperson

Eric Wolfe, Ph.D., Committee Member

Yvette Koepke, Ph.D., Committee Member

This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

Wayne Swisher, Ph.D.
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

Literary scholars study how readers interpret texts. Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, and Wayne Booth analyze how readers interact with texts transactionally, as a phenomenology, and as an ethical exchange. This grounding gives a foundation on which to analyze and define the interpretive acts demonstrated by readers. Poststructuralist critics Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida open up the idea of "text," allowing us to apply our phenomenology of reading beyond words on paper. I apply the work of these and other critics not to the readers of texts but to characters depicted within texts who are readers. These characters confront unfamiliar texts, interpret using codes of reading, and through acts of writing are transformed into better readers and members of communities. The works under consideration are Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Questions of Travel," Carol Shields' novel, *Swann: A Mystery,* and Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck's film, *The Lives of Others.*

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> *The novelist's happy discovery was to think of substituting for those opaque sections, impenetrable by the human spirit, their equivalent in immaterial sections, things, that is, which the spirit can assimilate to itself. After which it matters not that the actions, the feelings of this new order of creatures appear to us in the guise of truth, since we have made them our own, since it is in ourselves that they are happening, that they are holding in thrall, while we turn over, feverishly, the pages of the book, our quickened breath and staring eyes.*
>
> –Marcel Proust
> *Swann's Way*

Reading is a fundamentally human act. We read as a way to encounter the world, as we breathe, as we speak, as we love. Reading satisfies a need for connection and communication, information and entertainment, inspiration and enlightenment. The multiplicity of works that humans read is too great to recount here – from simple one-word street signs, birthday cards, official documents, to multi-volume works of literature. Our texts are culturally- and even situation-specific, or they have the potential to transcend place and time and be relevant across the globe and through thousands of years. For many scholars of literature, the impetus to devote themselves to the study of texts comes from an early attachment to reading in which some particular text – or the act of reading itself – affected them deeply. Somehow, we know that narratives have the power to hold us and teach us about the human condition, and as readers, we will chase that knowledge again and again. Literary scholars continue this pursuit by working with

the more sophisticated question "how does this text work?" One way to answer this question is to look at characters in the text, how they are constructed, and how that construction affects the work as a whole. This study will examine three texts in which readers appear, not as subjects of literary study, but as characters who themselves divine the power of reading and interpretation as transformative experience. This transformation is seen when readers in the texts change fundamentally through their acts of interpretation. The reading character has a greater worldview and sees his or her place in it and ability to affect it more clearly. Additionally, that reader carries out new actions – often an act of rewriting – because of the interpretive experience, thus altering his or her world. When we see this pattern of reading, interpretation, and writing, leading to personal transformation, we can recognize a familiar pattern of character development and anticipate it in further works.

Concern with the reader and audience has been part of literature and literary study from classical times. Plato and Ion discussed it. Homer played to it. Charlotte Bronte let her character, Jane Eyre, speak directly to her audience when she gives final release to the story's dramatic tension, declaring without apology, "Reader, I married him" (527). Since Aristotle and his *Poetics*, the question of who the reader is and what he or she is doing when engaged in this act has been the purview of literary critics. Modernist critics have taken a particular interest in the reader's role. Louise Rosenblatt's groundbreaking work *Literature as Exploration* puts forward a democratic treatment of reading in which teachers can guide students in a transactional approach with texts. As readers learn to decode meaning, Rosenblatt encourages a positivist epistemology incorporating past

experience and newly-learned information. The work of reading is for Rosenblatt an act of assembly, each element of the text available for the reader's use:

> In the past, reading has too often been thought of as an interaction, the printed page impressing its meaning on the reader's mind or the reader extracting the meaning embedded in the text. Actually, reading is a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context. The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed. (26)

This recursive movement means the reader is always an active interpreter, not a passive receiver of information. Readers become not only choosers of texts but also choosers of meanings, revisers, re-readers, and re-interpreters. Rosenblatt celebrates this multiplicity, declaring, "Meaning emerges as the reader carries on a give-and-take with the signs on the page" (26). Earlier critics and scholars, who looked at meaning in text as something to be discovered and not necessarily interpreted, put primacy on the text; Rosenblatt, and most who follow her, see that "meaning is not 'in' the text or 'in' the reader. Both reader and text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning" (27). When meaning is declared to be interpretive, not intrinsic, this is an exciting prospect because it opens up the possibilities that come from later critics, including reader-response and poststructuralists, that meaning is always open and in play. The reader is not an empty vessel accepting meaning but a meaning-maker, and with that active participation, the possibility of transformation also is in play.

Wayne C. Booth, in his classic *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* explains how narrative works, from a reader's perspective. The book explores the kinds of choices a writer makes to shape a text and how a reader may make meaning for him or herself. Booth also works to illuminate the implicit relationship between the author and reader through the text. Booth contends that all literature makes use of rhetoric to engage and guide the reader. A reader will then make use of interpretive or decoding skills to engage with the text. In Booth's model, the critical reader is making explicit a process that is intrinsically present but generally overlooked:

> When we read without critical preconceptions, we ordinarily take this dimension of literature for granted; we are not in the least shocked when we discover that the author has, in fact, worked to make his subject available to us. We think of the writer as someone who addresses us, who wants to be read, and who does what he can to make himself readable. (105)

The author and reader have a relationship that works on many levels. One of these is the critical level. Within these relationships, both the reader and the author have responsibilities to each other; among the reader's responsibilities is to approach the text with an openness to what it offers. Booth further defines this relationship as an ethical exchange between author, text, and reader in his book, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*:

> Ethical criticism attempts to describe the encounters of a story-teller's ethos with that of the reader or listener. Ethical critics need not begin with the intent to evaluate, but their descriptions will always entail appraisals of

> the value of what is described: there are no neutral ethical terms, and a fully responsible ethical criticism will make explicit those appraisals that are implicit whenever a reader or listener reports on stories about human beings in action. (8-9)

As we analyze the readers in the texts of this study we will see that this kind of open, ethical reading is necessary for the characters' ultimate transformations. Indeed, the characters must abandon preconceptions, open their reading models, and turn to writing in order to fully engage with the texts in question and complete their interpretations.

We can learn more about the relationship of reader to text and author from Wolfgang Iser. He describes a phenomenological approach that "lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text" (*Implied* 274). Again, we see the give-and-take inherent in the reading process; the reader is not merely waiting for the message but participating in its creation. In fact, Iser acknowledges that no text can contain every possible bit of information for a reader. Analyzing the way the author constructs the text to guide the reader to fill in those "gaps" is part of the work of the critic, according to Iser:

> The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader—though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be

> identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. (*Implied* 274-275)

When the author and the reader are both assigned responsibilities toward the text there is both a balance and a tension. The readers in question must bring their skills of interpretation to the texts they encounter to be able to progress to creation of their own texts and personal transformation.

The reader-response critics help us to understand the relationship between author, text and reader. But in this study we will not merely be looking at the responses of the reader to the text, but also, more importantly, texts in which characters are presented as readers – interpreters of situations that are sometimes not printed texts at all. The post-structuralist critics help us to further apply these ideas of the reader to another level of the text – what's happening inside the narrative – and allow us to apply these ideas to situations within the story that are not even driven by a printed text, but in these cases by an encounter with landscape during travel or the surveillance of a political suspect. Each of the three works to be discussed here is a sort of text: Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Questions of Travel," Carol Shields' novel *Swann: A Mystery*, and Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck's film *The Lives of Others* (which, of course, comes partly from a printed screenplay). In both the poem and the film, the reading characters are analyzing experiences – the poet examines her own life, and the film's key character examines both his own life and that of the artists whom he is asked to observe. This is still reading as the act of personal interpretation Rosenblatt describes. For we can now recognize "text" as a signpost for anything under analysis – a poem, a novel, a film, a piece of street art, a plate of haute cuisine, or the experiences in a particular period of life organized as a singular

event. The signs that make up the thing to be analyzed become the text, the substitution for words on a page, even as the words themselves substitute for the "things" they mean. Jacques Derrida's dictum that "There is nothing outside of the text" releases the bounds of text (158). Because, as Derrida said, "there is no linguistic sign before writing," and we understand the world – we interpret everything – through language in which "reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos" (14). Primacy is experience, and experience is language, and therefore, life is a text to be constructed and analyzed. Everything is in play, and the movement between sign and signifier, their natural switching of places, and substitution, is an excitement that opens the world for readers and allows them to analyze in a way that then opens up the readers' lives themselves, creating room for expansion and transformation of the self, a greater sensitivity, appreciation of nature, or art, or ethics, or community. The readers in these chosen texts are using the tools of analysis open to them – especially the conventions of reading and their own life experiences – to interpret what is before them. They will then use that reading to act – essentially an act of re-writing – to better understand themselves and their relationship to the community to which they belong.

We most readily associate reading with text – printed words on the page with generally agreed-upon meanings. But those meanings are never absolute; they are always somewhat in flux. And those meanings find their locus in the reader, according to philosopher Roland Barthes:

> Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (148)

The destination being the reader, reading is an act of interpretation. And that interpretation is not fixed, as the reader can ignore, supplement, modify, and re-imagine the codes by which he or she has read a particular work. The words on the page may not change, but their meaning is different for each reader. It is the endless multiplicity of interpretation that keeps works open and in play. The works in this study, described below, take advantage of openness or multiplicity as readers in these texts use interpretation for personal transformation.

Elizabeth Bishop was orphaned at an early age. After a Vassar education, she moved frequently, living in Key West, New York, Brazil, San Francisco, and Boston, among other shorter stops elsewhere. Her sense of place and placelessness and the quest for home is a major thread in Bishop scholarship. Noted Bishop scholar David Kalstone and others explore how her writing is an attempt to regain a picture of home. "Questions of Travel" is the title poem of Bishop's 1965 collection, a book in which she works out her discovery of the world and deeper knowledge of herself, according to critic Bonnie Costello. In "Questions of Travel," the speaker initially is overwhelmed by a new

landscape encountered during travel.[1] She makes sense of it through the techniques of reading, and this is demonstrated as the poem develops and makes use of rhythm, image, metaphor and other literary devices. To a careful reader, the play of these techniques is the promise that he or she is in the world of a kindred spirit. Finally, the speaker has analyzed the experience to her comfort and satisfaction, mediating her expectations, fulfilled and unfulfilled, with the actual experience. Then the poem turns, and the reader is in her room, ready with her journal to take on the act of writing. She has come to her understanding and transformation through language, interpreted by reading, and now produces a new text that promises possibilities for future acts. The speaker indulges in making and re-making. It is through narrative that we can explore issues of the self and help to make sense of our lives, ultimately moving toward transformation.

Carol Shields' novel *Swann* delivers even more play in the world of texts. It becomes a metafiction or gloss on the act of reading itself, with its gentle satire and deep knowledge of the reading subject. *Swann* brings together a community of readers who share a common text, a volume of poems by murdered rural Canadian poet Mary Swann. Swann never really receives her own voice in the novel, but the text depicts several different readers of her work, and their interpretations keep her writing and persona in play. Each of the Swann readers uses the codes and techniques of reading unique to his or her own discipline – those of feminist scholar, literary biographer, newspaper columnist and editor, to name the major ones – to not only build up the reader's conception of self but to re-create the lost Mary Swann in a way that supports the individual's reading. The

[1] Although Bishop does not indicate a gender for the speaker in "Questions of Travel," for consistency in this discussion, the feminine pronoun will be used.

signifiers of Swann are in a constant, multiple, state of play, along with the identities her readers have constructed for themselves. Eventually, the extant texts of Swann's life – the copies of her book, along with her personal artifacts – disappear, and the only remaining "texts" are the readings themselves. At the end of the novel, the readers must come together to recover the lost poems. They must both abandon and champion their individual readings of Swann to collectively reassemble one of her poems. Is it her poem, culled from the memory of her readers? Is it their act of interpretation? It hardly matters because the pleasure is in the openness of reading and the communal act it inspires. The "mystery" of *Swann* is balanced by parodic elements in the writing style and character development. Clara Thomas identifies the varied writing techniques and styles Shields employs and parodies in the novel, including those evoking Atwood, Leacock, and Davies (*Slight* 109, 110, 112). The open readings of Mary Swann and her writing within the text lend credence to Booth's claim that such texts produce sympathetic readers. According to Booth, readers guard their interpretations because they are attached to them. The *Swann* readers must abandon their insecurities to join in the re-writing at the end of the novel and claim their transformational moment.

In *The Lives of Others*, a 2006 German film by director and writer Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck, we witness the ultimate transformation of a character, from a closed to an open reading. The film centers on a Stasi agent, Wiesler, who is highly adept at reading human lives. He has the interpretive tools to understand all kinds of nuances that allow him to ferret out "traitors" to the East German regime. He goes from interrogating political dissidents for possible imprisonment to becoming so captured by a life he is reading that he is compelled to save that life, to rewrite reports and manipulate

the story to prevent the man's downfall. His skill instills confidence in his interpretations and both self-confidence and the confident approval of his superiors, and he is chosen for a plum assignment: to listen in on the life of a socialist playwright. The experience of listening to the playwright's life – that of loyalist, artist, believer – turns upside-down the codes of reading to which Wiesler is accustomed. He normally reads those who despise the regime, who are trying to hide things, who perhaps use art to further subversive ends. The playwright, Dreyman, is living his life, unaware of the dual sign systems he is simultaneously dismantling and creating for Wiesler. The Stasi agent's familiar and comfortable interpretive system is initially upset, but the playwright eventually wins him over. Wiesler becomes fascinated by the items that make the signs of Dreyman's life: the birthday gifts from his treasured friends, the bed in which he makes love, even the text of Brecht poems that so deeply affects both men. On the other side of the fulcrum, Wiesler begins to see that his surveillance of Dreyman, the "good man," is politically motivated. Now distrustful of the people whom he previously had served loyally, Wiesler comes to interpret the playwright's life favorably, and he begins to take action. As things become more and more perilous for Dreyman and his lover, the actor Christa-Maria Sieland, Wiesler begins to manipulate the situation in their favor – in effect "rewriting" their story. He falsifies reports – actual texts – moves artifacts, and coaches Sieland into an appropriate script during her interrogation. And although his act of rewriting is admirable, the situation does not resolve well for Dreyman, Sieland, or Wiesler. Some time after the Wall falls, an act of reading and writing further transforms Dreyman and Wiesler. Dreyman is informed of the previous surveillance and goes to examine his Stasi file – the text of his interpreted life. He discovers Wiesler's manipulations – his re-

writings – and understands their intention. Although Dreyman had not been able to write, to produce the text of his art and profession, since Sieland's death, he now can bring the narrative back into play, writing a novel and dedicating it to Wiesler. Texts are in effect exchanged, and debt is repaid. The good man and the man made good by reading are intertwined in story.

Critics are split on the film. Some are deeply critical of its use of the Stasi era; others find it to be a corrective to the "ostalagie" or nostalgia for pre-unification Germany. However, returning to Iser, we can construct a reading of the film in which Wiesler's act of interpretive reading is recursive, and his re-reading forces change in his life due to the unfamiliar Dreyman text. Iser tells us that humans live what they produce and perform themselves, and these narratives force us to leave behind our preconceptions. Booth concurs that we live our lives through stories. Wiesler finds himself thrust into a new story, and he consents to it. Because he made himself vulnerable to the experience and embraces new codes, he can have his transformation.

As we identify readers within texts, their acts of interpretation leading to rewriting and transformation, we can recognize this model again and again. And there is pleasure knowing that reading is an affirmation of the self. Rosenblatt acknowledges the singularity of each reader's experience, and that singularity implies nearly limitless possibilities – multitudes contained within textual systems:

> What, then, happens in the reading of a literary work? The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experience, links the signs on the page with certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more

> particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to *him*. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his interfusion with the peculiar contribution of the text. (30)

The open-endedness of these texts is ethical and democratic and leaves ripe the possibilities for future similar acts – the reading of experience. Since we exist through language, we, like the readers in these texts, become de facto authors. Derrida claims this privilege for interpreting readers of all sorts: "When we speak of the writer and of the encompassing power of the language to which he is subject, we are not only thinking of the writer in literature" (159-160). Who is the writer in a textual system? It is both the person who produces the signs and the one who interprets them. We claim authority because we are readers: "We must begin *wherever we are . . . Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be" (Derrida 162). And so the reader is from the start an active interpreter. We become not only choosers of texts but also choosers of meanings, revisers, re-readers, and re-interpreters.

In this study, we will look at three works in which readers play a prominent role – not readers *of* the particular works, but readers *in* the particular works. And, we will see how the authors depict this recursive, open-ended act of interpretation. The reading characters in question will encounter an unfamiliar "text" and be at first confused, bewildered, or troubled by it. The readers will be forced to into an act of interpretation,

bringing to bear their experiences on this new situation and shaping meaning as best as they can. Meaning is found in this new situation – but it is a live, open-ended meaning. The act of reading as interpretation does not close off the text or experience for these characters – instead, it opens for them a new path, a bigger plane of interpretation than which they had had before. And finally, these readers become writers, creating their own texts, another act of interpretation, emphasizing the multiplicity of meaning in the experience, an ethical act in which meaning is possibility and growth: transformation.

CHAPTER II

THE INTERPRETING READER IN ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL"

In the same unassuming way she lived her life, Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) has become one of the major American poets of the 20th Century. Considered a "poet's poet," who maintained longstanding friendships with such writers as Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and James Merrill, her published output was relatively small, but she is seen as an original poet, hard to categorize into a "school" of writing, still a vital voice achieving emotional resonance through exquisite, precise description. Bishop lost her father to death and her mother to mental illness, and by age 5 was a de facto orphan being raised by distant relatives and shuttled between New England and Nova Scotia. In her adult years she lived in such places as Key West, Brazil, New York, and Boston, and her poetry often works at making sense of her life in these places through a nuanced understanding of geography and culture. The titles of several of her collections reflect this preoccupation: *North and South* (1946), *Questions of Travel* (1965), *Geography III* (1976).

"Questions of Travel" became the title of Bishop's 1965 collection, which emphasized these kinds of questions of existence, loss, selfhood, and discovery her critics have described, in the guise of travel experiences, the exploration of the unfamiliar details of place, specifically the transient place, the unstable place to which one does not

necessarily belong.[2] Kalstone identifies the purpose of the book in using landscape to discover the self:

> The volume . . . in effect constitutes a sequence of poems, its Brazilian landscape not so much providing answers as initiating us into the mysteries of how questions are asked. It is important that the book also includes poems about her Nova Scotia childhood and the central story of that period, "In the Village." In the light of those memories, the Brazilian poems become a model of how, with difficulty and pleasure, pain and precision, we re-introduce ourselves into a world. (*Temperaments* 28)

The poems are an exploration of the journey from child to adult, from home to home (the volume is dedicated to Bishop's Brazilian lover and partner, Lota de Macedo Soares), and from question to resolution. Indeed, the two nouns of the title are equally important. Questions proceed from travel but also balance it. The poet needs to explore her inner life as much as she needs to explore her surroundings. Because "home" is in flux, the poet's thoughts also are not settled. She can address her inner life, the problems posed by travel, her own rootlessness, the troublesome details of her surroundings. In Bishop's poetry, travel – outer exploration – provides the open environment for questioning – inner exploration. Critic David Walker rejects the descriptive travelogue for Bishop and instead identifies the poems as the locus for perception:

> What keeps these poems from representing mere exotica or a tourist's souvenirs is that Bishop herself always remains present as a kind of

[2] Robert Lowell, in a letter dated October 28, 1965, wrote to Bishop about *Questions of Travel*, "What a full and glorious book, even grander than I foresaw, thinking of the poems in ones and twos. There are marvelous things in the poems I haven't mentioned—I think particularly of the title poem" (Travisano and Hamilton 593).

> balancing or qualifying element, never content simply to accept the glittering surface as beneath. The details of Bishop's poems are always compelling, but they are never the whole point, even in those apparently most purely "descriptive." The true subject of the travel poems is the mysterious act of perception by means of which we learn to distinguish ourselves from the peculiar landscape and the bizarre artifact, and also to discover what binds us to them. (149)

This poem is indeed not just a list of details or observations about a landscape, but a reading that balances these observations with interpretations that allow the speaker a transformation and better understanding of herself.

"Questions of Travel" presents a speaker who is visiting a new place – a place she clearly has read about – and must confront disappointment, as the actuality of place does not match the expectations formed about it. Metaphoric language in the poem is disassembled then re-formed to emphasize these unmet expectations and the movement toward an interpreted experience, and the speaker of the poem closes the work by writing a reflection about travel. This three-part dynamic — confronting a new situation or text, and reading or interpreting it through a set of codes, then processing that reading through an act of re-writing — will be detailed for "Questions of Travel," then applied also to two other works, Carol Shields's novel, *Swann*, and Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck's film, *The Lives of Others,* as a model of transformation that can be identified in literature.

