

“MINDS WILL GROW PERPLEXED”:  
THE LABYRINTHINE SHORT FICTION OF STEVEN MILLHAUSER

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## ABSTRACT

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“MINDS WILL GROW PERPLEXED”:

THE LABYRINTHINE SHORT FICTION OF STEVEN MILLHAUSER

Steven Millhauser has been recognized for his abilities as both a novelist and a writer of short fiction. Yet, he has evaded definitive categorization because his fiction does not fit into any one category. Millhauser’s fiction has defied clean categorization specifically because of his regular oscillation between the modes of realism and fantasy. Much of Millhauser’s short fiction contains images of labyrinths: wandering narratives that appear to split off or come to a dead end, massive structures of branching, winding paths and complex mysteries that are as deep and impenetrable as the labyrinth itself. This project aims to specifically explore the presence of labyrinthine elements throughout Steven Millhauser’s short fiction.

Millhauser’s labyrinths are either described spatially and/or suggested in his narrative form; they are, in other words, spatial and/or discursive. Millhauser’s spatial labyrinths (which I refer to as ‘architecture’ stories) involve the lengthy description of some immense or underground structure. The structures are fantastic in their size and often seem infinite in scale. These labyrinths are quite literal. Millhauser’s discursive labyrinths demonstrate the labyrinthine primarily through a forking, branching and repetitive narrative form.

Millhauser's use of the labyrinth is at once the same *and* different than preceding generations of short fiction. Postmodern short fiction in the 1960's and 70's used labyrinthine elements to draw the reader's attention to the story's textuality. Millhauser, too, writes in the experimental/fantastic mode, but to different ends. The devices of metafiction and realism are employed in his short fiction as agents of investigating and expressing two competing visions of reality. Using the 'tricks' and techniques of postmodern metafiction in tandem with realistic detail, Steven Millhauser's labyrinthine fiction adjusts and reapplies the *experimental* short story to new ends: real-world applications and thematic expression.

Robert Rebein, Ph.D, Committee Chair

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## Introduction

There is something exceptional about Steven Millhauser's writing. The recipient of the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Millhauser has been recognized for his abilities as both a novelist and a writer of short fiction. His stories have inspired major motion pictures (2006's *The Illusionist*) and his recent collection *We Others* was awarded the 2012 Story Prize. Yet, for all this acclaim, critics have struggled to agree on where to plot Millhauser's fiction on literary axes. Thus far, Millhauser has evaded definitive categorization because his fiction does not fit into any one category. The complex and often paradoxical character of Millhauser's prose is, in other words, a labyrinth which critics have attempted to map. Appropriately, much of Millhauser's short fiction contains images of labyrinths: wandering narratives that appear to split off or come to a dead end, massive structures of branching, winding paths and complex mysteries that are as deep and impenetrable as the labyrinth itself. My project aims to specifically explore the presence of the labyrinthine throughout Steven Millhauser's short fiction.

Millhauser's use of the labyrinth is at once the same *and* different than preceding generations of short fiction. Postmodern short fiction in the 1960's and 70's used labyrinthine elements to draw the reader's attention to the story's textuality (i.e. Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" or Bartheleme's "The Babysitter"). For many of these writers, the labyrinth was a metafictional instrument. Millhauser, too, writes in the experimental/fantastic mode, but to different ends. For Millhauser, the fantastic is an important means of thematic expression. Yet, Millhauser also writes an "abundance of surface detail" that would suggest the mode of realism (Fowler, "Postmodern" 81).



Indeed, Millhauser's fiction has defied clean categorization specifically because of his regular oscillation between the modes of realism and fantasy (77). As I will argue, the devices of metafiction and realism are employed in his short fiction as agents of investigating and expressing two competing visions of reality. Whereas the postmodern wave of the 60's and 70's was characteristically hostile towards the reader, Millhauser's fiction bears no such hostility. Using the 'tricks' and techniques of postmodern metafiction in tandem with realistic detail, Steven Millhauser's labyrinthine fiction adjusts and reapplies the *experimental* short story to new ends: real-world applications and thematic expression.

### **The Idea of the Labyrinth**

In her book, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, Penelope Doob traces the evolution of the labyrinth in art, culture and literature from antiquity to the middle ages. Doob observes that the labyrinth of ancient mythology was so perplexing that its maker, Daedalus, could scarcely navigate it (Doob 36). The confusion and imprisoning nature of the mythological labyrinth points to the trope's inextricable quality: its interior ambages (Doob 66). Likewise, Hermann Kern asserts that "the most important feature of the labyrinth [is]...the negative space of the path formed by those lines which determined the pattern of movement" (Kern 23). Nietzsche, too, observes that the force of the labyrinth is that its meaning resides solely in its interiority (Kostka 61).

Another of the labyrinth's characteristics is paradox. In his book *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society*, Jacques Attali notes that many linguists believe the word *labyrinth* has its origins in the word *labrys*: the *double-headed* axe emblem of Cretan kings (Attali xix). The labyrinth is historically encoded with the "doubleness" of design and chaos—

order and disorder (Doob 1). It is, in other words, “planned chaos” (2). Patterns of paradox can be found in early labyrinthine fiction that attempts to blend an objective pattern with a subjective path, imposing structure or design upon the chaos of life (24-25). The “planned chaos” of the labyrinth mirrors the multiplicity of responses to it. “Labyrinths, like life, involve chaos and order, destiny and free choice, terror and