Many critics have noted Bishop is a poet of place, but that engagement with place is not merely drawing a description of landscape; it is a way to make sense of other things— often an attempt to find the locus of the self. Willard Spiegelman says, "It is no

surprise that Bishop should instinctively be a poet of *places*, because the conditions of placement—stasis, domesticity, routine, community—compensate for her natural humility in the face of the greater 'world' where she often feels estranged" (106). Kalstone claims the poet's autobiography shows up in her work, reflecting her inner landscape, as "Bishop's precise explorations become a way of countering and encountering a lost world. Merely to praise her 'famous eye' would be a way of avoiding larger issues. We need to know what is seen, and how the eye, with what Kenneth Burke calls its 'disguised rituals,' initiates us into human fears and wishes" (*Temperaments* 13). The images and details in the poems, then, are not just exquisite description. They are meaning-makers, leading readers toward psychological realizations about them and the speaker that presents them. Spiegelman characterizes the central conflict in the poem as "the philosophical dimension of the debate between movement and rest" (106). But both "Questions" and "Travel" are movement, as the direction of the poem is toward contemplation and organization through acts of reading, interpretation and writing.

"Questions of Travel" explores what is seen and interpreted by a traveler who is confronted with a new and overwhelming landscape.[3] Through an act of interpretation – an act of reading followed by writing – she wrestles with the larger philosophical questions of the travel experience. The questioning in the poem is not only natural but right, and the answers are both difficult and transformational. It is natural that Bishop

[3] Several authors have addressed "Questions of Travel" but are not discussed at length here. Kim Fortuny devotes an entire chapter of her book, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Art of Travel*, to the poem and how it relates to Bishop's Brazilian experiences, especially her feelings on class and colonialism. Fortuny reads the speaker of the poem as an uncertain character, heart-driven, analyzing in the way of Eliot's Prufrock. Susan McCabe explores issues of alterity in the poem and compares it with Claude Levi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*. Bishop biographer Brett C. Millier also recognizes the poem as an important part of Bishop's Brazilian work because of its struggle with understanding and acknowledgement of the speaker's role as outsider. Bonnie Costello covers the dualisms and contradictions in the poem – gains and loss through questioning – using Bishop's key conceit of travel.

would be acutely aware of the "other" within the travel experience, and especially poignant, as she searched for her permanent home – physical and spiritual – on and off for most of her life, and so often found herself in the position of outside observer. Kalstone describes the poet's yearning for home:

> The young woman who felt when she sailed to Europe in 1935 that she had no right to homesickness spent much of her life overcoming it. Anne Stevenson, the author of the first full-length book on Bishop is quite right in saying that Bishop's poems are not conventional travel poems and have much more to do with re-establishing the poet's own sense of place. Bishop was to remark that she always liked to *feel* exactly where she was, geographically, on the map. (*Becoming* 22)

We see this effort at placement, the search for home and permanence and roots in "Questions of Travel," as a sense-making endeavor: experience, decoded through reading, and finally deepened through personal writing.

Bishop's commitment to observation and detail drives "Questions of Travel," first in the overwhelming visual and visceral experience, then in the act of reading, decoding the experience, to make sense of it, to force it into a set of known codes, and finally in writing, the controlled broadening of the experience, and when the details are now not unmediated and uncontrolled experience but the speaker's own tools for contemplation and growth. Bishop critic Bonnie Costello also connects this poem with Bishop's concerns of discovering both the world and one's self, setting the speaker up for transformation:

> In many ways at once, the poem "Questions of Travel" is central in Bishop's work, for it both comments on and repeats the structure of the other poems. It again deals with travel, and with the feeling of being lost, overwhelmed, by change. It is structured in a series of observations that generate questions rather than answers. And again, the questions move increasingly inward, so that the quest for the external world becomes a quest for the self. The self-reflection in the poem is affirmative in mood, even while it is interrogative in form. (127-128)

It is natural that we should find a reader in a work that advertises and contains so many "questions." Curiosity cannot be sated by experience alone, but must be completed by the reader's interpretation. The decoding may actually lead to more questions, but this questioning is the root of interpretation, indicative of the transformation that is to come. The speaker sorts and categorizes and philosophizes all the way to the end of the experience, when the event is interpreted in an act of writing.

Costello identifies travel as a key conceit in Bishop's work, akin to being in a state of instability from which self-knowledge emerges. "Questions of Travel" can be seen as a central poem to understanding Bishop's work, as "Bishop both celebrates travel as leading to self-consciousness, and conversely declares there is no alternative to travel for the self-conscious person. The poem comes full circle to explain itself. In that sense it is not only a reflection on travel but a journey in its own right" (127). That journey is physical, emotional, and intellectual. Travel implies different, alternative, or new experiences, and that is certainly true in Bishop's writing. But travel also implies a homecoming, a return to the familiar, but now laden with the baggage of travel, the new

experiences that cause personal change. Thus the travel experience is necessarily one that destabilizes the traveler. Costello notes that Bishop allows for this, imbuing the travel poems with tangible objects that become object lessons and allows for the speaker's transformation on return:

> But travel without pause is tiring and unsatisfying. The problem of these poems becomes how to present moments of rest and coalescence which nonetheless preserve the sense that our condition is inherently restless. Bishop's solution is to create places, objects, figures representing a unity around which we collect ourselves, but at the same time symbolizing our transience. The double function of these images satisfies our ambivalence about travel. The self is kept expansive even while it experiences a needed coalescence. (128-129)

This coalescence manifests itself in "Questions of Travel" because in the poem the speaker, a reader, is able to interpret experience and then reassemble that experience in an act of writing. The poem is not merely a set of images but a careful exploration of an aspect of the human condition through those objects and images in Bishop's characteristic manner.

The poem demonstrates the challenge and process of reading and resolution through writing. The act of writing then brings the speaker to a point in which she is more equipped to deal with the world through language – the triumph that comes when the interpretation of art makes a more thoughtful human being. According to Booth, we perform this kind of interpretation constantly, adjusting our perceptions accordingly: "Even the life we think of as primary experience . . . is rarely experienced without some

sort of mediation in narrative; one of the chief arguments for an ethical criticism of narrative is that narratives make and remake what in realist views are considered more primary experiences – and thus make and remake ourselves" (*Company* 14). The value of life is not in the primary experience, but in the interpretation of it. Narrative shape and symbolic or imagistic meaning come from outside the event, but inside the reader, and the interpretive event is what makes the experience. Unmediated by language, experience lacks meaning, and therefore it cannot even be identified.

The path to knowledge through reading is important in Bishop's work. Indeed, in her major poem of identity, "In the Waiting Room," the little girl is reading *National Geographic* when she comes to a realization of her own selfhood and sees the overwhelming differences in the humanity pictured in the article before her.[4] The precision of detail allows readers of her work to assemble meanings with complexity and grace. It also allows us to recognize readerly activity within the text. In "Questions of Travel," this process of mediation and meaning-making is implicit, then made explicit, as a reader of the poem follows the speaker's journey and can assemble his or her own experience in a similar fashion, intensifying and mirroring the action of the poem. But instead of the uplifting transcendence one might expect from a travelogue, in this poem complications are made explicit through the reading process. The expectations put in place by prior reading are not fulfilled in the journey. The reading speaker is left with metaphors without antecedents, lost images, unconnected actions. She must then make

[4] For an interesting discussion of reading as a trope in "In the Waiting Room," including the child Elizabeth as reader, how the poem is read and mis-read, and how those misreadings potentially are encouraged by Bishop in her choices and modifications of purportedly autobiographical detail, see Lee Edelman, "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room.'" Robert Pinsky also places significance on the reading Elizabeth in "In the Waiting Room" in his essay "The Idiom of a Self: Elizabeth Bishop and Wordsworth."

sense of it all, as it is automatic, there is no choice. Booth explains: "The transition from what we think of as more primary (because 'real') to the experience of stories about it is so automatic and frequent that we risk losing our sense of just how astonishing our story worlds are, in their power to add 'life' upon 'life' – for good or ill" (*Company* 14). In "Questions of Travel," this sense of astonishment is revived by the speaker's work in recreating the experience by writing it into new images and metaphors, then turning to another writer's ideas to contemplate on a philosophical level and write a journal entry about the experience – first an instant reaction, then a contemplated interpretation that shows reading to be the primary activity of the poem. Here, reading and writing are perpetual arts, and the speaker becomes a better reader and writer, able to make sense out of experiences, mediate disappointments, and work at broader intellectual questions by continuing with them.

The speaker in "Questions of Travel" clearly has expectations about the place she is visiting. One can surmise from the poem that those expectations probably come from texts she has read, perhaps travelogues, or letters, guidebooks, or even fiction or poetry about or from the place. Reading, naturally, as an act of imagination and composition and configuration, sets up expectations that become the property of the reader. Imagination can surpass the actualities of experience, and interpretation is an act of imagination that leads to a mediated experience. When imagination is posited against actuality of experience, it is no longer a matter of interpretation but expectation, as Iser states, "With a literary text such comprehension is inseparable from the reader's expectations, and where we have expectations, there too we have one of the most potent weapons in the writer's armory—illusion" (*Implied* 284). And, in "Questions of Travel," when those

expectations aren't fulfilled but are shown to be unobtainable illusions, this leads initially to disappointment, but then the speaker is allowed to examine the experience through further reading and writing. This negotiation of expectation and disappointment means the reader can be "shattered, altered, surpassed, or deceived, so that the reader is confronted with something unexpected which necessitates a readjustment" (*Implied* 58). In "Questions of Travel," the reader must then re-write the experience, renegotiate and alter for herself the imaginative world that she has created – and by which she has been disappointed – and as Iser identifies as a model, "this in turn gives rise to an esthetic experience consisting of a continuous interplay between 'deductive' and 'inductive' operations which the reader must carry out for himself" (*Implied* 58). We see the interpretive techniques of reading – decoding image and metaphor – at work in "Questions of Travel," and through that decoding the speaker comes to a realization about not only the experience of travel, but her condition as a thinking human being. The poem, then, is a commentary on how reading helps to sort and organize experiences outside of text and come to terms with the self as a thinking, artistic being. Iser describes this kind of move from imagination to reality for the reader: "In this way, the experience communicated through the work of art becomes real to the reader. For whenever his expectations are not fulfilled, the reader's mental faculties are at once directed toward an attempt to comprehend the new situation with which he is confronted" (*Implied* 58-59). The speaker comes to this new understanding by re-writing in the readerly terms of simile, metaphor, and philosophy, taking the reader of the poem through his or her own creative reading experience.

"Questions of Travel" is not a travelogue; indeed, we never know the precise place to which the speaker refers—although it is undoubtedly a vista from Bishop's extensive Brazilian travels. We only know there are waterfalls, mountains, clouds, a gas station, a birdcage, details that are typical, if not banal. But we can strongly suspect from the speaker's reaction that she has established for herself very specific imaginative expectations through some kind of reading. Indeed, there is an implied expectation based on these interpretations. Iser declares that this is the purpose of that type of writing:

> In the traditional travel book, the description of a locality helped to build up a complete factual picture of the relevant place or region . . . If they are to be presented for their own sakes, they must be sufficiently interesting in their own right, and so they have to be considered from all angles; this in turn means that the reader must use his own imagination to bring about a coordination of the different aspects of reality. (*Implied* 66-67)

But we can never hold "a complete factual picture" when that image has been created through a reading experience – although that picture is "true" for the reader, it is created through association, a "recreation" unique to that reader. Travel writing can only remain authoritative when it is "given by one traveler only" (*Implied* 66). So even those with travel experience are working within individual subjectivity, but they can write with such conviction that they activate others' imaginations in ways that seem like new realities—the transformative, broadening experience of reading.

This poem's speaker seems to have come to this particular travel experience with a specific, imagined reality in mind. The poem opens with a declaration: "There are too many waterfalls here." Travel and nature are supposed to invoke images of the sublime.

How can there be "too many?" Where does this reaction come from, subverting our expectations about travel poems that wax romantic and rhapsodic about faraway lands? Critic Kim Fortuny declares, "The poem begins in protest" (63). (Actually, we're prepared for doubt by the very title "Questions of Travel.") Critic Susan McCabe notes the speaker's sense of unease in this landscape as "The narrator has 'arrived' at an unsettling and volatile setting requiring superlatives" (163). Already, the reader is coping, trying to decode. Helen Vendler says Bishop's travel poems are a contradiction between the familiar and the unknown, and that can be manifest in unexpected ways: "Though the exotic is frequent in her poems of travel, it is not only the exotic that is strange and not only the local that is domestic" (83). For Bishop's readers, the speaker's discomfort here should not be unexpected. The speaker is off-balance, and through her reaction, Bishop puts her readers in a similar position of unease. And Bishop is the consummate observer. She builds the world through detail and comes to truth through object. Kalstone gives her writerly work an air of the social scientist as the poem "falls back on minute discriminations, the anthropologist's technique, the awakening to a world question by question" (*Becoming* 214). Observation leads to the reader's questioning and finally to writing, but it starts with the detail perceived.

In the poem, as the reader's imagined viewpoint manifests itself as an overwhelming physical sensation, she is overtaken, unable to focus on a landscape of sublime beauty. Probably it is loud, with water rushing and wind blowing and birds squawking. Books are quiet. They make only as much noise in the reader's head as he or she will allow. And by their nature, books are organized: letters are arranged to make words; words are arranged syntactically to make sentences; sentences form paragraphs,

and so on. By breaking sentences into component parts or "correlatives," Iser says, "They set in motion a process out of which emerges the actual content of the text itself" (*Implied* 277). Even when confronting new, difficult or confusing information, the reader has a process by which to organize, break into smaller pieces and comprehend what is happening, a luxury not always available in the extratextual or actual situation. Indeed, our speaker cannot immediately use the tools of reading to understand what is happening– what she is supposed to experience from the landscape, perhaps – if the text has been taken as an "authority." Interpretation comes later; in the moment it is a conflict of actuality: "For this bringing to fruition, the literary text needs the reader's imagination, which gives shape to the interaction of correlatives foreshadowed in structure by the sequence of the sentences" (*Implied* 277). The sentences elude the speaker in her travel experience, because when confronted with actual geography, "the crowded streams/hurry too rapidly down to the sea". Unlike reading, which can be slowed down to whatever speed we need to make sense of the situation, life outside the text keeps moving with or without us. Interpretation gives the reader a way to understand on more solid footing. The experience is no longer a series of unmediated events; it is a shaped narrative that gives the reader a place within a context. Being a more skillful reader naturally means having the ability to more easily interpret texts and situations of many sorts.

The reader in "Questions of Travel" makes an effort at interpretation using what skills she has. Before the end of the poem's first sentence, the clauses become imagistic: "and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops/makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,/turning to waterfalls under our very eyes." The speaker is working to make the experience fit her prior expectations, creating images from words. This re-

writing illuminates one of the conflicts of reading. We wish for clarity and specificity but feel ambivalent as our expectations are fulfilled only in a limited way, as Iser explains: "For the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us" (*Implied* 278). The speaker is clearly unsatisfied – the images do not match the interpretation. She must keep reading. With regard to the concrete details of the poem, a meteorologist could tell us that the atmosphere indeed is pressurized, and clouds have a specific weight, based on the amount of water within them. But that is not the "pressure" that sends water down a mountain. This speaker is not using the techniques of science. She is working to reduce the landscape that surrounds her into an image she can manage, certainly an effort of interpretation. In effect, it is an act of writing, which is learned through reading. The very next lines, indeed, confirm that this is what is happening; the speaker is no longer merely creating images out of physical experience, but compressing them into metaphor: "–For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,/aren't waterfalls yet". This use of a readerly technique seems fundamental, not only for the genre of poetry, but for the act of interpretation itself. And it is a vivid picture: Streams become "streaks," through easy assonance, then the embellished "mile-long, shiny, tearstains," instead of merely "waterfalls," their actual state. This reader further reveals her expectations by justifying her composition, claiming that "in a quick age or so, as ages go here,/they probably will be." Of course we recognize the word "age" as not a precise measure but a poetic construction of time. The speaker is using techniques of reading here to qualify the overwhelming rush of senses that initially had overtaken her. In fact, she is beginning to acclimate to her surroundings

and allow her wit to emerge. "[I]n a quick age or so, as ages go here," is certainly tongue-in-cheek. An age is by definition a significant – not quick – period of time. It's as if she's been thinking, *"Yes, this landscape has been here for a long time, and you, my dear girl, are overwhelmed by it, but don't worry, it will all make sense in due time."* Here is an example of how reading enhances imagination and inspires the speaker to interpret and recreate her experience with her own imagery and writing. She moves from facts to interpretations quickly, because, as Booth says, the "effect of engaged energies means that figurative language will always figure the mind more incisively than plain language" (*Company* 298). Being engaged in sense-making through language gives the speaker freedom to move back and forth between experience and art, actuality and metaphor, and in the slippery spaces between, she makes sense of them, leaving room for readers of the poem to join her in the experience and ultimate transformation.

A stanza break interrupts the speaker's reverie, and she comes back with solid, seemingly unmetaphoric questions: "Think of the long trip home./Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?/Where should we be today?" Although this too transcends the literal and asks for imaginative interpretation, as "Where should we be today?" is a question not merely of geography but of psychological and intellectual locus. Fortuny observes that "Each question anticipates a problem in its own right, as if the speaker wishes to preempt all accusations by confessing first" (66). This questioning is the beginning of a kind of interpretation, a closing off and selection of detail to bring the experience into a manageable sense. What is at issue here? Kalstone will claim it is the placement of the self, as "Elizabeth Bishop has always written poetry to locate herself" (*Temperaments* 37). It is interesting that we are implored to "Think of the long trip

home." Home is ostensibly where the speaker came from. It is not this visited place with its overwhelming landscape, and contemplating home is perhaps not what one normally does during travel. But home is also a starting place. Iser puts great importance on sorting out these kinds of correlatives during the reading experience:

> Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections. The memory evoked, however, can never resume its original shape, for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so. The new background brings to light new aspects of what we had committed to memory; conversely these, in turn, shed their light on the new background, thus arousing more complex anticipations. (*Implied* 278)

Revising the journey while still on it is a reminder that one has come far, geographically and intellectually, and a reimagining should be adjusted according to interpretations. The speaker asks, "Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?" How does one think of a far-off place when one has not visited? Is it a refusal of the possibilities of becoming a better reader, a better interpreter of experience? Perhaps we could learn second-hand from others who have traveled and formed their own conceptions, giving us another platform of interpretation. More likely, it is through reading, decoding and creating images, accurate or not, or perhaps through viewing photographs, which is a kind of reading and decoding in and of itself.

These same lines for McCabe are Bishop's moment of opening the experience up to alterity. This is interpretation of signs in an open way. The Other cannot be closed, if the reader is open. McCabe says, "In 'Questions of Travel,' she opens her situation up to ethical consideration: 'Is it right to be watching strangers in a play/in this strangest of theatres?' Is it possible to come upon the Other without projection? At the very least, Bishop reveals the act and process of projection . . . and shows how our perception configures and shapes what we discern" (160). Travel is leading her to the actualized, individualized experience. But by definition the traveler is not of the place herself, so interpretation begins almost immediately. The lines McCabe quotes indicate the speaker has translated the place she is visiting into a drama, another kind of textual art form an experienced reader can decode. This is another metaphor and an acknowledgement that this experience is created – as a play is created – by her interpretive performance of the action. Iser calls these kinds of connections the most vital part of the interaction between text and imagination: "Thus the reader, in establishing these interrelations between past, present and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections. These connections are the product of the reader's mind working on the raw material of the text, though they are not the text itself—for this consists just of sentences statements, information, etc." (*Implied* 278). The re-writing that happens in the speaker's mind is a reimagining of the actuality before her. The "strangers" she writes about are living their lives, not performing for her benefit, but the traveler decodes them as performance by an other. We don't know how others live their lives; indeed, privacy usually is expected. But we understand that in a play action happens, and we are meant to watch the scene, as the traveler witnessed, encouraged to take in the private moment, to

have an experience, to decode it with the conventions of the genre. Iser calls this kind of interpretation an act of production in which the reader comes to understand himself as much as the situation: "Ideally, then, the reader should take over production of the whole scene, so that the process of animation will lead up to an enhanced awareness of all the implications. The technique mobilizes the reader's imagination, not only in order to bring the narrative itself to life but also—and even more essentially—to sharpen his sense of discernment" (*Implied* 39). In "Questions of Travel" the speaker seems to be reading her own experience, questioning herself. These are not strangers in a play, but how else do we understand them and this experience? The speaker seems to know that she has interpreted it as her own personal drama, but questions whether this is the right thing to do.

Still she falls back on language, as she declares a new sight to be "some inexplicable old stonework,/inexplicable and impenetrable/at any view". The speaker is hanging on to some notion that words can make sense out of the experience, even when the words she falls back upon are indeterminate, showing her confusion, not the nature of the concrete object. Through language she is becoming comfortable with her own discomfort. Iser considers accessibility through illusion a kind of natural, inherent methodology: "Without the formation of illusions, the unfamiliar world of the text would remain unfamiliar; through the illusions, the experience offered by the text becomes accessible to us, for it is only the illusion, on its different levels of consistency, that makes the experience 'readable.' If we cannot find (or impose) this consistency, sooner or later we will put the text down" (*Implied* 285). Sometimes, consistency comes in practical, obvious ways. In "Questions of Travel," repeating "inexplicable" in adjacent

lines creates an echo for the reader of the poem and emphasizes the fact that the speaker can't explain, isn't ready to make sense out of this experience. Choosing "inexplicable and impenetrable," with the in- and im- prefixes that indicate being without or lacking in a quality, shows that there was the expectation not of this lack of understanding but of a neat, sorted-out verbal package that could be related in a journal, letters, or in conversation, perhaps. Indeed, thoughts are interpretation, a kind of sense-making, self-conversation, or understanding through language, and the speaker has been denied even this. Paradoxically, some of the speaker's frustration seems to come from the belief she has found or created no depth to the experience at this point, that it is all surface, because while they are "inexplicable and impenetrable," they are also "at any view,/instantly seen and always, always delightful?" The speaker must be a true reader, for she is disappointed by the presence of the delightful and absence of the difficult.

It is at this point that the poem breaks off into its most poignant expression, the speaker's frustration and longing coming out in a passionate declaration in the form of a question: "Oh, must we dream our dreams/and have them, too?" Kalstone notes this moment of yearning and marks it as the point the poem moves into sense-making, as "the observer is drawn very cautiously by accumulating detail, and questions themselves begin to satisfy the imagining mind" (*Temperaments* 31). The imagining mind is the reading mind, the mind engaged in acts of interpretation. As the poem continues, she specifies this abstraction of longing with a tender, familiar image: "And have we room/for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?" From the exclamation "Oh" to the abstraction of "dreams," to the imagistic "folded sunset" the speaker is in a passionate confusion. We are left with a stanza break in which these ideas linger over white space, holding the

poem's reader and demanding a resolution to the speaker's trouble. This is the poem's emotional climax, but it also needs an intellectual resolution.

Resolution, then, comes through an interpretive readerly act. This speaker not only reads the event and place as experience but turns back to writing and reading to complete a kind of interpretive circle. Is this an inevitability? Booth reminds us that reading is almost an involuntary act, as we turn practically everything into narrative:

> We treat "formless" stories just as we treat the generally *un*storied world that meets us daily: we turn it into meaning-ridden story. Psychologists have found . . . that all of us spontaneously make narratives out of just about every bit of information that comes our way. We long for intense engagement in a story, and we long for a coherent story of our own lives. (*Company* 192)

Longing colors this section of the poem. That the speaker is able to overcome disappointment and create a coherent story from a "plotless" experience becomes clear as the poem moves forward. The speaker becomes a champion of reading and writing and moves from learned to self-created imagery. Through reading and writing, she has made sense of and enhanced the travel experience.

The ways in which reading and experience enhance one another become a tight circle in this poem, and the speaker's transformation is due to both. In the next stanza, it seems that the speaker forgives herself for her insufficient reading and unsatisfactory experience, first acknowledging that the trip is worthwhile, on the physical level: "But surely it would have been a pity/not to have seen the trees along this road,/really exaggerated in their beauty". This statement is not a literary attempt at explaining the

situation. It is direct, using an intensifier, "really," and two adjectival abstractions, "exaggerated" and "beauty," to begin to put language to the experience. This kind of early interpretive move, Iser says, is natural for a reader: "The process is virtually hermeneutic. The text provokes certain expectations which in turn we project onto the text in such a way that we reduce the polysemantic possibilities to a single interpretation in keeping with the expectations aroused, thus extracting an individual configurative meaning" (*Implied* 285). But the poem is a poem, after all, and this speaker moves beyond the merely configurative. She again attempts to use poetic, literary, artistic language, to come to an understanding through the techniques of reading: "not to have seen them gesturing/like noble pantomimists, robed in pink." "Them" refers to the trees, which do not literally gesture, of course, but are affected by the forces of wind and weather. But gesture they do, as the speaker finds her literary voice in the simile, which imagistically brings the reader of the poem back to the warm, folded sunset of the previous stanza. The next line begins with a dash – a curious place for such a punctuation mark – as if the thought had just now come to her. The speaker continues her musings with a question about the experience, an attempt at justification, perhaps, in which she cannot help but indulging in some engaging imagery:

> –Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
> the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
> of disparate wooden clogs
> carelessly clacking over
> a grease-stained filling-station floor.

Indeed, she finishes the stanza with a parenthetical aside that acknowledges how far she has come from her unfulfilled, reading-induced expectations to a personal, written interpretation: "(In another country the clogs would all be tested./Each pair there would have identical pitch.)" The speaker's creation doubles her experience for the reader, who in turn uses the polysemantic possibilities presented by her words to form his or her own illusions – or interpretations – about the text. She has become a better reader, and our reading benefits through her experience.

In the next stanza, the experience is becoming even more clearly an interpretation. We are confronted by a series of musings offset by a preceding dash, like the one described above. The section becomes a kind of list, the kind that might be found in a journal entry. We learn that the speaker thinks it would have been a pity "not to have heard/the other," . . . "not to have pondered,/blurr'dly and inconclusively,/on what connection can exist for centuries" and "–Never to have studied history in/the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages." The stanza culminates in an outburst of contemplation that takes advantage of extended simile and imagery to put forward a sensory experience, the speaker using her knowledge of literary codes to use words to make of the experience what she ultimately wants – an aesthetically beautiful, organized, progressive, literary interpretation:

> –And never to have had to listen to rain
> so much like politicians' speeches:
> two hours of unrelenting oratory
> and then a sudden golden silence
> in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

The stanza breaks, and the next two stanzas are presented in italics; the reader can take this as what is actually being written in the notebook mentioned above. These last two stanzas give us a concise view of the tension in the poem. The first is a reiteration of the primary question the traveler has in the poem: "*'Is it lack of imagination that makes us come/to imagined places, not just stay at home?*" followed by an allusion to the fact that reading has shaped this speaker's perception of not only this experience but the world: "*Or could Pascal have been not entirely right/About just sitting quietly in one's room?*" The final stanza bursts into poetic fancy, the speaker, now a writer, emphasizing "ee" rhymes and breaking into a perfect, obvious, iambic pentameter line:

> *Continent, city, country, society:*
> *The choice is never wide and never free.*
> *And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,*
> *wherever that may be?"*

Bishop scholar (and former student and confidant) Lloyd Schwartz calls this last line "the final question of travel" (140) and characterizes the inherent tension in Bishop's conception of home in that "It is sweet, and necessary, to remember where we are from; but home is also the place we have to leave (142). The act of rewriting here is also the homecoming – with the benefit of having read, interpreted, and been transformed by the new travel experience.

That the speaker is open to answering these questions is further proof she is having a reader's experience. Costello draws attention to this as a positive ending, as "The self-reflection at the end of the poem is affirmative in mood, even while it is interrogative in form" (128). That affirmation is clear in Bishop's choices here. It is not

"lack of imagination," it is the desire to experience imagined places and events that causes her to travel. And, as she examined her constructions through simile and metaphor and the philosophy of contemplation, she is illustrating Iser's point: "The fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written" (*Implied* 279). The speaker in "Questions of Travel" is far beyond reproducing the waterfalls and mountains in her mind, for as Iser says, "The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents" (279). She is creating the interpreted experience she desired and was denied when she merely placed the texts of others on the activity of viewing a foreign locale. She is re-placing unfamiliar geography in an act of home-making. This is the quest for home apparent in Bishop's work and defined by Costello: "In Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, geography is not for adventurers looking out from a center at the horizon, nor for imperialists seeking to appropriate that horizon. Rather, it is the recourse of those hoping to discover, out of the flux of images, where they are and how to get home again" (109). This is explicit at the end of "Questions of Travel," with its italic musings, the philosophical writing of the interpretive traveler.

The transformation of the speaker in "Questions of Travel" is the classic purpose of reading that coincidentally, Booth defines: "if all I wanted was a peaceful reinforcement of my beliefs, I should have 'stayed home,' comfortably freed from nasty challenges. But that is not what anyone can really want. Surely learning to meet 'the others' where *they* live is the greatest of all gifts that powerful fictions can offer us" (*Company* 414). It is notable that critic Booth and poet Bishop both construct staying at

home to mean living the unexamined life. Indeed, our speaker met the other, and was subjected to a great challenge, coming out the other side in possession of a gift of expansion of experience and interpretation every reader should desire to have. Kalstone describes this movement, which he claims for the entire volume of *Questions of Travel* but recognizes as culminating in the titular poem: "Bishop's book, then, imagines first the mere tourist, then the invader, and finally, in the title poem, faces what is actually available to the traveller. 'Questions of Travel' anticipates a new submissive understanding, taking what comes on its own terms" (*Temperaments* 30). Indeed, our poet does not fight the experience. She experiences, decodes and creates, to understand herself. This poem is not a denial of understanding but an act of interpretation: Reading and writing.

CHAPTER III

THE READING COMMUNITY: COMING TOGETHER THROUGH COMMON TEXT IN CAROL SHIELDS' *SWANN*

Born in Illinois, but identified as a Canadian from the time of her marriage, Carol Shields (1935-2003) became one of the major Canadian novelists of the late 20th Century, as well as garnering renown in the English-speaking literary world beyond her adopted country.[5] Honored with many awards for her work over the years, including the Orange Prize for *Larry's Party* (1997), Shields attained her greatest literary success with her 1993 novel, *The Stone Diaries*. The book won the Governor General's Award in Canada, as well as the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award upon its U.S. publication. Shields also became known for her sense of humor and irony, exquisite craft and attention to detail. She also has been called a poet of the quotidian for her ability to weave seemingly mundane details of ordinary existence into transcendental storytelling, a quality similar to Elizabeth Bishop. Shields' 1987 novel, *Swann: A Mystery*, not only demonstrates these characteristics but is an artful example of her willingness to create a unified, complete narrative out of seemingly disparate writing techniques and styles – which she would later also apply to great effect in *The Stone Diaries*. *Swann* is the story of several people – a feminist scholar, a literary biographer, a small-town librarian, and a newspaper editor are the major ones – who all have a stake in the literary legacy of the

[5] For a concise timeline of Shields' life, see "A Shields Chronology" in Besner (263-266).

obscure poet naïf, Mary Swann. Swann, the wife of a poor Ontario farmer, was murdered by her husband before her first book was published. When her work is re-discovered by feminist scholar Sarah Maloney, she becomes a figure of literary study, but the actual artifacts of her life are disappearing, by theft and other trickery. The "mystery" in *Swann* becomes multiple – questions not only of what is happening to Swann's artifacts and manuscripts, but questions of who Swann herself was, how her writing came to be, and its lasting significance. Some mysteries never can be solved.

Similarly to Bishop's "Questions of Travel," we see in *Swann* characters who undergo a transformation by reading. In *Swann*, the characters have a printed text, and as in Bishop's poem, interpretation ties closely to each character's experience. But with the space of a novel, Shields can give each of her readers a stake in the outcome and public acceptance of their readings, as their constructed identities as readers, scholars, and public figures are tied up in the success of their personal interpretations. Within *Swann,* Shields features a group of readers who circle around a particular text – Mary Swann's poetry volume, *Swann's Songs* (Shields' devilish, macabre pun one of the novel's many dark laughs at the characters' follies). In the novel, each Swann reader brings a particular set of interpretive codes to his or her reading and uses the Swann text to reinforce his or her position in the community of Swann readers, as well as his or her professional identity. However, when the actual artifacts related to Swann and her manuscript disappear, the reading community must come together for the common good and reconstruct the text, apart from their own agendas. This shows another result of the act of reading: the building of a stronger reading community under the common banner of the original text. However, the text itself remains an enigma, and no reading ultimately takes

precedence. The various readers depicted in the novel – literary scholars, a biographer, publishers, a librarian, and other interested persons – exercise their prerogative as members of specific interpretive communities and claim importance for their own positioned interpretations of the Swann poems. The lost artifacts are the prima facie mystery of the novel, but there are others, the most important of which is "who was Mary Swann?" Each character, using his or her reading codes, constructs the Mary Swann he or she needs to support that reading. And in one sense the true "mystery" of *Swann* is how all of these interpretations can all simultaneously be. The resolution of the story comes when the characters must reproduce– literally rewrite – Mary Swann's text, informed by their reader's love of the work and the various codes by which they originally interpreted it. No interpretation can take precedence without the text, and it is their job as readers to be responsible to it. The text is not independent of the reader, but the reader is responsible to the text. And in *Swann*, when the text in question literally disappears, the readers become responsible to each other regardless of the interpretation they place on the poems or the codes they are trained to use. Their personal transformations have created individual ties to the text, and that individual relationship allows each to contribute back to the reading community as they attempt to recover or recreate the lost Swann poems. As we saw in "Questions of Travel," the reading experience can transform the individual; in *Swann*, the individual readers carry that transformation forward and contribute back to the good of the community of readers.

For each of the *Swann* readers, Mary Swann becomes through interpretation his or her kind of person; that common love for the constructed woman and her work therefore facilitates their coming together as a community, makes rewriting possible, despite their

disparate interpretations. Initially, these characters see Swann and her writing only through the set of reading codes they already possess, and that is where her meaning lies for them. Throughout the novel, characters try to hide the fact their Swann artifacts, notes, and manuscripts are disappearing, to avoid a kind of emperor-has-no-clothes attack and protect their reading from someone who holds a different set of preferred codes of interpretation and may literally still hold their Swann artifacts. But it is all so very little necessary, because when the loss of the primary materials is discovered, the readings themselves are understood to remain, regardless of which interpretation one holds and whether others affirm or reject it. Because the actual initial text was the same for each reader, the characters have a community, regardless of their conflicts in interpretation. Critic E.D. Hirsch calls these kinds of interpretive conflicts secondary to the meaning-making act of reading: "Whenever interpretive conflicts are concerned only with emphasis in the conduct of a commentary, then they are conflicts about immediate aims and not about meanings. Most interpreters retain a respect for original meaning, and recognition of this might mollify some of our disagreements" (88). Disagreements are put aside for the sake of recovering Swann's words, in a communal love and appreciation for the original text. The characters use their memories, shaped by their individual interpretations, to try to re-create the lost texts. This may be impossible, for many reasons both theoretical and actual, based on the terms of the novel, but each reader establishes him or herself as a member of the community, regardless of interpretation. Whether biographer, feminist theorist, editor, symbolist, or even intellectual novice, they all have read from the same work and can compile a collective understanding that produces a recreation. It is again the cycle of reading, interpreting and writing that makes each of

these scholars better in his or her field and collectively, a contributor to the whole through the techniques of reading.

Swann's titular character, Mary Swann, never gets her own voice in the novel. She is dead before the action even starts, appears in only a few remembered scenes, is quoted even less, and does not even speak through her writing, which is alluded to but presented as an element of the text only in remembered fragments. She is the creation of course of Shields, but also of the various characters who study her. Each interprets her in a way that presents his or her own character in a better light to others. Of her famous poetry, we get just a fleeting line here and couplet there, always to "prove" another reader's interpretation. This fragmentation is a kind of postmodern example of the way a novel presents a character – as something to be interpreted by a reader. Shields is here doing what Iser describes in the work of Sir Walter Scott, "fanning out the character into a series of perspectives" to give the reader "a heightened awareness of the *potential* character" (*Implied* 99). But this is also true of the readers inside the novel: they cannot know Mary Swann, who is long dead and left scant records behind, so "The way is laid open for the imagination to penetrate the diversification and to bind the various aspects together in a unified picture" (*Implied* 99). The way is open for interpretation both inside and outside of the novel.

Swann is presented in five sections; each of the first four introduces the lives of figures involved in reclaiming the literary life of Mary Swann. The fifth section is presented as a stylized transcript of a documentary film of the "Swann Symposium," an academic conference in which the first subjects, as well as many other peripheral characters, assemble to discuss Swann's life and in the process discover that the artifacts

of her existence – most importantly her manuscripts – are disappearing from their personal collections and from libraries across North America. As for our cast of characters, Mary Swann was purported to be a friend of the shy small-town librarian Rose Hindmarch, but their short, infrequent encounters would indicate otherwise. The editor Frederic Cruzzi, who published Swann's book, admits he had little contact with her but supports interest in the newly rediscovered poems despite the personal hardship and emotional turmoil they caused him. Swann's own daughter holds back any unpleasant memories, preferring to describe her only vaguely to the visiting biographer Morton Jimroy. The other characters knew her not at all. Their Swanns are second-hand interpretations. In a narrative such as that in *Swann*, where point-of-view shifts from section to section, this disorder is purposeful and heightened. The readers of Shields' novel keep these meanings in play as they assemble for themselves a fuller story of Swann's life and work than individual characters within the text can know. And the individualized reading belongs to the reader him- or herself. It is how each then defines individual identity in the scholarly community. As critic Brian Johnson says, "It can be no accident that all of these readings succeed in revealing more about the characters themselves than they do about Mary Swann's elusive poetic intent" (225). These various appropriations hold the locus of the scholars' identities until they must be abandoned in the final scenes, to put Swann back together, individualized readings being subsumed into the whole. Those characters, possessing varied and individual interpretations of Swann and her work, eventually must form a community to re-write the missing Swann texts. This communal act of reading and writing demonstrates the power of the text – every

reader can be singular and individual, but the transformative aspects of those acts draw them back to the need of the community.

Shields' critics have read *Swann* in a variety of ways, but all recognize the "mystery" plot and varying character perspectives as the driving force behind the story. Some read it as a character study of the four main characters; others believe it is an oblique character study of Mary Swann herself.[6] Clara Thomas identifies the writing styles represented in the various sections of the novel: Sarah Maloney's section as a kind of gentler rewriting of the feminist heroine found in Engel or Atwood (*Slight* 109); Rose Hindmarch's section as "an omitted character in Leacock's gallery" (110) and Frederick Cruzzi's section as "satisfyingly, unmistakably in the world of Robertson Davies" (112). Whether the reader of the novel can parse these influences or not, the parodic edge is unmistakable, and Thomas allows that this guide for readers is meant to enhance the fun of the novel: "She has assembled all the pieces of her puzzle, and now she breaks it all up under our eyes, forcing us to remember that our suspension of disbelief has been just that" (114). We are in on the secrets and pleasures of the tale and allowed to laugh at the characters' foibles and failings. The readers of *Swann* are not going to get the answers to the psychological mysteries presented, but the reading characters within the novel already

[6] Several critics give positioned readings of *Swann* on themes peripheral to those of interest in this discussion. In her essay "Reassembling Fragments: Susanna Moodie, Carol Shields, and Mary Swann" Clara Thomas considers the Swann poetic fragments Shields provides and how they are "contextualized to the character whose concerns call it to mind" (199). Thomas also writes on the pastiche of writing styles within *Swann*, and how Shields constructed the novel to give readers an "in" to the gentle literary parody she created in her essay "'A Slight Parodic Edge': *Swann: A Mystery*." Mary Eagleton gives a lively, convincing reading of *Swann* through the terms of Pierre Bourdieu, as she says the novel "particularly lends itself to a Bourdieuian analysis because the text actually dramatizes the construction of a literary field" (314). Burkhard Niederhoff is interested in the depiction of historical research in *Swann* – how the novel sets up "self-reflexive" parallels between the Cruzzis reconstructing Swann's damaged manuscript and her untimely death. Brian Johnson does a Barthian reading of *Swann*, identifying it as an open text. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney claims Shields' work in *Swann* as part of a female narrative tradition, playing with the open-endedness and ambivalence of the female writer towards language and narrative. Donna E. Smyth traces the development of the major characters of *Swann* through the paradigm of Heidegger.

have had their transformative reading experiences and thus will not lose their text – they will act with energy and verve, and perhaps a bit of argument, to contribute what they can and reclaim the possible words of Mary Swann.

As Thomas and others have described, Shields crafts the each section of the novel in a different style of writing. This, to critic Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, is an example of open-ended feminine narrative construction, "In *Swann*, Shields uses formal strategies that reveal her ambivalence toward reading and writing: interrupted, indirect, or dialogic narration; mixed genres and embedded texts (in particular, feminine texts which are absent or illegible); depictions of a feminine text's composition, publication, and interpretation; and an ambiguous ending" (22). These varieties of construction and the ambiguous ending are an overt way of saying that Swann's writing itself is not the point. It is the way Swann's writing is read by each of the characters – what they can make of it through the codes of interpretation to which they cling. Sweeney recognizes the ambiguity of the novel's ending and the unreliability of the text the Swann readers create: "What Mary Swann wrote on the page – let alone what she meant to say – remains obscure. *Swann* also represents an ambivalence toward reading and writing, then, in the fate of this embedded feminine text, whose transcription, editing and publication is so unreliable, and whose readers' interpretations are so hopelessly contradictory" (25). But that contradiction might be expected where disparate reading codes are being employed. The various readers inside the story world of *Swann* share the original work and can come together under that commonality to put together a coherent text despite their different interpretive positions. Contradiction here means that more possibilities are in play. As Booth says, by accepting the picture an author presents, a reader easily can

become part of a sympathetic vision as "the energy serves to bind me to the implied author; consciously or unconsciously, I see him or her as my kind of person" (*Company* 299). Each reader in the novel has made Mary Swann into "their kind of person," implementing the codes common to his or her doctrinal position, but reading *Swann's Songs* also has transformed each of these readers and given them a common reference point by which they may come together.

But each character also has an inner life of insecurity, a life he or she has tried to construct based on the codes to which they cling. Booth claims this kind of personal attachment of reader to text is natural and important: "I suggest that we arrive at our sense of value in narratives in precisely the way we arrive at our sense of value in persons: by *experiencing* them in an immeasurably rich context of others that are both like and unlike them" (*Company* 70). However, a rich context, deep reading experience and wealth of possessed texts are not always enough to protect and nurture a fragile ego. In *Swann*, each reader guards his or her reading by claiming it is the superior one. This is not unexpected, as the effects of interpretation are the growth of the personal, and alternative interpretations could be experienced as a threat to the individual ethos. Booth says ethical reading and analytical strategies become our crutch as interpreters: "The only choice we have is either become conscious and explicit about doctrinal agreements and differences or to rely on them silently and even unconsciously" (*Company* 422). At *Swann's* conclusion, the characters must abandon their doctrinal differences and come to the point of commonality in order to try to reconstruct the Swann poems. It is a case of starting with different interpretations and returning – by rewriting – to the shared element. The common denominator in this collaboration is their original love for the

writing of Mary Swann. They can get back to it through the codes of interpretation, a recursion that actually makes them a community.

In the end, none of the *Swann* readers are "correct" – or more correct than any of the others, of course – as Booth says, "Regardless of what the artist has tried to *give*, we can judge only what we manage to *take*, and that will be as various as our various natures dictate. How, then, can we ever say that any particular reading is the proper one?" (*Company* 83). In *Swann*, what really matters for these characters, what betters them as readers, is this admission, as they must put aside doctrinal differences and try to reconstruct what they remember from Swann's missing manuscripts. The interpretive codes within which each operates are not, presumably, useless. They cause each reader to remember the writing in particular ways, based on what was important to them in the first place. But the text is first, and their return to it – a kind of return to the precritical stage – makes the Swann readers, collectively, better interpreters, a better, larger reading community, and allows the legacy of Mary Swann to continue. Each reader is correct in his or her interpretation of Swann's writing, as they are all working in a manner consistent with themselves. This is the only way, Hirsch says, to work authentically, which is the true critical standard: "A valid interpretation is one that represents an authentic realization of meaning through one's own perspective, or through that of one's time and culture" (45). Truly removed from the author, and even removed, quite literally, from her work, only the self remains, and reading as a deeply personal interpretive act is realized again and again in the novel.

The first section of *Swann* is told from the point of view of Sarah Maloney, a young, attractive, appealing, feminist scholar and professor who gives herself credit for

"discovering" Mary Swann for the critical community when she finds a copy of Swann's book in a vacation cottage. Sarah's section of the novel reads like an internal monologue, as though she is constructing her own life – both as she wants it to be and how she wants others to perceive it – through her manipulation of language. This is not surprising, considering her work as a feminist reader and writer. She sees herself as a literary figure and attempts to construct herself in the terms by which she wants others to perceive her and shape a possible legacy, having already published a successful book of feminist scholarship:

> I write letters that are graceful and agreeable, far more graceful and agreeable than I am in my face-to-face encounters. My concern, my well-governed wit, my closet kindness all crowd to the fore, revealing that rouged, wrinkled, Russian-like persona that I like to think is my true self. (Pick up a pen and a second self squirms out.) The maintenance of my persona and the whole getting and sending of letters provide necessary traction to my quotidian existence, give me a kick, a lift, a jolt, a fix, a high, a way of seizing time and keeping it in order. (23-24)

It is clear even at this early stage of the novel that Sarah is not a "Russian-like persona," no matter what she thinks of herself, and she is bringing to this created Sarah what she has come to absorb as a trope of the literary world. She has the privilege of a "second self;" how she reads herself translates to how she desires others to interpret her. And, it is clear that as a person interested in exploring the self, she will find in Swann what she desires to read – her construction of Swann as a proto-feminist persona is not to fit who

Mary Swann might actually have been but to conform to what type of research the constructed scholar Sarah Maloney would produce.

Sarah gives herself the privilege of producing what she sees as a better, more progressive – she hopes even definitive – reading of Swann by interpreting Swann's writing through the codes of feminism she has absorbed (and ostensibly helped to create in her previous writing) and then rewriting Swann to fit that model. Indeed, even though she was the "discoverer" of the Swann manuscript, she must still set her reading apart, to establish the dual importance of Swann as an author and herself as Swann's leading scholar:

> Even today, Swann's work is known only to a handful of scholars, some of whom dismiss her as a *poete naïve*. Her rhythms are awkward. Clunky rhymes, even her half-rhymes tie her lines to the commonplace, and her water poems, which are considered to be her best work, have a prickly roughness that exposes the ordinariness of the woman behind them, a woman people claim had difficulty with actual speech. (17-18)

As a feminist trained to examine scenarios in which women are denied power, Sarah can read Swann's work and biography as a sympathetic example upon which she can exercise her techniques of reading and analysis: "Poor Mary Swann. That's how I think of her, *poor* Mary Swann, with her mystical ear for the tune of words, cheated of life, cheated of recognition. In spite of the fact that there's growing interest in her work – already thirty applications are in for the symposium in January – she's still relatively unknown" (18). Sarah can read Swann as a cheated proto-feminist heroine and label those who oppose this reading as oppressors, marginalizers. Indeed, at this point, it pays for Sarah to

maintain her reading of Swann as an unknown, despite the "thirty applications" to the Swann Symposium, which may be evidence otherwise. There is a tension between the perception of an emerging Swann community and Sarah's desire to be the most significant reader.

For Sarah, who considers herself the discoverer and most important guardian of Mary Swann's legacy, the interest of so many other scholars validates her work but also is a threat. Sarah is not ready to give up her position as the greatest champion of an abused unknown. She appropriates a term often associated with bourgeois, conventional, snooty people, or worse, the oppressive officials of law enforcement, by calling another scholar a "swine":

> Willard Lang, the swine, believes absolutely that Swann will never be classed as a major poet. He made this pronouncement at the MLA meeting last spring, speaking with a little ping of sorrow and a sideways tug at his ear. Rusticity, he claimed, kept a poet minor, and, sadly, there seemed to be no exceptions to this rule, Burns being a different breed of dog. (18)

Feminist Sarah will know that outsider status is a huge barrier blocking the ascendance of Swann's legacy – as a female, as an unknown, as a member of no circle or society or movement, as poor, and dead before she was "known," nearly everything works against her. Extratextually, this is also a gentle parody of Shields' own status as a Canadian writer, which she shares with Swann. Being from the Commonwealth rather than the mother country or even the U.S. is often an automatic mark of "rusticity" and a cultural barrier for the writer to transcend with her readership.

Sarah will be a major scholar, she believes, if Swann is a major poet. She needs to be a big fish in a big pond. It must be particularly painful to Sarah that this diminution of Mary Swann comes from Lang, a man who purports to be sympathetic but is emphatic when classifying and defining Swann in a damaging way. Even worse, he made his "pronouncement" in front of an official gathering of literary scholars – the MLA as ultimate reading community – in a manner that may seem apologetic but was truly meant (as Sarah reads it) to be exclusionary. This causes Sarah to stiffen her resolve and be even more protective of her reading: "*My* Mary's unearthly insights and spare musicality appear to certain swinish critics (Willard is not the only one) to be accidental and, therefore, no more than quaint" (18 emphasis added). To miss the agency in Swann's poetics is a sin no literary scholar should make, and Sarah will work to negate other readings with all the tools at her disposal. To further emphasize her me-against-the-world reading, she goes on to address and minimize one of the literary community's most common complaints about Swann's writing, indeed one she herself presents as universally held: "And no modern academic knows what to do with her rhymes, her awful moon/June/ September/remember" (18). So what is Sarah to do against so universal a view, a seeming agreement of the entire community? She denigrates them personally, then formulates her own interpretation that incorporates the accepted mainstream reading, "It gives them a headache, makes them snort through their noses. What can be done, they say, with this rustic milkmaid in her Victorian velours!" (18), and modifies it to fit her own construction of Swann:

> I tend to get unruly and defensive when it comes to those bloody rhymes. Except for the worst clinkers (giver/liver) they seem to me no more

> obtrusive than a foot tapped to music or a bell ringing in the distance. Besides, the lines trot along too fast to allow weight or breath to adhere to their endings. There's a busy breedingness about them. "A Swannian urgency" was how I put it in my first article on Mary.
>
> Pompous phrase! I could kick myself when I think about it. (18-19)

Sarah dismisses what she sees as misreadings, but she also further interprets her own reading, emotionally, The mild expletive might imply that she is not only frustrated by the mainstream reading but understands it on some level and is fatigued by her constant need for justification of her reading. It foreshadows the end of the novel when the barrier of individual interpretation will need to be removed for a collaborative understanding to emerge. Indeed, she tries to establish her own jargon, her own set of terms by which Swann is to be read – a "Swannian urgency" indeed. The final line (its own paragraph that also ends the chapter) shows that Sarah recognizes she is not without her own foibles when it comes to this matter, but she believes the pomposity is not in her own reading of Swann. This trouble is in others' assault on her identity as a Swann reader.

Sarah's reading of Swann comes into further clarity not as her need to reclaim a lost feminist artist but to carefully present the scholar as *author*ity, a creator worthy of respect. Swann is dead; in her lifetime, her manuscript did not penetrate even her own small piece of society. But Sarah wants to be the top voice, the best reader, in her community. On a book tour – "as though a book that was number six on the nonfiction bestseller list needed further pumping up" (20) – she attempts to overthrow her insecurity and assert that authority to an interviewer: "To quell her I talked about the surrealism of scholarship. The pretensions. The false systems. The arcane lingo. The macho

domination. The garrison mentality. The inbred arrogance" (21). But the interviewer here outreads the reader: "She leaned across and patted me on the knee and said, 'You're not coming from arrogance, sweetie; you're coming from naked need'" (21). What Sarah needs is not just recognition as a scholar but also love and security. By the end of the book, she is married and pregnant (248-249). She has had to redefine herself in more ways. But the need to define herself as the mother of Swann scholarship does not change. Indeed, one of Sarah's greatest claims to Swann is linked to her possession of Swann's notebook (28). She retains this slim book and has not shared a facsimile copy with any other scholar. As long as she owns some words of Swann's that no one else has seen, she must have the primacy of the best reading. When the notebook disappears, she hides that secret from her peers, until the revelation of truths at the end of the book leads to the collaborative reading and rewriting that makes for the betterment of the Swann community.

Sarah, in her neediness, though, is still a scholar and does not attach herself to a reading without understanding that it is a kind of construct: "In a sense I invented Mary Swann and am responsible for her" (30). But she immediately backs off and rewrites her claim in a way that can be backed (perhaps perfunctorily and grudgingly) by even her adversaries:

> No, too literary that. Better just say I discovered Mary Swann. Even Willard Lang admits (officially, too) that I am more or less – he is endlessly equivocal in the best scholarly tradition – *more or less* the discoverer of Swann's work. He has even committed this fact to print in a short footnote on page six of his 1983 paper "Swann's Synthesis," naming

> me, Sarah Maloney of Chicago, the one "most responsible for bringing the poet Mary Swann to public attention." This mention on Willard's part is an academic courtesy and no more. (30)

Professional courtesy or not, Lang's words are something Sarah can hang on to as a written confirmation of her authority. It is in print. People can read it for themselves, (although they may have to go to a footnote to see it). It is declarative enough to require little interpretation. Sarah even deconstructs her reading of Lang by diminishing his acknowledgement as "a simple declaration of frontier between the authority and discovery, Willard being the authority, while S. Maloney (me) is given the smaller, slightly less distinguished role of discoverer" (30). In Lang's reading, she is "S. Maloney . . . discoverer." And Sarah, the feminist scholar, reads this reading, too, not forgetting to empower the long-dead poet in the mode of feminist interpretation: "In truth, no one really discovers anyone; it's the stickiest kind of arrogance even to think in such terms. Mary Swann discovered herself" (31). If by interpreting Swann's work Sarah Maloney can discover herself, that may be the purpose of her reading: "It happens fairly often, this sensation of being a captive of fiction, a sheepish player in my own *roman-a-clef*" (37). This is a complex psychological circle; Sarah has read Swann through her feminist lens, and her interpretation of Swann's life and writings has allowed her to construct herself as a more powerful feminist scholar. Sarah then feels compelled to live up to that reading of her own life, as well as protect it, and that will not change until all of the Swann Symposium readers must stop and put Swann herself ahead of their own readings.

But Sarah adds to the destruction of Mary Swann by throwing away Swann's rhyming dictionary (46). Sarah was given the dictionary, along with the now-missing

notebook, by librarian Rose Hindmarch when Sarah visited Nadeau, Ontario, Swann's hometown. And the pedestrian rhyming dictionary gave Sarah doubts. According to her feminist and literary codes, wouldn't a poet, even one without academic training, somehow know what to write, know which rhyme was right, innately, without the help of such a book? The dictionary was a tangible object that made Sarah fear that Mary Swann might not have been a primitive literary artist, an undiscovered genius, but a hometown poet of the old school – perhaps even like those Dana Gioia calls the "trinominate, blue-haired state laureates" "rear-guard" and "middle-class" (37). And if Swann was the latter and not the former, that would certainly jeopardize Sarah's own interpretation, call her reading into question and destroy her place in the hierarchy of Swann scholars, make her just another voice in the community, or destroy the burgeoning Swann community altogether. This would be completely unacceptable, so Sarah destroys the evidence, makes the origins of Swann's poems a non-fact. Only her reading – her interpretation – ultimately matters. Indeed, Sarah has focused her interpretations so sharply on a particular point of view that she can read the poems as meaning something entirely of her own construction: "Take 'Lilacs,' her first published poem. It pretends to be an idle, passive description of a tree in blossom, but is really a piercing statement of a woman severed from her roots, one of the most affecting I've ever read" (50). The poem means what Sarah interprets it to mean. Analyzing subtext to foster one's own literary career means everything: "Naturally, I opened her notebook hoping for the same underwatery text, and the reason I've refused to share it casually with Morton Jimroy, or anyone else for that matter, I that I still hope, foolishly perhaps, to wring some meaningful juice out of those blunt weather bulletins and shopping lists" (50). Harnessing one's own power

through reading – through interpretation – is the currency both the author, Mary Swann, and the literary scholar, Sarah Maloney, have in common. They are linked through Sarah's authority, her reading of Swann, and any counter reading that might materially change Sarah's is to be prevented at all costs. So Sarah feels justified in withholding the notebook and destroying the rhyming dictionary. But if reading is the key, why destroy the only texts touched by the poet's own hands? Because it is not the text that is important, but the act of reading – the interpretation of the words and structures surrounding them by an agreed-upon set of codes – that makes the text significant. And other scholars, even those who share a similar set of interpretive codes, may come to different readings through the same printed text.

Morton Jimroy, a literary biographer, is one scholar Sarah refers to who has a "holy attitude toward prime materials" (50). The actual physical text is so unimportant to Sarah's readings that at times she need not even have it present to do her work. When she sits down to write her paper for the Swann Symposium, she recalls that her copy of Swann's book, *Swann's Songs*, is on loan to her friend, the rare-book dealer nicknamed "Brownie." The text, Sarah declares, has become so much a part of her that she can claim a physical connection: "Never mind, I don't need the book. I can close my eyes and see each poem as it looks on the page. For the last few years, haven't I lived chiefly inside the interiors of these poems? – absorbed their bumpy rhythms and taken on their shapes? They're my toys, if you like, little wooden beads I can manipulate on a cord" (54). She can read them without reading them; her interpretation is already set; to "manipulate" is the key to reading, a recognition that the words themselves are merely a starting point for the feminist codification Sarah desires. Indeed, what Mary Swann actually wrote is but a

small concern within the codes of the scholarly community studying her. They generally agree that with Swan's rudimentary rural-school education she very likely had no knowledge of modern poetry. Therefore, her words have a purity for these scholars, who, like Sarah, can read them within their own interpretive codes and make sweeping statements such as "I like to think, Mary Swann invented modern poetry. Her utterances, the shape of them, are spun from their own logic" (55). Their "logic" is imposed upon them through the interpretive codes of the scholar. Swann invented each poem as her artistic achievement; her readers re-create them through their own understanding of codes, like Sarah, "off, shimmying with concentration, tap-tapping my way down the rosy road toward synthesis" (55). Sarah's codes of feminist reading are deeply personal and internal. She therefore can interpret Swann's work easily. However, other code sets in the novel will depend on externals that make interpretation frustratingly difficult. The multiplicity holds and is fascinating.

Section II of *Swann* switches to the point of view of Morton Jimroy, the literary biographer. Jimroy is concerned with documentation – what he thinks he can prove about Mary Swann with texts. The codes he deciphers through his reading must lead back to something tangible, provable, which is difficult with Swann, whose life was little-documented and obscure. Critic Donna E. Smyth explains how each of the novel's main characters demonstrate the shaping of their lives, concealment and unconcealment, the coping with losses and search for love and acceptance. She considers the biographer's shaping the work of honest artistry: "Jimroy, the biographer, creates life out of these sordid (to him) details, a life shaped like art, truthful as he can be to the original, honest as he can be in his male abstractness" (140). Jimroy's task is to produce a text that

makes– or imposes – meaning out of a life. He has come to admit that Swann's life was dull and labels that as a paradox (*Shields* 76). In fact, he knows that the readers' codes can be just as devastating when it comes to examining a life, "It was just a matter of time before the theoreticians got to Mary Swann and tore her limb from limb in a grotesque parody of her bodily death" (81). The violence of the metaphor he chooses shows both his protection of Swann as subject and his deep sublimation of the codes of literature and reading. When confronted by a student's question about whether the art might be the life, Jimroy more decisively severs the life, which can only be lived, from the text, which can be analyzed through a set of codes to which he gives the transcendent position: "from common clay, works of genius evolve. That is to say, the work often possesses a greater degree of dignity than the hand that made it" (82). But as the documentable facts of Swann's life prove so terribly elusive, he begins to doubt even the biographer's tools, the code by which he understands the world: "What was the point of context anyway?" (84). And finally, he begins to doubt even the word itself: the art of poetry. But ultimately the word is what brings him back: "It had always seemed something of a miracle to him that poetry *did* occasionally speak. Even when it didn't he felt himself grow reverent before the quaint, queer magnitude of the poet's intent" (86). It is the emotional value of the art, not the codification of the words, that are ultimately moving, truly trustworthy, even to the biographer whose work is determinedly focused on documentation. Jimroy becomes the object of bathos as his yearning and narcissism combine in a statement of deep longing: "Speak to *me*, he wanted to say to poets. To poetry" (86). Although he does not trust the flashy line or the complex rhythmic pattern, he can find solace in the human response:

> Poetry was the prism that refracted all of life. It was Jimroy's belief that the best and worst of all human experiences were frozen inside these wondrous little toys called poems. He had been in love with them all his life, and when he looked back on his childhood, something he seldom did, he saw that his early years, those passed before the discovery of poetry, had drifted by empty of meaning. (86)

There's a lot at stake here for Jimroy. He has not only examined his subjects' lives through the reading of poetry but codified his own life, come to understand its "meaning" through poems. And he has given poets the primary position in the pantheon of literature. Working at the top is precarious, and failure would be a great blow to his constructed identity.

So we come to understand that for Morton Jimroy, like Sarah Maloney, there is something personal at the heart of his reading of Swann's life and work. The success of his biography, how well it is read – and by extension how Mary Swann comes to be known and liked – will by extension cement or defame Jimroy's reputation, too (especially since Swann is far less well-known than his previous two subjects). He romanticizes Swann, looks to her for his emotional redemption: "The discovery of her poems a few years ago had rescued him from emotional bankruptcy, and at first he *had* loved her. Here was Mother Soul. Here was intelligence masked by colloquial roughness" (87). But the more he can document of Swann's life through the text of scant letters, the more he grows to dislike her. And like a spouse, or more likely an overprotective parent, who does not wish his family member to reflect badly on himself, he hides her problems from the world, withholding letters he deems unworthy or racist as for Jimroy "A

Poundish falsity was creeping her into her life, drowning her, obliterating her" (88). This becomes a way of rewriting or recodifying her life. A fickle lover, ultimately, Jimroy comes to dislike and mistrust the Swann he constructs through his reading and research. For instance, he judges unworthy the reading material she checked out from her tiny municipal library (93). If he cannot save her, what should he do? "The problem was not to reconcile Swann with her background, but to separate her from it, as the poetry had done" (107). For the biographer Jimroy, it has become the art first, the life he creates for the subject second, the documentation third, and some distant, practically irrelevant fourth the actual woman. He makes the requisite visits to archives, interviews those who had even marginal contact with Mary Swann, even gets to know her daughter, now a Californian far removed from the desolate Ontario farm, but still the link between the text and woman is not real for Jimroy (111). Jimroy so longs to see Swann's notebooks – being withheld by Sarah and soon to be known as missing – and the unpublished love poems being held by another scholar, to have something to connect directly to the woman.

For the biographer, all the documentation must lead to something bigger than the subject, some truth or epiphany that other readers can decode for themselves. He is looking to build his communion with Swann herself, through his interpretation of her life, and believes if he is successful, his readers will follow. Smyth finds something sympathetic in Jimroy's thwarted efforts, his inability to reconcile his reading codes with the reality he finds, "This is the same man who cannot bear the thought that Mary Swann read Edna Ferber instead of Jane Austen. We laugh at Jimroy's contradictions but also recognize them as our own" (143). Readers want completion – the realization that the text

satisfies the codes under which we expect it to operate. Ultimately, Jimroy does not even have any direct quote from Swann for his book – nothing from her spoken, corporeal existence remains to link the woman to the text he is creating. Desperate for a link to the human behind the text, he already has stolen a photograph from the Swann memorial room in the tiny Nadeau museum, and from Swann's daughter, Frances, he swipes the fountain pen with which Mary Swann had copied out the final drafts of her poems (114). By the final chapter, these artifacts, too, will have disappeared.

The third section of the novel is told from the point of view of Rose Hindmarch, the only person in the novel to claim an actual friendship with the elusive Mary Swann – "friendship" albeit an exaggeration of their relationship. She is the outlier in the reading community that eventually gathers to interpret Mary Swann. Rose even has to look up the word "symposium" when she is invited to the Swann event (132). Rose has not learned to construct her life based on a set of written codes or structures in the way feminist Sarah and biographer Jimroy have. However, Rose does claim a type of connection to the literary world: she is the librarian in a tiny rural town, as well as the city clerk and self-appointed curator of the city's local history museum, in which she has improvised a room in homage to Mary Swann, infamous murder victim and marginally-famous local poet. Although she doesn't work with the codes of reading to create a self, Rose does benefit from a kind of external code related to the act of reading. Johnson puts her firmly in the same camp of appropriation as Sarah Maloney and Morton Jimroy, "Rose's self-construction through her appropriation of Swann's life-text is only a more overt instance of the very process in which Sarah and Jimroy are already engaged" (223-224). Being a librarian, she is identified as a potential intellectual voice in her rural

community, a reader, a knowledgeable person, and therefore peripherally qualified for membership into the Swann community:

> Her post as librarian has given her something else: an unearned reputation for being a scholar, for it is assumed by people in Nadeau that Rose must read the books that fill her library shelves, so easily is she able to locate these books for other people, so adroitly does she thumb the index, so assuredly does she say, her forehead working into a frown, "Here it is, just what you're looking for." (*Shields* 125)

Rose, lonely, aging, and insecure, is willing to try to enter this scholarly world, play the few cards she can with the visiting scholars and then pretend enough to seem to belong at the Swann Symposium. The elusive life of Mary Swann becomes Rose's claim to a literary life and respectability in the community. As a battered, worn, impoverished farm wife, one of Mrs. Swann's few known pleasures was an occasional, brief trip to the Nadeau library to check out novels by Edna Ferber. And, as the librarian, Rose could claim to have been a "friend" to Mrs. Swann, when in truth she exchanged a minimum of pleasantries with her on each visit. "Acquaintanceship" is potentially too strong a word for what is being bandied about the Swann community as Rose's friendship with the poet. Rose is self-conscious about the exaggeration. But like her contact with the library books, the fact she can claim contact with Mary Swann is a signal to visiting scholars that she has a certain authority they can exploit for their own ends. Booth calls this kind of fakery necessary in critical development: "Many of the virtues that we most honor are gained by practices that our enemies might call faking, our friends perhaps something like aspiring or emulating" and we must fake to master, when "One soon learns, in developing any

skill, that we inhibit our progress most by declaring ourselves incompetent" (*Company* 253). Rose herself has doubts about her skills. Although she had contact with Mary Swann and has been crowned the authority about her by both her neighbors and the visiting academics, she does not feel she can speak to scholars about their work (141). She is not one of their community, despite her Nadeau reputation. And she feels even more unsure when working within Swann's texts, the unifying element for her literary community: "Poetry, though, poses a problem for Rose. Except for Mary Swann's book, she has trouble understanding what it's about, and even with Mrs. Swann she's not always sure" (137). Rose can make good literal interpretations both of Swann's life and her poetry, but when Jimroy visits and talks to her about the poems' significance, she is confused, unsure, and aware that she is not part of their intellectual community (147) despite her friends' assurance that she is as good an expert on Mary Swann as anyone else, due to her contact with the actual woman (142).

Newspaper editor and small-press publisher Frederic Cruzzi had only one meeting with Mary Swann, but it is the pivotal event that links each of the characters in the book and delivers the most ambiguity about Swann's life and writing. Cruzzi, who considers himself an intellectual of the old school, was raised in Europe, and is attracted to the cosmopolitan, romantic trappings of the life of the mind. However, he ended up living much of his adult life in Kingston, Ontario, editing a weekly newspaper and trying to replicate with his beloved late wife the literary circles of his lost European life. This portion of the novel reads with the brevity of a newspaper but spares no detail, leaving the reader to fill in only the emotional and psychological significance of Mr. and Mrs. Cruzzi's actions.

The story gets to the crux of the matter – the anointing of Mary Swann – in the section titled "Frederic Cruzzi: His (Unwritten) One-Sentence Autobiography" (182). For a man who constructs himself as both an intellectual and a public figure, it is not unlikely that he would compose his life story over and over again, reviewing the details, polishing, shaping himself into a desired image, much in the way Sarah Maloney does in the first section of the novel. This is the kind of activity that would be valued in the kind of community he imagines for himself. It is a testament both to Cruzzi's talent and ego that this section is composed as one tour-de-force grammatical and syntactical unit of several hundred words, culminating in his work with Peregrine Press:

> which he and Hilde launched in order that they might print the work of a number of new Canadian poets who had come to their attention, Mary Swann of Nadeau Township being perhaps the most singular, a poet that Hilde found endearingly "rough" in technique, but as fine a poet in her way as the great Rilke—a rather extravagant comparison, but one with which Cruzzi partly concurred. (183)

Swann as a rough Rilke indeed – hindsight being 20/20 and scholars pushing to get her recognized as a literary figure, it does Cruzzi's ego and self-image good to set himself up to be her discoverer and champion. He can be a kind of paterfamilias to the Swann community springing up to his surprise years after the publication of *Swann's Songs*. He understands that he is creating an image for himself, but because he truly believes in that image, what it signifies, and what a person of intellectual rigor does, he does not see any evil in the creation.

There is a mythos about art and artists, that they possess some otherworldly power, and Cruzzi has read and understood enough to be able to perpetuate it and use it to his advantage as he flits in and out of the Swann community. Then, he creates his own myth about the Swann manuscript, a myth that has the shadow of fact but contains a much darker truth. He claims to Sarah "as an old newspaper man, rather than a professional scholar, I may have rather less reverence than you for the holiness of working papers" (192). He cites oral tradition – as if those poets didn't revise and edit, too – as the reason for eschewing "this cherishing of original manuscripts" (192). But in the end, he makes a shocking, almost hyperbolic anti-manuscript claim, "the odd clutter of paper, or 'manuscript' as you call it," is not a tragic loss, and indeed, his wife wrapped up fish bones in the scraps (192). The original text, written in the author's hand, became literal fish wrap (albeit accidentally), and to deflect its loss, Cruzzi attempts to diminish for his audience the significance of the artifact. But he is not merely posturing and staking his position; he is covering his sins. The story of how he and his wife acted as "midwives" to the Swann manuscript is much more sinister. Shields again presents Cruzzi's literary work and encounter with Mary Swann as third-person essays with the titles, "Frederic Cruzzi: His Short Untranscribed History of the Peregrine Press: 1956-1976" (199) and "Frederic Cruzzi: An Unwritten Account of the Fifteenth of December, 1965" (205).

When Mary Swann shows up at the Cruzzi's home on a dark, snowy, gloomy afternoon, Cruzzi notices her mouth, as it looks misshapen and moves without making much coherent sound (210). "Her flow of apology began once again, mumbled and unintelligible. So sorry. Such a bother" (211). The typography here is particularly

ambiguous. Does Swann say "So sorry" and "Such a bother," or is this Cruzzi's paraphrased remembrance of her attitude? Cruzzi does most of the talking. But it is not the ephemeral spoken word that is important in this exchange. When she finally speaks in quotation, it is to present him with her poems, a bag of scrappy literary leaves. And Cruzzi tries to put her off by saying he'll call. The Swanns don't have a telephone. "In that case, I could drop you a line" (214). But she persists and asks him to read them right away. He reads. And he's impressed. It is interesting to compare his account of her work to Willard Lang as opposed to what he says he told Mrs. Swann directly. Cruzzi tells Lang, "'I knew the work was highly original. It was powerful. There was, you might say, a beguiling cleanliness to the lines that is only rarely seen" (215). Lang asks if he told her this. Cruzzi says he did, but the quote is not repeated. Her reaction is wordless: "A soft, quite lovely smile" (216). The smile remains her only emotional reaction, and it is hollow with missing teeth, but gentle. When Cruzzi does speak to her using some of the vernacular codes of the literary world, her response shows she is not quite in the community of people who think or speak this way. It is not part of her set of personal codes:

> "You have every reason to be proud of your work," he remembers telling her.
>
> "My work?"
>
> "Your writing. Your poems." (216)

Perhaps "work" is not the first verb a poor, beleaguered farm wife would immediately jump to when thinking about some extra little pleasure that must be fit in between chores, cooking, and pleasing a demanding, violent spouse. Cruzzi makes her an offer of

publication and drives her to the bus stop. Although it occurs offstage, in the timeline of the novel, Mary Swann was murdered by her husband shortly thereafter, probably within 24 hours, perhaps even because she disappeared with her writing instead of tending to her farm duties. Does the manuscript cause her death? It is for the reader to interpret.

Hilde Cruzzi is waiting for her husband upon his return home, and he jubilantly tells her of the visit, turning Swann into a kind of folk literary figure. Already, he is interpreting Swann and her writing, as many will do after him: "He remembers that he shivered with pleasure thinking how he would tell her about Mary Swann. 'I have been visited,' he began, 'by a beautiful toothless witch. A glorious, gifted crone. She materialized out of the storm—" (218). Hilde laments she was not there to speak with her, but Cruzzi is proud that he has the artifacts, the poems. The written documents are the beginning of the conversation: "He reminded her, teasing a little, how she had once tried to persuade the owner of a local gravel pit to become a patron of the Peregrine Press by telling them they only published work that was mysterious and accessible at the same time. 'You've never seen anything quite like these poems,' he told her now" (218). "Mysterious and accessible" are part of a reading a code the two have developed, and it is apt for the Swann poems. "He would make a presentation of the new poems. Benefice of the afternoon storm. Mary Swann's bag of poems. Providence from an accidental universe" (219). Swann herself is an enigma, and the poems, which shift depending on how a reader applies codes of understanding to them, are not necessarily a stable artifact.

But Cruzzi initially seems to have lost even the tangible papers Swann had left. He does not see the packet where he left it and believes Hilde unwittingly used the poems to get the fire going. He can only form the screamed word, "No!" (219). But his wife has

not thrown out the bag. It is in the kitchen, sitting under the detritus of their dinner, the bones and heads of the newly-caught fish Hilde brought home (220). Frederic Cruzzi's reaction is barely verbal; he can only chant "Christ, Christ, Christ." But it is very physical, as he throws the fish guts at the walls and shakes off his wife's attempt at comfort by hitting her (220). He does violence to his wife just as Swann herself will experience the ultimate violence that night at the hands of her husband – indeed, she may be experiencing that violence at that very same moment. Cruzzi immediately begins intellectualizing his action, putting codes around it, interpreting, justifying: "He knew that phrase—*something snapped*. He heard it every day; he deplored it. It was cheaply, commonly used, even in his own newspaper, in the reporting of crimes of passion. Something snapped. Someone was pushed over the edge. Temporary insanity" (221). And it is the Cruzzis' further bad luck that Mrs. Swann wrote with an ink called "washable blue" (221). The text is disappearing in the stink of fish guts right before their eyes. Believing that Swann will not have copies of the poems, "Her innocence and inexperience ruled against it" (222) they jump to save them. Between their deep immersion in the literary world and Hilde's past unsuccessful attempts to write her own poetry, they know enough of common poetic codes to recreate the works: "words could be glimpsed, then guessed at. If one or two letters swam into incomprehension, the rest followed. Hilde was quick to pick up Mary Swann's quirky syntax, and when she made guesses, they seemed to Cruzzi's ear laden with logic" (222). These literate, well-meaning people are now panicked, guilty, and working from the codes of reading developed over years and years of work reading and editing poets, although they are editing a poet who seemingly lived outside of these codes. Critic Burkhard Niederhoff

recognizes their work as experienced readers as well, “In this guesswork, the Cruzzis use their linguistic and interpretive skills as professional readers of poetry” (73). He notes that the moment in which Cruzzi strikes Hilde over the damage to the poems is a parallel to the Swann murder. In the moment they confront the violence. They use their reading codes to repair the poems and their marriage. And of all the times the Cruzzis need confidence in their skills as readers, it is now, with beautiful writing disappearing before their eyes and a violent act hanging in the air. Niederhoff notes the Cruzzis’ motivation comes from their love of writing and feelings toward the author, “The Cruzzis are also driven by a protective – or patronizing – desire to improve Swann’s work along its own lines” (73). This becomes a complicated act of reading, interpreting and rewriting, with the editors seeking the pre-critical meaning but relying on their knowledge of codes to help them. How much of this rewriting is based not upon what actually might have been on the page originally, and how much is it based on their knowledge of codes and their small community as co-editors and lovers? When is Swann’s “quirky syntax” not reconstructed but replaced by Hilde’s words? And is Cruzzi more likely to support his wife’s linguistic choices because he is wracked with guilt over striking her?:

> By midnight they had transcribed more than fifty of the poems. Cautious at first, they grew bolder, and as they worked they felt themselves supported by the knowledge that they would be able to check the manuscript with Mrs. Swann who would surely remember what most of the obliterated words had been. Already they were referring to Hilde’s transcribed notes, and not the drying, curling poems on the table, as “the manuscript.” (Shields 222)

But as they worked, piecing together the dismembered poems, Mrs. Swann's husband was likely hacking apart her body. And incomplete and piecemeal will be the story of Mary Swann going forward. The manuscript is no longer hers; she would not get to rewrite what was lost, what the Cruzzis "guessed, then invented" (223). So the Swann community of scholars develops around a text of dubious origin. But it matters little. As long as the community shares the same text, they can come together in debate, despite disparate codes of interpretation.

It is clear that while people like Sarah Maloney, Morton Jimroy, and Willard Lang depend on their various constructions and interpretations of Mary Swann and her work to make their literary reputations, the Cruzzis would be damaged if the truth of their adulteration of Mary Swann was known. In truth, the egos of the Swann community share a wish for protection and validation. But the Cruzzis share the biggest secret as:

> a curious conspiracy had overtaken them. Guilt, or perhaps a wish to make amends, convinced them that they owed Mrs. Swann an interpretation that would reinforce her strengths as a poet. They wanted to offer help and protection, what she seemed never to have had. Both of them, Cruzzi from his instinct for tinkering and Hilde from a vestigial talent never abused, made their alterations with, it seemed to them, a single hand. (223)

This acknowledgement of "interpretation" and "alterations" under the guise of "help and protection" will become not the first part of the book's editorial process but the truth of the manuscript, replacing those fishy slips as Mrs. Swann dies in the night:

> It was one of the most brutal murders ever reported in the area, the kind of murder that makes people buy newspapers, read hungrily, and ask each

> other what kind of monster would do such a thing. It was the kind of murder that prompts other people to shrug their shoulders, raise their eyebrows, to say that we are all prey to savagery and are tempted often in our lives to wreak violence on others. Why this should happen is a mystery. "Something snaps." is what people usually say by say of explanation. (223-224)

As her life and text both disappear, Swann becomes two texts: the worst kind of newspaper story, salacious and clichéd, and a book manuscript born of violence and guilt, two stories she can neither rewrite nor defend. Frederic Cruzzi strikes his wife over the potential loss of the poems; Mary Swann is killed by her husband as the Cruzzis kill and resurrect her manuscript. When Cruzzi's house is burgled shortly before the Swann Symposium, all four of his remaining copies of the book are stolen (227) leaving him with only his secrets and stories.

The final section of *Swann* differs significantly from the others. Clearly, as the novel develops its "mystery," the plot lines need to converge in some manner. But more importantly, Shields has given readers four major and several minor points of view and readings of who Mary Swann might be and how those readers use reading and writing – and their reading of Swann particularly – to define themselves. Now, she chooses seemingly the most transparent kind of narrative structure. This section is presented as a film transcript for a purported documentary about the Swann Symposium (although no documentarian would have access to all of the events in this part of the novel). Thomas calls this a move away from realism, "For four-fifths of the novel Carol Shields has developed her characters away from caricature or stereotype to powerful illusions of 'real

people.' Now, in her culminating section, called 'The Swann Symposium,' she switches gears dramatically, breaking up her illusory 'realism' and moving to blatant artifice and artificiality" (*Reassembling* 203). Letting the reader in places him or her above the characters' level of understanding and in a place of privilege, even as the readers of the text are led to the point of their greatest confusion and do not get a satisfactory resolution to their problems of reading – familiar to all who know the multiplicity of interpretations that exist within the field of literary study.

The Swann Symposium also becomes a plot device by which the characters are put in the crucible and are forced to confront the selves they have created, whether or not they can be reconciled to other documented facts. Niederhoff notes the fragmented, destructive nature of the scholars' agenda that exists before the community finally comes together as readers, "At times, the scholarly activity devoted to Swann seems more like a concerted effort to erase and obliterate her voice than to make it heard and understood by a wider audience" (74). Yes, we have read the characters correctly, it seems. But as will happen at a scholarly symposium, challenges to each person's reading come into play. In the end, these individual readings are not what is important; what matters are their common ties to the same original text. However, things do unravel. First, Rose's fragile feelings and vulnerability in not being a credentialed scholar are further damaged when someone points out that the Nadeau public library has a very limited selection of books that Mrs. Swann may have actually read (which has the double effect of calling into question Jimroy's claims about her influences):

> BUSWELL: Miss Hindmarch. My interest is in addressing the question of influences. I assure you, I am not challenging you personally. It is Mr.

Jimroy who makes claims for Mrs. Swann's familiarity with certain works in the modern trad—

JIMROY: I suggest only. I do *not* claim. (260)

Jimroy cannot claim because he has no documentation, the tool of the biographer's trade. Rose takes Buswell's comments with great pain, because her identity is built upon her codified understanding of what it means to be the Nadeau librarian, what responsibility and authority that confers, as limited as it may seem to a person outside the provincial sphere. But "influences" are how her scholars intend to place Swann in the interpretive community to which she may have belonged. They persist in trying to fit her into a cultural "matrix" (266). Jimroy stresses her outsider status, that she was not part of any interpretive, literary, artistic, or scholarly community. Sarah affirms his position by calling her "a kind of curious cultural hiccup isolated from any sort of cultural tradition" (266). Sarah can prove nothing but again stakes her claim for her reading of Swann as a lost feminist: "SARAH: . . . And I'd like to state in conclusion that, like other self-generated artists, Mary Swann had the ability to state her truths with a sharpness and slant that lit up what had become stale by traditional use. It's this, more than anything else that gives her work its power" (266). A "self-generated artist" gets around the problem of influences; rejecting "traditional use" means to heck with the codes you expect such a writer to use. Is Sarah correct? It doesn't matter because she's correctly telling the story she wants to be true; she is reading the codes of feminism around what little can be known about Swann. But Sarah's authority is called into question over another kind of documentation she had withheld – Swann's notebook, given to her by Rose, and now lost: "WOMAN WITH TURBAN: Surely the public, or at least those who have an

academic investment, should be allowed access to the journal" (268). The words anticipated to be in the notebook are the kind of documentation, the key codes to reading these people long for. Sarah tries to recategorize, recode, change the terms of the journal: "SARAH (at a loss): The journal . . . as you call it – and perhaps I should never have used that term in my original article" (268). Sarah had tried to use the "journal" to cement her authority as the most connected Swann scholar, literally a possessor of unique knowledge, and now she must back off of that basis for her claim: "SARAH (exasperated): Shopping lists, Mr. Jimroy. That's what's in the journal. Comments about the weather. Once, once, she mentioned a door latch that was broken. Not a symbolic door latch, either. A real door latch. Anyone could have written the stuff on those pages. That's the tragedy of—" (268-269). The journal is useless, Sarah claims, because it is a universal document, with no codes and subtext, no connection to the art. But Jimroy, ever the scavenging biographer, speaks for the community of scholars: "JIMROY (fiercely, but trying for control): Nevertheless, this material, marginal as it may be, and I suppose I must take your word for *that*, Dr. Maloney, this marginalia does offer a glimpse of that private person behind—" (269). Skeptical, but unwilling to let go of the hope of insight, Jimroy presses on, states that it is not Sarah's job to decide for all scholars. The loss of the diary also calls Sarah's integrity as a member of the community into question. Sarah's ability to read the codes others in the community might see is doubted, even when she reiterates, "there's nothing *in* the notebook" (276), as a scholar looks for meaning that can be extracted. And nothing would change that except the journal itself – the document to which codes might be applied. Again, Swann has been a conduit for understanding not her own work and character but how self-definition rules their lives. In the end, though,

the text must have primacy, and they must put aside their constructed selves for the good of the community.

In the novel's closing pages, the characters finally reveal to each other that most of Swann's books, artifacts, and working papers have disappeared from the characters' possession as well as from various libraries. We come to know that Sarah's ex-lover, a rare-book dealer nicknamed "Brownie," is likely responsible. He is not caught, but disappears into the city streets, similar to the brownie imps of legend that cause their mischief closest to home (310). The novel does not resolve whether the artifacts are ever returned, whether the scholars get their things back, whether Brownie is punished. In that manner, the "mystery" of *Swann* is not solved. But as Smyth posits, "The loss of the Mary Swann artifacts, memorabilia, and poems, is, then, emblematic of other losses" (143). Perhaps the characters' belief in the primacy of their own readings is the most profound loss. But they have a different opportunity for redemption and transformation: their work as a community committed to knowledge acquisition, in other words, as Hirsch says, scholars in a discipline:

> A sense of the community exists precisely because a sense of the discipline exists. The process of knowledge occurs *on the level of the discipline*. Despite individual eccentricities, brilliant guesses accompanied by brilliant perversities, the direction of knowledge goes forward at the level of the discipline. The probability of truth does in fact increase even in the humanities, so long as the sense of the inquiring community persists and inferences are drawn at the level of discipline. (152-153)

The scholars have a new purpose in coming together: to try to recover Swann's poetry from their collective memories. This collaborative act of reading and re-writing is one of great love and compassion as well as cooperation. Smyth says, "What really matters in *Swann* is the group of academics who have become, for the moment, a loving community as they piece together *Swann's Songs*. In the end, this mystery novel reveals itself as a kind of existentialist divine comedy" (144). Perhaps their in-fighting will remain, but the group must act as a unit, cooperating, debating, compromising. The reading transformation here is from individual to community, the focus on shared text and abandonment of individual construction. The "Director's Final Note" gives an indication of purpose for the Swann scholars:

> The faces of the actors have been subtly transformed. They are seen joined in a ceremonial act of reconstruction, perhaps even creation. There need be no suggestion that any one of them will become less selfish in the future, less cranky, less consumed with thoughts of tenure and academic glory, but each of them has, for the moment at least, transcended personal concerns. (311)

These scholars can work together as a reading community when needed. A "ceremonial act of reconstruction" is an act of writing within the Swannian codes that affirms these people's position as a community of readers. The fact that they approach the task reverently and together means they work as a kind of literary congregation, with the common tie a text that shares their attention and esteem. The concluding lines here are a kind of incantation of what they can recover of Swann's missing words. And finally, separate from the last page of the section, Shields presents the novel's only complete

Swann poem. We suppose because of its proximity to the final section and the collective rewriting party that it is a creation of that group. But perhaps it is Mary Swann's own work. Or a Cruzzi-crafted creation. The ambiguity seems to further affirm that the reader's own authority in interpretation is the most important thing, not the authority of the writer, who has since died, been edited, been lost, been recreated, and was in the meta-aspect a fictional creation to begin with. And here the power of many readers is the most important community virtue.

Because the questions surrounding Mary Swann's life, writing, and murder are not answered, in the strictest sense, Niederhoff also recognizes that the most important element of the novel is the coming together of the academics – Swann's readers – to recreate her texts, "Whether the reconstruction of a poem in the final scene of *Swann* is true to the original, matters very little. What counts is the communal experience that this reconstruction creates among the self-absorbed academics taking part in it" (81). Thus the story of the novel is not Mary Swann's, it's the readers'. "For all its self-reflexivity, historiographic metafiction is still storytelling" (Niederhoff 82). And the story is in the readers' construction of themselves and Swann through their reading codes. Swann may be the vortex of the mystery, but the readers of her work are the story. That is why their transformation is the highlight and the climax of the final section of the novel. Because they were transformed individually, they own a reading that can contribute to the communal rewriting.

The novel supports a view of scholarly reading as collaborative process. With so many disparate readings emerging from the same text, we understand that all readers confront texts personally that have potentiality of meaning and value, as Booth says, "Of

course the value is not there, *actually*, until it is actualized by the reader. But of course it could not be actualized if it were not there, *in potential*" (*Company* 89). When the characters read within a set of personal, individual codes they choose merely to support their own egoistic constructions, they are caught up in their own foibles. They strive only for mastery and primacy in the community, not for the interest of the collective of scholars or Swann's legacy or the general reading public. It is only when they come together and discover that no one owns all of the ideas (and artifacts) related to Swann's life – no one can prove that his or her reading is the most correct – that they collaborate, agree that each can contribute to and restore Swann's legacy. Here the "better" reading is not the most provable. Nor is it the one that puts Swann and her poetry in the best light. She is dead; it doesn't matter to her (nor to her surviving daughter, who is so removed from her mother that she doesn't even remember much of what her mother ever said to her (111). Surely this killing of the author is Shields' way of reminding us the actual flesh and blood person is nothing compared to the text. A writer gets no say beyond the text. The reader is always the interpreter and holds the power of the text. It is not even the reading that comes from the scholar with the most "credentials." No one reading is here correct; the best one is assembled based on what has endured in the memories of the various readers. The fact that each scholar originally read the same text and came to a different interpretation is actually enriching. According to Hirsch, "The potential nonsynonymy of texts with themselves is, in fact, the chief raison d'etre of literary scholarship" (63). Why any piece of Swann's work may have been memorable to any one or another of the readers depends on the codes in which her or she might be versed and the personal experiences and memories acquired as an individual. When it comes time to

write, these disparate readings create a richer, more personal experience for the collective Swann community.

At this point, there is no definitive Swann text, so each reader depicted has a stake in the "definitive" interpretation. But, according to Iser, dynamic texts "resolutely resist all attempts at total comprehension, for this is the only way in which they can break down the barriers to the reader's contemplation of his own ideas" (*Implied* 177). None of the Swann Symposium participants feel as if they are speaking from firm ground, not just because of the challenges of the text and the different codes of interpretation in which the various readers are engaged, but because none have their hands on an actual copy of the Swann text. Still they cling, not to the Swann manuscript, but to their own interpretations. The text is there not to satisfy these readers but to be manipulated by the codes in which each operates as a scholar. Iser calls this kind of refusal of the text a serious limitation for the reader who purports to be seeking meaning as:

> one can only release oneself from the text by trying to reduce the confusion of configurative meanings to a determinate, final meaning. In order to do this, the reader must stand at a distance from the text, but this distance, although it grants him a view, also ensures that his view will comprehend at most some of the possibilities of the text. And so in seeking a determinate meaning, the reader loses possibilities of meaning, and yet it is only in losing these possibilities that he can become aware of the freedom his faculty of understanding had enjoyed before he committed himself to passing judgments. (*Implied* 177)

It matters little that the Swann readers have no extant primary texts. They are so deeply tied to the codes of interpretation from their professions that they are not free to interpret the poems themselves.

Johnson, invoking Barthes, declares that these readers are deep into not only interpretation but appropriation: "The Swann Symposium brings the issue of appropriation to a head in the novel's final section. The Symposium itself, embodying the social and cultural institution that establishes author functions and validates or rejects authors, would seem to present itself as a veritable nexus of appropriation" (226). This is what they must abandon to come together to save the poems. Perhaps not having the text of the poems is a quite literal way in which they are now able to be distanced, freer, less judgmental, and establish a community of readers open to the broad possibilities of interpretation. Niederhoff notes this stake the community of readers must take as a vital one:

> Up to this point, Shields has presented the conference as a babel of isolated statements and disconnected clichés. But here the participants finally transcend their personal preoccupations and join in a communal experience. After the satiric scrutiny that the literary and biographical research have been subjected to in this book, the final scene amounts to a surprising and paradoxical affirmation of this activity. (75)

Each of the individual readers has been transformed and now feels a responsibility to the text that affected them. They agree to this communal act of writing. The isolating aspects of reading are turned on their heads as individual readings must be abandoned to reconstruct the Swann text. Each reader, and thus each reading, contributes something to

the effort. As Niederhoff says, “The poem exists only in the minds of its readers; to be more precise, it is rewritten in the course of a dialogue between its readers (just as it was rewritten by the Cruzzis on an earlier occasion)” (75). Each reading is individual, but the original common text now lost, and the need to return to a common text makes dialogue necessary and proper.

To satisfactorily conclude the novel, some ending or finality must be achieved. Shields does not choose to have the Swann manuscripts and artifacts return to the readers. Mary Swann is dead and gone and cannot speak for her work. Cruzzi will stand by his published text as definitive. But each character has a different personal attachment to the text, and no one reading could be definitive. Sweeney’s argument for a female poetics comes strongly into play at the end of the novel, “When Swann’s poems literally disappear at the end of the novel, it becomes clear that such feminine texts must be read differently than masculine texts. . . . The novel’s ending describes the effects of reading the feminine text in this new way” (25). The text is recreated with each reader contributing to the whole, but kept “feminine” and open-ended in that it is not identified as final or exact – Swann’s words, Cruzzi’s words, the collective work of disparate readers – all are possible and alive. Sweeney recognizes the importance of this kind of reading and rewriting, “The ending suggests, then, that reading a feminine text appropriately . . . empowers readers by allowing them to transcend ‘personal concerns’ and unite with others” (26). This communal reading and rewriting both keeps alive the multiplicity and provides an act of finality on which to close the narrative.

Swann is not just the story of the scholars who study her and stake a claim with their readings. There is also, of course, the backstory of the character of Mary Swann. A

battered wife, she was murdered by her husband, her corpse hacked to pieces and hidden on their desolate Ontario farm. Her husband was the first to destroy her, literally and corporally, and the scholars of the novel destroy her and put her back together figuratively, by reading and interpreting and rewriting. The characters, until forced to truly confront the disappearance of the manuscripts, do not reconcile their readings. All are possible and active in the community. The readers of the novel are encouraged to avoid the kind of finality of meaning conventionally expected. This is a challenge for a reader, Iser explains, as he or she is forced to be removed from the very thing that was so engaging, and come up with a satisfactory interpretation:

> But if the reader refuses to allows the text to make its catalytic effect on his consciousness, this very decision brings about another effect: one can only release oneself from the text by trying to reduce the confusion of configurative meanings to a determinate, final meaning. In order to do this, the reader must stand at a distance from the text, but this distance, although it grants him a view, also ensures that his view will comprehend at most some of the possibilities of the text. And so in seeking a determinate meaning, the reader loses possibilities of meaning, and yet it is only through losing these possibilities that he can become aware of the freedom of his faculty of understanding had he enjoyed before he committed himself to passing judgments. (*Implied* 177)

Swann keeps this freedom open, which could be unsatisfactory for the reader who expects a "mystery" to conclude with "resolution," but certainly supports the overall theme of the

novel that text and reading are key to establishing the self, and we protect our stories even as we come together in interpretive communities.

Is it any accident that Shields chose to call the event a "Swann Symposium," instead of a Swann Conference? A very common shared code among readers would be to recognize that the word "symposium" has some of kinship with "sympathy," and "symbiosis," and we should have expected a coming together of these cantankerous, disparate readings. These characters are readers who must become collaborative writers, but as Thomas points out, they have been writing all along, "All along Carol Shields has made this text: under her aegis Mary Swann wrote her poems; Frederick and Hilde Cruzzi made their text; now the Swann scholars are making yet another final text" (*Slight* 115). The final act of communal rewriting is devised by the author of the novel but necessary for the characters' transformation; each reading contributes a piece of his or her own reading to the final writing. Mary Swann had to summon her ego to write poems and submit them for publication; her identity was then subsumed in her murder and dismemberment; knowledge of her was limited to locals and largely lost to history. Rediscovered and read by scholars, we have not Mary Swann but a collective interpretation of her as textual object. It takes the abandonment of many egos to recreate her properly and allow each of her readers to be part of a community, not a hierarchy or power struggle. Hirsch would caution against this kind of destructive reading: "All are ethically governed by the intentions of the author. To treat an author's words merely as grist for one's mill is ethically analogous to using another man merely for one's own purposes" (91). At the moment of recreating – rewriting – Swann's work, the readers here are not fighting over meaning. They are all working to create something beautiful,

something that attracted them as readers in the first place. The transformative experience of reading leads them to the communal experience and acknowledgement of the multiplicity of codes through the singularity of originating text.

CHAPTER IV

ACTING ON SURVEILLANCE: READING A LIFE TO CHANGE LIFE IN *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*

The previous chapters of this document looked at two examples of reading that lead to acts of writing and transformation. First, in Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions of Travel," a reader who confronts not a text, but a personal experience, must decode that experience and complete the personal transformation through writing in a journal. Then, I looked at Carol Shields' novel, *Swann*, in which a disparate group of readers is transformed from individually-identified to a reading community when they interpret the work of a murdered poet through their individual sets of interpretive codes. When the physical texts disappear, the readers in *Swann* assemble as reading community and acknowledge that although their transformation was personal, their reading all came from the same text, and they held a responsibility to the community of readers to attempt to recreate Swann's missing poems. This chapter will examine a reader who, like Bishop's traveler, is decoding the events of a life, not a paper text. And that reader uses a set of interpretive codes to which he has committed his life's work, not unlike the scholarly readers in *Swann*. The transformation for this reader is profound; it changes his own life and the codes to which he has been dedicated and prompts him to direct his acts of writing not just to the required official reports, but also in constructing a kind of re-writing of the events to bring about the culmination he most wishes to see. Director and

writer Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck's film, *The Lives of Others* (2006) depicts an East German Stasi agent as a professional reader and decoder who interprets the signs of human behavior. When his assignment to spy on a noted socialist playwright causes him to read outside the codes to which he has been accustomed, he gets caught up in an intrigue and becomes more than an observer; he chooses to be a player, manipulating and attempting to control the outcome of the official surveillance, as his own character is transformed by the encounter with a life saturated with literature, music and the arts. The film won many honors from film societies worldwide, including the 2007 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film in the United States and the Gold award for Outstanding Feature Film at the 2006 German Film Awards (imdb). Although well-received by audiences, the film has not been without controversy among critics. Three notable arguments emerge – first, that the film uses deliberate historical inaccuracies to gloss over the terror of the Stasi surveillance and the GDR regime in service of a romanticized, redemptive tale; second, that the film is contributing to the tensions surrounding "ostalagie," or the trend toward looking nostalgically at life in East Germany pre-unification, or third, that the story is inherently sexist, turning its only major female character into an unwitting villain and using her as a prop to tell a love story between two men.[7]

[7] Philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Zizek is deeply critical of the film for playing fast-and-loose with the facts and details of Stasi surveillance and minimizing the true horror of living under such a regime. Timothy Gorton Ash is even more critical of this romanticized portrayal and the situational fictions on which the film's plot hangs. Gerry Coulter is similarly troubled by the depiction of the "good Stasi," but puts this aside enough to conduct a reading of distancing in the film using Baudrillard and color theory. Jennifer Creech, Lindenberger, and Gareth Dale are among those who examine the tensions these nostalgic, seemingly uncritical depictions of the GDR create. Creech, Zizek, Thomas Lindenberger, and Mary Beth Stein are all critical of the sexual politics in the film and particularly the treatment of the lead female character, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland.

Despite the varied and strong arguments about *The Lives of Others* as failed history, romanticized nostalgia or misogynist, homosocial love story, I am most interested in the transformation of Wiesler, the seemingly ideal Stasi agent, from loyal, inflexible, hard-edged operative of the state to a man who will sacrifice everything to protect art and artist, and indeed, manipulate and attempt to create a kind of art of his own, through the surveillance apparatus available to him. I plead guilty to Mary Beth Stein's observation that "Not surprisingly, humanists have embraced a different element of the plot: the transformative power of art and literature" (567). Wiesler's transformation in the film can be attributed to a complex act of reading and rewriting, reading not printed text, but human life via surveillance tapes and transmissions. Wiesler goes from merely following the protocol by which he has lived his life to leaps of positive interpretation, as his decision-making turns from rooting out suspected enemies to protecting those who create art. As critic Diana Diamond says, "For Wiesler, through his observation of the lives of others, comes for the first time to experience art, poetry, and music, and this newfound aesthetic dimension in turn expands his capacity for and comprehension of human experience" (816). Wiesler is living the poetics of reading I have come to define: He encounters an unfamiliar "text" in the life story of artists (as opposed to the life stories of political dissidents). He works through the confusion and disruption this new text causes by decoding and interpreting new signals that leave him in a new state, ready to create his own art, indeed doing so to protect the original text – the life, work and sanity of the loyalist artist Dreyman. Wiesler, through acts of ethical, open reading, is a decoder of art and becomes deeply affected by the music, poetry, and other artistic performances to which he is exposed. He can turn his back on that exposure and continue to serve

loyally the state's interest by bringing about his bosses' desired outcome, or he can choose to be a "good man" who decodes, understands, respects, and ultimately creates the artistic texts he has chosen to read. Wiesler demonstrates the three-step process of reading: first, he encounters an unfamiliar "text," the life of an artist who is not the usual political dissident; second, he must decode and interpret the text in light of his initial discoveries, and third, he then writes a new text for himself, as well as for the "official record" demanded by his Stasi superiors that becomes the historical record, waiting for its ultimate reader – the artist who was himself observed. Wiesler is forever changed, positively, for having read and experienced the unfamiliar text and then engaged in his own act of writing.

If reading is an act of interpretation, and meaning exists only through the reader, being exposed to a powerful new kind of text can create new possibilities for the reader. In *The Lives of Others* Wiesler's interpretation of Dreyman's artist's life changes the agent profoundly. Iser finds a performative aspect in this kind of recursive reading loop as "interpretation highlights the fact that human beings live by what they produce, which points to an important facet of the human condition: humans appear to be an unending performance of themselves" (*Range* 156). As the reading affects the reader, the human being is transformed, and the performance of his or her humanity changes as well. We see this manifested as a profound change in Wiesler. The Stasi agent is not expecting the changes that come about in his emotional life as he observes the playwright. The "text" of Dreyman's life is unfamiliar to Wiesler, who normally does not conduct surveillance of loyal socialist artists, but is known for his interrogations of political dissidents. He must learn to decode this new experience and decide how to interpret the information. Iser says

the complications of text can overtake the reader, and "Through this entanglement the reader is bound to open himself up to the workings of the text and so leave behind his own preconceptions" (*Implied* 291). The film unfolds as a political thriller, and as the viewer sees the Stasi agent open up to the aesthetic effects of art, he or she also sees many points in which the agent can turn his back on these experiences and what decisions he makes, but the text – the life he is observing – takes over, and he must surrender to it, adjusting his own life to accommodate his interpretation. For, as Booth has explains, everyone lives in story, needs to interpret life as a story to explain and understand daily events:

> We all live a great proportion of our lives in a surrender to stories about our lives, and about other possible lives; we live more or less *in* stories, depending on how strongly we resist surrendering to what is "only" imagined. Even those few tough-minded ones among us who claim to reject all "unreality"; even those who read no novels, watch no soap operas, and share no jokes; . . . even the statisticians and the accountants must *in fact* conduct their daily business largely in stories (*Company* 14-15).

It is the very strangeness of playwright Dreyman's story that attracts Wiesler, but it is his loyalty to the state based on his original interpretive codes that propels his initial interpretations of the surveillance.

The interrogations Wiesler undertakes at Stasi headquarters are a programmed narrative; he can expect particular reactions by which he can then shape his interpretation of those who may be disloyal to the regime. But upon first encountering Dreyman at the

theater, he observes the playwright's reactions to the performance – fear, nervousness, love, passion – all while understanding that he is known not as a cold automaton of the state but as a passionate and loyal thinker. It is clear that Wiesler sees lives as things to be read, because when he is confronted by someone whose life does not fit the codes with which he is familiar, he seeks to explore this life as a new story. Critic Jennifer Creech characterizes the two men's roles succinctly: "Dreyman produces high art, while Wiesler functions (along with the spectator) as the 'intended audience,' whose aesthetic appreciation completes the artwork by transforming theory into praxis" (104). But Wiesler does not appreciate art at the beginning of the story. He is reading strictly in his familiar set of codes when he first observes Dreyman at the theater and declares him to be: "An arrogant type, the kind I warn my students about." Wiesler's colleague, the politically-minded Grubitz, agrees, but sees Dreyman's political value as Wiesler does not, as "He is our only non-subversive writer who is also read in the West." The fact Dreyman's work seems to transcend the political codes under which he is forced to operate means he is not a typical figure for Stasi interpretation. Wiesler himself suggests surveillance of Dreyman, but is told by Grubitz, that there is no reason to spy on a loyal man. It is only when the even higher-placed Hempf requests the operation that Wiesler is put to the task. Wiesler learns Hempf's motive is not to test Dreyman's loyalty to the state but to discredit Dreyman so he can steal his lover, the beautiful actor Christa-Maria Sieland[8]. By showing his curiosity about Dreyman and beginning the surveillance, Wiesler puts into practice Booth's claim that assent is the essential first step in

[8] In this writing, the character named Christa-Maria Sieland will be referred to as "CMS," as she is ultimately referenced in the Stasi reports on Dreyman. The characters in the film refer to her as Christa, Christa-Maria, or Ms. Sieland, but I wish to avoid calling the film's only significant female character by her first name while all of the male characters are primarily referred to by their last names and/or titles.

interpretation, as it "occurs when we surrender to a story and follow it through to its conclusion. The act of assent will usually include assent to innumerable occasions of critical doubt offered by the author" (*Company* 32). Wiesler will have many reasons to doubt Dreyman over the course of the surveillance – or extended reading project – but he must agree to accept, or read along, to let the narrative continue. His interpretive skills adjust as he discovers motives both inside and outside of Dreyman's life that will change the narrative and his own view of it.

Wiesler practices particular interrogation techniques, repeated systems that produce results, a kind of reading toward a desired interpretation. And he gets the results he wants, because he has correctly read the signals and signs of the situation. The film implies this is the routine of Wiesler's life, and he is extremely skilled at it. Although one may think Wiesler's skill is remarkable, as a reader he is himself stultified, as stagnated and repressed as the regime he works for. Booth identifies this kind of anti-ethical reading as a result of inflexible codes and texts:

> The serious ethical disasters produced by narratives occur when people sink themselves into an unrelieved hot bath of one kind of narrative. No single work is likely to do us *much* good or harm, except when we are very young. But a steady immersion at any age in any one author's norms is likely to be stultifying – even if they happen to be as broad or conventional as those of a Shakespeare or Tolstoy" (*Company* 282).

Are the political dissidents Wiesler usually encounters all living the same narrative? Perhaps not, but his training is to read them in the same way and fit them into an unvarying set of interpretive codes. Wiesler is about to be immersed in a strange text, one

that goes far off script from those he is used to. In the opening of the film, we are led to believe that he could easily bring about the downfall of a man like Dreyman. After all, Wiesler is trained to be suspicious even of his students, those who aspire, ostensibly, to be like him in their professional interpretive practice.

Wiesler sets up the surveillance operation on Dreyman in a model of socialist efficiency. His grey Stasi uniform blends into the walls of the garret in Dreyman's building, where the surveillance equipment is housed, and in the visual language of the film he becomes part of Dreyman's surroundings, albeit peripherally, a shadow in a dark attic. He shows a certain tentativeness the first time he puts on the listening equipment, which seems unexpected, considering his confidence shown in earlier scenes. But this is the opening of a new text, a new kind of reading for Wiesler. It is important to remember that Wiesler can only hear what is going on in Dreyman's apartment; he has no visual contact. This means that he is already one step into the reading act, interpreting right away. Diamond notes the ambiguity inherent in this situation, where "Wiesler comes to inhabit a transitional space that blends objective happenings with subjective imaginings, half real, half reverie" (815). It adds a dimension to the film in which we must consider that the point of view is often that of Wiesler himself, and he is actively interpreting the situation.

Shortly after the surveillance begins, Wiesler listens in on Dreyman's 40th birthday party. The key intellectuals of the story are all present – Paul Hauser, a younger dissident writer; Albert Jerska, Dreyman's former director, blacklisted by the Stasi; and his new director, Schwalber, handpicked by the regime – so the event should prove to be a bonanza of information for the Stasi reports Wiesler is expected to generate. Jerska

separates himself from the others at the party and sends his friends away. Only Dreyman's approach is welcome. He asks Jerska if he came to the party to read. Jerska counters that it is Brecht. Wiesler makes a note. Knowledge of Brecht is a text-based code of understanding between the two artists Wiesler does not share. Jerska's gift is a music manuscript titled "Sonata for a Good Man," implying the path of the artist is how one becomes a good man. So far, Wiesler has not been pushed to read Dreyman in a way that transcends his usual codes of interpretation. He has many possible clues to follow and can satisfactorily begin his work of generating reports to his superiors.

When the night technician arrives, he nearly catches Wiesler mimicking CMS's position in bed, his arms curled around himself, head lolled, eyes closed. Although there is no way Wiesler could have known her body was positioned this way, having no visual contact with the apartment below, it indicates he is forming a deep attachment to this story. We do not expect from the Stasi this kind of empathetic reading, and clearly it is confusing for Wiesler himself. As Wiesler reads and interprets Dreyman's life, he seems to be vulnerable to the experience in a way he was not when interrogating the man in the opening scene of the film. He is operating with the same set of interpretive codes, but the text—the life of the writer Dreyman—is different than any he has encountered previously. Wiesler gets extremely involved in his interpretation of the life of the passionate writer and finds himself in the kind of reading situation described by Iser as a suspension of the self: "Reading reflects the structure of experience to the extent that we must suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our own personality before we can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary process. But during this process, something happens to us" (*Implied* 291). What happens to Wiesler is a shift, then

abandonment of the codes of interpretation under which he works. Finding new codes in the artists' lives are the beginning of his transformation.

We see this shift quite early, as the same night Wiesler reads and interprets lovemaking between CMS and Dreyman he hires a prostitute and attempts a human connection of his own. But the experience does not translate. Although the woman is affable, they have quick, mechanical sex. Wiesler does not even disrobe; it is not an act of intimacy. Wiesler asks the prostitute to stay a while longer, to mimic his interpretation of the experience he observed, but she is on a schedule. Not unkindly, she says, "Book me for longer next time." Wiesler tries to make a different kind of physical connection with Dreyman's life, perhaps more on course with his codes of surveillance. He enters Dreyman's apartment, sees the backscratcher and pen that were birthday gifts from Dreyman's friends, and the articles he heard about on the night of the party, sitting prominently on the playwright's desk, mementos of human connection of a kind Wiesler lacks. This is not a Stasi agent looking for incriminating evidence against a possible dissident. This is a man who has become deeply interested in a story, who has started identifying with a character and wants to learn more about him. Booth regards this kind of identification as a shift in the reader: "It is not, then, that in identifying we stop thinking our *own* thoughts but rather that 'our own' thoughts now become different from what they were. The author's thoughts have at least in part become ours" (*Company* 140). Wiesler's actions indeed imply he has interpreted Dreyman's character and deeply wishes to adopt some part of it. Wiesler seems to genuflect at the corner of Dreyman's bed. Later, Dreyman remarks to CMS that he cannot find his volume of Brecht. We see Wiesler on the plain sofa in his own apartment smiling as he reads the Brecht text and

goes where those words will take him. We may presume he took it because it was the object of discussion between Dreyman and Jerska at the party. But Wiesler's satisfied, dreamlike expression indicates the effect this playwright's story and its codes are having upon him. Writer Timothy Garton Ash is not in the least convinced by Wiesler's transformation, acknowledging that although he never knew a Stasi agent who was strictly "an evil man" and such a change could have been possible, if quite improbable, but "Wiesler's own conversion, as shown to us in the film, seems implausibly rapid and not fully convincing . . . It would take more than the odd sonata and Brecht poem to thaw the driven puritan we are shown at the beginning." Perhaps fair, but if a film is doing its job correctly, the viewer won't notice the rapidity of the change, because its emotional accuracy will be adequate. But Wiesler's transformation is not merely hearing and then believing; he must make the leap, as a reader of the situation, of interpretation and then re-writing. Wiesler reads Brecht; he reads Dreyman and CMS; he reads their music and art. Then he must interpret and write for himself – the literal writing of false reports, the situational writing of confrontations with other actors – to complete his transformation.

These profound changes in Wiesler are not inevitable but certainly show the powerful effects of reading on a powerful reader. As Stein notes, "It is an important element of his fundamental ambiguity that Wiesler undergoes an evolution, not a conversion" (571). Wiesler's skills as an interpreter of lives are significant, but Dreyman's life has its own quiet power. As Booth posits, we take what the text gives us, but "No authority or rule can force us to take these *donnees* in the offered way; we can always refuse to grasp the story and turn it instead to the other predetermined purposes. Those who hail the indeterminacy of all 'texts' are thus quite right, up to a point: readers

must always in a sense decide whether to accept a given responsibility" (*Company* 141). Presumably, in Wiesler's past readings his codes have been largely predetermined. He is expected to interpret the Dreyman story in a way that will benefit his superiors, who are looking for sexual conquest over CMS and political position and promotion through the system. But Wiesler sees a value in preventing the immoral or unscrupulous motives of his colleagues and superiors and perpetuating the Dreyman story that is giving him pleasure and insight into a new world. So, he accepts responsibility for Dreyman's fate. Wiesler allows his reading of Dreyman to transform him. He is no longer locked into a closed reading with the outcome of punishing a traitor to the state. He tries to maintain the openness of the experience of art, friendship and love by doing what he can to deceive his supervisors and protect Dreyman, even in the face of the playwright's subversive action.

It is not inconceivable that even a character such as Wiesler previously so deeply immersed in an interpretive code and committed to upholding a particular doctrine would undergo a change when confronted with a profound reading experience. A kind of transference between the reader and subject occurs when a reader identifies closely with the text, according to Iser: "If reading removes the subject-object division that constitutes all perception, it follows that the reader will be 'occupied' by the thoughts of the author, and these in their turn will cause the drawing of new 'boundaries.' Text and reader no longer confront each other as object and subject, but instead the 'division' takes place within the reader himself" (*Implied* 293). Indeed, between the encounter with the prostitute, conversation with CMS in the bar and theft of the Brecht book, we can indeed see that Wiesler is doing more than interpreting Dreyman's life. He is trying on elements

of that kind of life—or how he interprets it—for himself. This is the deepest effect of text– its power to affect our emotional development in a way that promises to linger long after the reading is completed. As Booth explains: "This means that the most powerful effect on my own ethos, at least during my reading, is the concentration of my desires and fears and expectations, leading with as much concentration as possible toward some further, some *future* fulfillment: I am made to want something that I do not yet have enough of" (*Company* 201). Dreyman's desires are being reflected in Wiesler's actions, and Wiesler begins to desire the codes of Dreyman's life. As those codes begin to bring value to Wiesler's life, it is natural that he will want to protect and perpetuate them, even as it means changing his own life's narrative. This supplanting of the self also is a displacement of the codes that shape Wiesler's sense of self, another result of reading as described by Iser: "In thinking the thoughts of another, his own individuality temporarily recedes into the background, since it is supplanted by these alien thoughts, which now become the theme on which attention is focussed (sic)" (*Implied* 293). It is the first step in Wiesler's own personal transformation, his journey to become more like the playwright in character and spirit. The world of art and artists is no longer alien to him.

Dreyman receives a phone call informing him that Jerska has hanged himself. The playwright cannot speak; words have failed him. He goes to the piano and plays the "Sonata for a Good Man" Jerska gave him. Wiesler, listening in the garret, is obviously moved by the music and Dreyman and CMS's sorrow. This penetration of art into the interpreter's consciousness means that Wiesler is truly involved with the narrative. Dreyman quotes Lenin on Beethoven for CMS, and then he muses, "Can anyone who's heard his music, I mean truly heard it, really be a bad person?" As artists, they both

understand what this implies: a certain penetration of the soul. Wiesler's reaction is not shown. The viewer is left to presume a change is happening in him that perhaps he himself does not realize. As his subject is changing him, so his codes are changing. The great energy Wiesler has expended into getting to know Dreyman's character as he interprets the effects of art in the man's life are coming to a point in which he will move from reader to interpreter to writer. This moment is key for many of the critics of the film. Although the logic of art changing evil to good is specious, it is a key moment in the film. Indeed, Ash points out that this love of music and theatre is attributable to many dictators, Soviet, Nazi, Stasi, and otherwise, and the transformation is not guaranteed. "Did they not *really* hear the music? Does high culture humanize? We are back with the deepest twentieth-century German conundrum, conveyed most movingly in music and poetry. Such are the synaptic connections that make *The Lives of Others* resonate so powerfully in our heads." Wiesler is not Lenin, and *Sonata for a Good Man* is not the *Appasionatta*. No, music and art are not magic curatives for evil. But *this* character, in *this* story does change. And he changes because he not only hears the music, reads the poetry, sees the play, but because he examines the life, reads the text before him, and writes his own version of the story with the personal transformation now apparent. Wiesler produces a written report of "Operation Laszlo" that finishes the story by protecting this man he has come to admire. But the written text here is just one piece of narrative in play. Wiesler also attempts to "rewrite" the ending of the interrogative drama by hiding the evidence of Dreyman's subversive writing and trying to intercept CMS before she plays out the text she believes she has been given. Effort given to the reader's task, Booth says, leaves readers like Wiesler more likely to form an ethical opinion about

his interpretation: “The energy I expend in reconstructing the figure is somehow transferred to retaining the figure itself and bonding with its maker. In short, since ‘energy expended = ethical power,’ every deviation from the conventional way of speaking, every special demand on the listener’s powers of reconstruction, will add to the effect” (*Company* 299). Those demands have penetrated Wiesler. He has seen the play, read the poems, listened to the sonata, emulated the lovemaking. It is no surprise he has changed, but outside the milieu of interpreting Dreyman and CMS’s lives, how far does the effect penetrate?

Jerska’s death blocks Dreyman’s ability to write. He confronts CMS about her infidelity and drug use, says she does not need Hempf or the drugs because she’s a great artist. She reminds him how quickly the system could destroy them. Wiesler hears this angry exchange at the end of his shift, and instead of telling his replacement tech that CMS is going to see Hempf, he repeats her lie that she plans to go to see a former classmate. How Wiesler interprets the situation is changing in favor of the artists instead of the political operatives he works for, and his interference in the narrative is about to take its deepest turn so far. He is now re-writing the text to support the change that it has made in him. Wiesler goes to a neighborhood bar, orders a drink, and shortly, CMS enters, looking for liquid courage before her encounter with Hempf. She sits down at an adjacent table and, hiding behind large sunglasses, drinks a cognac. Wiesler approaches her, having knowledge of the situation from his surveillance, and interprets and rewrites this scene advantageously. He says he knows who she is from the stage and praises her acting, saying that she’s always honest and herself. His voice and face are softer than we’ve seen them before, and he projects an open manner of honesty and kindness. As he

sits across from her and speaks, his body rocks gently back and forth, a looser posture than his Stasi interrogation mode.

CMS: “So you know what I’m like.”

Wiesler: “I’m your audience.”

The double-meaning of this statement is only known by Wiesler and the audience of the film. But his surveillance gives Wiesler the opportunity to use the knowledge he’s gained to read and manipulate this situation. He calls her out when she tells her lie about visiting a classmate, and she begins to trust his insight. When she asks him whether she should sacrifice love for art, he gives her a succinct answer:

Wiesler: “You already have art. That’d be a bad deal. You’re a great artist.”

CMS: “And you’re a good man.”

We recall Dreyman’s words as he played the sonata. Perhaps Wiesler is becoming a better man, but he is certainly not behaving as the good Stasi agent he was trained to be. Reading an artist’s life is affecting him in a new way. The report of events from later that night prove Wiesler’s efforts to manipulate and rewrite the narrative were successful. The visual language of the film shows the typescript of the report superimposed over images of CMS and Dreyman making love and the night tech, Udof, reading his report over music playing. This cinematic presentation implies that we are in Wiesler’s consciousness, that he can now read Stasi reports in a highly artistic way, interpreting lives not in terms of who is guilty and who is innocent, but how we create narratives of love out of life. From here, Wiesler’s actions begin to be weighed in a new way. How much will he do to preserve the mission of surveillance and be true to his training and

longstanding ideology? How much will he do to re-write the situation, to continue to read the fascinating artists' lives? The tension is ratcheted up, built on the kind of desire scholars Thomas J. Catlaw and Greogry M. Jordan identify as the Lacanian lack or absence, some unfulfilled need. (292) They see Wiesler's actions in terms of a turn to the self, instead of the official, ideological role:

> What is distinctive about Wiesler, however, is that he does *not* act on principle. He makes no reference to some good or to his duty to a higher law; nor does he seem particularly interested in the content of the critical expose that Dreyman is preparing. He seems neither interested in being a hero nor being a vehicle for the heroic "content" of Dreyman's manifesto. Rather he is *moved* by Dreyman's desire and suffering and, in being moved, he chooses to bear his own desire. He breaks from his discursive constraints, representations of the good, and the symbolic identifications; lets Dreyman alone; and creates a space for himself to feel. (296)

This is the personal transformation that allows Wiesler to complete his act of reading. He has interpreted codes, worked to re-write the situation in his own way to resolve positively, and inserts himself only as necessary to complete the rewriting. He does not need to be the star character in his rewriting of the story, because his transformation is internal.

When Dreyman meets with Hauser and others regarding a possible article on suicide in the GDR for *Der Spiegel* magazine, the listening Wiesler has the opportunity to falls back into the reading patterns of a Stasi agent but does not complete his phone call to the border agents: "Just this once, my friend," he says in the garret. He wants to keep

listening to the artist's life; to report these activities would make it all end. He is now reading the situation not as a Stasi analyst, but as an artist in his own right, rewriting the situation in the way he wants it to be presented officially, and manipulating it, just a bit, so that he might continue. Is Wiesler an artist? Not really, but he certainly is learning to read his subjects, the lives of others, through a new set of codes. He is enough involved in the story to not wish to turn Dreyman in on this pretense, although he certainly could. He wants to keep reading an open text.

Wiesler's reports on the surveillance are now a fiction, appropriating a plausible lie from the writers themselves, who use it so as not to reveal their true purpose to CMS. Stein also recognizes this act of writing that connects the reader with his subject: "Wiesler becomes a writer of fiction himself, creatively embellishing Dreyman's pretext of writing a play for the 40th anniversary of the GDR. True believers, whose idealism puts them at odds with regime under which they live such different lives, Dreyman and Wiesler are connected through the act of writing and the cover story that conceals their subversion" (574-575). This connection is the evidence of Wiesler's transformation, the completion of the reading and writing act. Wiesler puts the next phase of his own writing into play by barging into Grubitz's office. Grubitz is grading a dissertation about five types of artists and how they should be punished in the case of disloyalty. Dreyman is on his mind. Wiesler, though, is not there to turn in the traitorous Dreyman. He is there to protect him, to lie to his colleague, saying that the operation is not bearing enough fruit, and it should be ramped down, his assistant, the tech, Udof, should be dismissed, and only Wiesler should observe the apartment. Grubitz, himself a highly-trained agent as well as an astute political operative, is suspicious: "Something doesn't feel right here," he

says. “There’s something you’re hiding.” But because he trusts his knowledge of Wiesler’s skill, known loyalty, and integrity, Grubitz supports his decision, even giving him the verbiage for his report that will satisfy the codes of understanding of the Stasi: “Write as a reason, ‘Lack of suspicious activities.’” But Grubitz leaves his former schoolmate with this caveat: “Projects aren’t about grades, but success.” Grubitz has not seen the change in Wiesler, as Wiesler is talented enough to interpret his friend’s needs and manipulate them for his benefit. Wiesler now believes he is free to listen to Dreyman; he does not know that Hempf is having CMS followed, and other intelligence channels cross the artist’s path, making his interpretations not the only ones to be reckoned. Deep into the re-writing stage of his reading experience, Wiesler is reinterpreting the scenarios to mitigate the desire he has been feeling. This supports Catlaw and Jordan’s Lacanian reading in which “we could say that language is in fact generative of a certain kind of existential suffering that compels us to keep moving and trying” (304). The newly transformed Wiesler recognizes an artist’s suffering and is attempting to write his way out of it.

Pieces of information evade Wiesler as he interprets Dreyman’s life. This kind of reading, in which the reader must produce the codes he or she is operating under, is dependent upon the inputs it receives, and these are necessarily limited by only what the reader observes and is able to process. Iser says these gaps of information are what allow readers to begin interpreting, begin reading the story presented: “The gaps, indeed, are those very points at which the reader can enter the text, forming his own connections and conceptions and so creating the configurative meaning of what he is reading” (*Implied* 40). For Wiesler, visual inputs are largely missing from his observations of Dreyman. He

is limited to what is audible. These lacks, however, are part of what allow Wiesler to construct Dreyman in a sympathetic light. He can imagine what is happening to fill in the gaps in a way that does not offend the codes he has learned as a Stasi agent and affirms Dreyman to be the loving patriot he has interpreted him to be.

The rest of the film depends on Wiesler successfully rewriting the story, on the spot, by manipulating the actions toward the outcome that will best protect the artists. When the *Der Spiegel* article is published and makes a big public splash, Grubitz is called out and admonished to discover the author. He knows the *Der Spiegel* editor had come to East Berlin for a four-hour visit, but he does not know he ended up in Dreyman's apartment with Hauser and others. Wiesler lies about this when Grubitz confronts him:

> Wiesler: "Wouldn't I have included it in the report?"
>
> Grubitz: "Yes, of course, but I smell a writer behind this text."

(Actually, there are two writers and two texts: Dreyman writes the *Der Spiegel* article, and Wiesler composes false reports for the Stasi record and to protect his subject.) This exchange, on the knife-edge of humor, contains some particular insights into the nature of interpretation these men undertake. For Wiesler, if it does not exist in the report, it cannot be read, and did not officially happen. He has not created a code of understanding for what he has observed. This is a kind of editing function. For Grubitz, a "writer" behind a "text" means that the created document, the meaning, has been shaped by a particular kind of individual, not state sanctioned, and therefore, outside of the acceptable political conversation – the conversation for which he is responsible. Although a writer, a particular kind of artist, may recognize the political boundaries, he or she would necessarily not feel bound by them.

The Stasi raid Dreyman's apartment. They examine a brass urn filled with ashes. He is asked, "What do you burn in here," and his answer, "Substandard texts," is honest, eloquent, simple, and insolent. But they find nothing during the raid that could expose Dreyman as the author of the *Der Spiegel* article. Wiesler is at his listening post in the garret of Dreyman's building during the raid, and he can construct the event through the sounds he hears – tearing sofa cushions, cupboards being emptied, papers and books rustling. Because Grubitz does not have accurate information from Wiesler, he turns the screws on the more vulnerable CMS. After arresting her at the doctor's office where she receives her drugs, she crumbles even before the interrogation begins. The threat of losing her ability to perform, to practice her art, is so devastating that she quickly asks how she may save herself, even giving veiled suggestions that she may be sexually available. Grubitz puts Wiesler in charge of CMS's interrogation, presumably so he can read the agent's loyalty, as he asks Wiesler if he's still on the right side before he enters the interrogation room. But which side does Wiesler see as right, at this point? He has become so caught up in reading and interpreting a narrative of Dreyman's life, the theater, poetry, music, and essays of an artist, that he has turned his back on the techniques of recognizing and exposing anti-state narratives, as he had been trained for so many years? Wiesler reveals himself to CMS, and she recognizes he was the man from the bar some weeks earlier who could see through her acting, knew the truth from the lies, and trusts that she will perform during the interrogation. "Don't forget your audience," Wiesler tells her, a comment layered in meaning. She will retain her ability to perform in front of an audience based on the outcome of this interrogation. Finally, she relents and agrees to become an informant on her beloved Dreyman. Grubitz reminds her

of the rules of the new role she is playing: "Remember, you're an informant now. That means responsibilities, like conspiracy and confidentiality." And, she reveals to Wiesler the exact hiding place of Dreyman's contraband typewriter, as he sketches on a notepad a map of their apartment not unlike the one he has been living with on the garret floor. The typewriter is the link to the *Der Spiegel* article and is enough to destroy Dreyman. Wiesler finally has the inputs he needs to "write" the last portion of the narrative.

This behavior toward Dreyman and CMS is so different than any other interrogation experience Wiesler seems to have had before, but it is consistent with a profound reading and interpretive experience. Wiesler has identified his new, transformed self, and since he has been injected into the story, he can operate with new codes and goals. Iser points out the divisions of self created in reading experiences and the force with which readers can surrender or modify their lives: "As we read, there occurs an artificial division of our personality, because we take as a theme for ourselves something that we are not. Consequently when reading we operate on different levels. For although we may be thinking the thoughts of someone else, what we are will not disappear completely—it will merely remain a more or less powerful virtual force" (*Implied* 293). Wiesler performs at the climax of the film both as the interpreter of the CMS-Dreyman story and as the Stasi interrogator he is expected to be; he opens up both sets of codes and uses them to his advantage as a reader.

Wiesler does not confront Dreyman nor does he warn him. He will let the events play out and hope he has performed enough to give the narrative the shape he wishes it to have. When Grubitz arrives at Dreyman's apartment, he remarks on how Wiesler was able to get there so quickly. Wiesler presents him with the last report for "Operation

Lazlo," now a complete fabrication by the transformed reader. He is operating under the artist's codes, not the Stasi's codes. This split is an effect of reading that allows the reader to interpret and behave in a manner outside of the self he believes himself to be, according to Iser: "Every text we read draws a different boundary within our personality, so that the virtual background (the real 'me') will take on a different form, according to the theme of the text concerned. This is inevitable, if only for the fact that the relationship between alien theme and virtual background is what makes it possible for the unfamiliar to be understood. (*Implied* 293-294) Wiesler is indeed acting in an alien theme, but he can draw on both his newly-transformed self and his original codes as a Stasi agent. He has used new, situational interpretive codes for this reading and successfully divides his self to accomplish what he sees as his role as reader and writer. In acting on behalf of Dreyman and CMS, Wiesler shows that he has been deeply affected and absorbed their narrative, has found their goodness as artists and lovers to be of value. Now that Grubitz has CMS's testimony, he can walk right to the typewriter's hiding place, and announces to Dreyman, "This doorsill doesn't look kosher to me." CMS, who arrived shortly before Grubitz, retreated immediately to the bathroom and stands in the shower trying to wash away her sins. Newly baptized as an informant, she wraps herself in a white robe and meets Dreyman's eyes as Grubitz pries up the floorboard. In as close to a pure state as she will come – cleansed and with only the one revelation on her hands – she runs into the street and is hit by an oncoming truck. Wiesler is the first one to her body as she bleeds to death on the street. He tries to tell her it was for naught – he himself hid the typewriter. But Wiesler's sentence is incomplete – he cannot fully become one of the actors in the Dreyman/CMS life that he has been observing as a performance. He steps

aside quickly as Grubitz and Dreyman catch up, and CMS dies in Dreyman's arms. Grubitz did not find the typewriter and is smart enough to figure out Wiesler's betrayal. Although he cannot prove it, he too can work within the Stasi codes he well understands to make his colleague's life miserable: "There's one thing you should understand, Wiesler. Your career is over. Even if you were too smart to leave any traces. You'll end up in some cellar steam-opening letters until you retire. That means the next 20 years. 20 years[9]. That's a long time." And Grubitz has the power to make good on his promise. So Wiesler, the Stasi agent who learned to read like an artist, outside the codes of his profession, and even tried a bit of writing and performing himself, is left to defile texts by opening the mail for inspection but doomed never to read them. However, twenty years – or the rest of his professional life – turns out to be an inaccurate prediction. The Berlin Wall falls just a few years later, and upon hearing the news, Wiesler walks out of the dark basement where he steams letters – like an Orpheus rising from the underworld. He remains a civil servant, delivering the mail, ostensibly connecting human beings to one another, when he has so few connections himself.

Two years after the Wall falls, we again see Dreyman at the theatre, where his play from the beginning of the movie is being given an updated, avant-garde staging. During the performance, he must walk away, the memories of his lost Christa-Maria plaguing him. In an anteroom, he meets Hempf, who claims to be there for the same reason. Hempf takes some satisfaction in the gossip that Dreyman has not written since the fall of the Wall: "What is there to write about in this new Germany? Nothing to believe in, nothing to rebel against" is how Hempf sums up the ennui generated by the

[9] Because the quotes in this manuscript are transcriptions from the film's DVD English subtitles, numerals are used here, as they are simpler for a reader to process quickly.

perceived freedoms of a democratic state. Dreyman finds the bitter, shallow, aging man as distasteful as ever, but now he has the freedom to ask a question that, under the codes of the old regime, was verboten: Why was he not spied upon, when so many others were? Hempf laughs, and says of course he was, fully. The stunned Dreyman returns to his apartment, checks behind the switches, as Hempf told him, and begins to pull the impotent, useless wires that were once a silent menace from wall after wall. He goes to the former Stasi headquarters, now a "Research site and memorial," and demands his file. The clerk who delivers the hundreds of pages of manuscripts on a cart says, "My respects," a simple, eloquent marker of a new diplomacy that has replaced one in which the respect of being able to think and act freely was denied to its people. As Dreyman reads, the codes of a Stasi report unfold. Wiesler's code name, "HGW XX/7" appears again and again. Dreyman sees where the "reports" begin to drift into fiction, as Wiesler's fakery of the 40th anniversary collaboration for the GDR comes into play. He even reads HGW XX/7's attempts to keep up the ruse of the play in play – laughably bad– but proof that this agent was willing to try to create art to save some part of humanity in which he was interested. Finally, he reads CMS's agreement to inform on him, her assigned code name, "Marta," her signature a bright blue against the yellowing page. Dreyman had been living under the impression that she moved the typewriter but still died in guilt, but putting together the fact she had been away all night, with the time of the raid, the time of her death, and the time of HGW XX/7's report, he sees that this was not possible. He also sees a bloody fingerprint on HGW XX/7's last report, the one presented to Grubitz just before the final raid on Dreyman's apartment. The fingerprint matches the ones Dreyman made on his *Der Spiegel* manuscript, when he unwittingly cut

himself opening the doorsill hiding place. This is Dreyman's proof that HGW XX/7 was the writer of that report; he too was cut by the exposed nails in the hiding place. Wiesler never saw the space before retrieving the typewriter; he only heard Dreyman's actions, and saw the mark CMS placed on his sketched map during interrogation, so he didn't know to be careful.

Rather than tracking down Wiesler and thanking him in a conventional manner – with a box of chocolates, or a bottle of wine, or some such token that could never fill the chasm of understanding between them – Dreyman writes. He produces a novel and titles it *Sonata for a Good Man*. As Wiesler passes the Karl Marx bookstore, he is drawn in by a large photograph of Dreyman in a display window. The frontispiece of the book reads: "Dedicated to HGW XX/7 in Gratitude." Can a Stasi agent – who interrogated for the regime, sent people to severe punishments, and taught others to do the same – be transformed into a "good man?" In the act of reading that he performs it is not only possible, it is probable. By being open to a text and seeking to interpret it even when it may be in conflict with the codes with which he was indoctrinated, Wiesler shows an example of what Iser identifies as an act of inhabitation of another: "In the act of reading, having to think something we have not yet experienced does not mean only being in a position to conceive or even understand it; it also means that such acts of conception are possible and successful to the degree that they lead to something being formulated in us" (*Implied* 294). If Wiesler has not entirely become the "good man," he can be the good man within the context of the story that Dreyman interpreted and then produced as his own manuscript. Iser posits that identification in the reading process means that interpreting the acts for the good can involve adopting the traits of the person whom one

is examining: “For someone else’s thoughts can only take a form in our consciousness if, in the process, our unformulated faculty for deciphering those thoughts is brought into play—a faculty which, in the act of deciphering, also formulates itself” (*Implied* 294). Wiesler learned something of the life of a man like Dreyman – who worked within the codes of East German socialism Wiesler himself believed in, but in a way radically different than anything the Stasi agent had ever known. And Dreyman, in reading Wiesler’s reports, interpreted the story of his doomed time with CMS in a new way, seeing that a man who was previously unknown to him could be good, do good for him, even within an act of treachery. Catlaw and Jordan privilege Wiesler’s actions as a particular kind of public good:

> Wiesler’s actions point to a kind of ethics distinct from the typical one discussed in public administration – namely, the wish to do good or wanting to provide the goods for others. These both involve a project of bringing into correspondence the will with some positive object or conception of the Good. To act ethically is to act in conformity with a particular Good. In the realm of servicing, the Good is achieved by my getting what I want, bringing into line my demand with the goods of the marketplace in equal exchange. Wiesler, we have argued, acts neither for exchange nor for value or principle. Paradoxically, the film suggests, it is precisely in this stance that he becomes “a good man” (e.g., is open to the “Sonata for a Good Man”). He is, though, a good man in a radically contemporary sense, a sense in which he fully bears his desire. (306)

Wiesler bears his desire through the writing stage of the transformation. His faked reports, his manipulation of the interrogations, are the ways he can cope with the unfolding story. He has read the situation through his desire and rewritten through the depths of the effects to better understand the situation and be open to transformation. This change brought about by reading is directly due to the difference between author and reader, in both cases. There is ambiguity in the readings performed by both men. Wiesler had to put aside the fact Dreyman wrote the *Der Spiegel* article. Dreyman must assemble his narrative knowing that although Wiesler did make an attempt to save him and CMS, it was only because he was under surveillance in the first place, his every move listened to and interpreted under suspicion. Each man interprets the other's story in an isolated manner. To look upon the events as part of a larger, historical whole would poke holes in the goodness each man brought to the situation. It is these individual stories that penetrated the codes, caused each man to rethink, and create new value paradigms, as Booth describes:

> Perhaps we all underestimate the extent to which we absorb the values of what we read. And even when we do not retain them, the fact remains that insofar as the fiction has *worked* for us, we have lived with its values for the duration: we have been *that kind of person* for at least as long as we remained in the presence of the work, and any ethical criticism we engage in will thus be "tainted" for those who would prefer some kind of objective view. (*Company* 41)

Wiesler somehow, despite his training to believe that suspicion usually leads to the finding of treachery, interprets Dreyman as good, loyal to the state, loving, and can put

forward reciprocal actions that show he understands the artist and can try to be a similar kind of person. And Dreyman, upon reading his file, can overcome the violation of surveillance and the loss of his lover to understand that the risks taken by a rogue Stasi agent were meant to help him, to thwart the blackmail of callous superiors, to promote the work of the artist.

Furthermore, both men come to empathy through their reading of the other because each life is in some way worthy. This may not be a value judgment in terms of goodness or evil, but a commentary on how compelling each man finds the other's life and work. Each goes to live in the other's world, in a way, to follow through with the narrative that has entranced him. Booth describes this as a kind of overtaking possession:

> When a story "works," when we like it well enough to listen to it again and to tell it over and over to ourselves and friends . . . it occupies us in a curiously intense way. The pun in "occupy" is useful here. We are occupied in the sense of filling our time with the story – its time takes over our time. And we are occupied in the sense of being taken over, colonized: occupied by a foreign imaginary world. (*Company* 139)

Indeed, both men must occupy a foreign, imaginary world, in that they cannot really know the other. But each becomes so deeply involved he does find himself in the story as an actor and as an author. Wiesler changes the course of events for Dreyman and allows him to continue his life, his work. Dreyman, in turn, imagines what this Stasi agent must have done in order for him not to be arrested and writes a new narrative based on his reading.

In the bookstore, the clerk asks Wiesler, “Shall I gift-wrap it?” As the shot freezes on Wiesler’s beatific face, he says, “No, it’s for me.” This is the end of the film. But the viewer is left to understand that Wiesler is the man who is willing to change because of reading. He was the true, capable loyalist to the regime’s ideals who was willing to do hard, cruel things to support the system he believed in and protect it from dissident influences. He unwittingly left himself open to what art can do and made an attempt to re-write the life story of a man whom he respects, politically, but initially distrusts. He emerges in the new country, having saved one man, and therefore his art, and also managed to survive himself to receive a reward, of sorts. His is an ultimate act of transformation through the reading ethos, from interpretation to creation of human reciprocity.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have shown a pattern of reading by characters in texts: A reader encounters an unfamiliar situation – whether it is a printed book, a life experience, or a performance – and must interpret it as a text by employing a set of codes with which he or she is familiar. In these texts, the interpretation culminates with an act of writing, creative output to help make sense of the reading experience. This is a model of reading as path to transformation. Recognizing this model within the stories in this study establishes a pattern that can be identified in other texts. Not every character who reads will fit the pattern, but when the pattern holds, connections can be made and character transformation discovered through a particular progression.

Louise Rosenblatt shows that an open relationship between reader and text is democratic and transactional, allowing the reader access to what is available in the text, discovered through interpretation based on prior knowledge and experience. The completion of this exchange, Rosenblatt says, defines the full reading model:

> Since he interprets . . . in terms of his fund of past experiences, it is equally possible and necessary that he come to reinterpret his old sense of things in the light of this new literary experience, in the light of the new

> ways of thinking and feeling offered by the work of art. Only when this happens has there been a full interplay between book and reader and hence a complete and rewarding literary experience. (101)

Interplay is active and dynamic, so it is not surprising that authors and filmmakers can make use of this dynamic with their characters. Characters can be depicted as encountering texts and interpreting them to lead to personal growth and transformation within stories because the interiority becomes exterior with the acts of writing that complete the transformation.

Wayne C. Booth helps to define not only how texts work, but the interplay between text and reader and the responsibilities that manifest in the reading process. Readers may define lives by texts, and they enter into a conversation with the authors of those texts by essentially comparing their value system to the implied author's, "If I am to give myself generously, must I not also accept the responsibility to enter into serious dialogue with the author about how his or her values join or conflict with mine? To decline the gambit, to remain passive in the face of the author's strongest passions and deepest convictions is surely condescending, insulting, and finally irresponsible" (*Company* 135). The responsible, ethical reader, therefore, is open to the message of the text, and in that openness, can evaluate the work and be prepared for possible transformation. When this happens to a reader inside the text, the reader of the text can further share in it.

Wolfgang Iser's phenomenology of reading also involves an exchange between reader and text, but he emphasizes that the reader must fill in the "gaps" in a text, which

is always by necessity a set of choices, not a complete possible description of a scenario. Iser's reader seeks to connect to a familiar element in the text, but if that expectation of the familiar is not met, the reader must adapt. This process leads to personal growth: "The efficacy of a literary text is brought about by the apparent evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar. . . . As the literary text involves the reader in the formation of illusion and the simultaneous formation of the means whereby the illusion is punctured, reading reflects the process by which we gain experience" (*Implied* 290). So, if the reader is responsible for using his or her experience for filling in the gaps of a text, he or she is essentially making meaning as a personal act. In the works studied here, that meaning-making led to the growth and knowledge of the traveler from confusion to contemplative moment. It also meant the readers of the lost Swann text all had a personal stake in and contribution to the communal re-writing of the work. And finally, being open to meaning-making and not trapped in his "closed" reading techniques, meant the Stasi officer could undergo an extreme personal transformation that also helped to save the life and career of the socialist playwright he observed.

The reader-response critics dealt largely with traditional printed texts – books – and the readers who encountered them. But this study looks at characters who read within the narrative of the text. Additionally, what those characters read is not always a printed manuscript, but a life experience, or even the life of another character in the text. The poststructuralist critics allow us to read this way, releasing the models of reader and text and allowing for recognition of a wide range of modes to experience text. Roland Barthes allows, "We now know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a

variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146). Reading characters within narratives – whether they are interpreting printed texts or experience – are part of the multi-dimensional space Barthes opens up. Further, Jacques Derrida's now-classic dictum, "*There is nothing outside of the text*" (158) allows for interpretation always to be in play, and the reader to be decoding in all parts of his or her life. This constant work means we are actually living in an interpretable text that we encounter as we are able. We can be within a story, encountering a life, living our own lives. Interpretation and analysis through readerly codes is perfectly legitimate, and indeed unavoidable. We live within narrative and create it as we live our lives; it is how we make sense of what is happening to us.

The three texts under consideration in this study present this reading phenomenology similarly and give us a basis for establishing this pattern and recognizing it in other works. In Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Questions of Travel," we recognize her life-long grappling with ideas of place and home and belonging. An intensely private person, essentially orphaned at a young age, Bishop struggled to make a home for herself. Her travels took her to New York, Key West, Brazil, and Boston, among other locales. Brazil was her home for more than a decade, with the great love of her life, Lota de Macedo Soares, and "Questions of Travel" reflects some of her experiences at that time. In the poem, the speaker, a traveler, is initially overwhelmed by an unfamiliar landscape. The speaker then decodes the experience, using techniques of reading, such as imagery and simile, among others. Finally, the speaker sits down at her desk to write, and in the journaling completes the process of transformation. This is our example of individual transformation.

Canadian novelist Carol Shields presents a multiplicity of readings of a single text in her novel *Swann: A Mystery*. The story brings together several readers: a feminist scholar, a literary biographer, a newspaper and small-press editor, among others, who have all studied the work of a murdered poet of rural Canada, Mary Swann. Each of the readers interprets Swann's writing and the facts of Swann's life based on the codes of his or her own discipline. These disparate readings stay in play, as Shields never allows Mary Swann her own voice in the text – she is the literal embodiment of the "death of the author." Each of these readings could exist in their multiplicity, but Shields further complicates the story by the theft of all of the known copies of Swann's book, as well as most of the remaining artifacts of her impoverished life. So, with no actual physical "text," the Swann readers ultimately must come together to recreate the "work." Their multiple readings allow them to contribute to the communal act of writing and the transformative experience they share.

Finally, the film *The Lives of Others*, written and directed by Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck, gives us the riskiest act of reading, in which a reader abandons long-held codes, leaves himself open to the effects of art and artists, and ultimately goes through a personal and ethical transformation that makes him rewrite the story in favor of the affirmation of life and art. The reader in this film is Wiesler, a Stasi agent assigned to perform surveillance on a loyal socialist playwright and his actress lover. A thoroughly accomplished agent and teacher, Wiesler is deeply versed in his readerly codes and has made a career rooting out traitors to the East German state. However, in his surveillance of the playwright Dreyman, he is exposed for the first time to an artist's life, filled with poetry, music, the conversations of writers and actors, and tender lovemaking. Wiesler

leaves himself open to this new kind of text and becomes deeply affected. When political forces close in on Dreyman and his lover, Wiesler acts, essentially re-writing their story, with false reports and covert actions. He is transformed into the "good man" by his reading experience. Years later, when Dreyman reads his Stasi file, he recognizes this, dedicating his book to this faceless reader.

Recognizing this reading paradigm and its permutations allows us a new way in which to analyze similar texts. There is great pleasure and use in being able to apply models to texts. When texts also can equal life experiences, they then have even greater ramifications. As E.D. Hirsch says, interpretation is not an act in itself, but a method to give value to the act and the interpreted:

> The value of interpretation lies in its application . . . The job of criticism is both to illuminate meaning (when necessary) and to indicate some valuable application of meaning, some special charm or use or wisdom for the present time. Ultimately, then, the aim of interpretation is to form a reliable basis for application. The value of knowledge is realized in its application, and there alone, even when the application resides in the spiritual exaltation of a pure contemplation of meaning. Exaltation is not a trivial value. (156)

Exaltation indeed is appropriate for the kinds of readerly transformations we have read about in the works in this study. Tracing a reader's transformation from decoding and interpreting to his or her own writerly or artistic act is a pattern that occurs in many texts. We will not see this phenomenology in every text that features a reader. But when we do, it should be a chance for contemplation and exaltation, because the pattern will indicate a

character transformation. In turn, we also may expect a personal transformation, as readers decoding these texts.

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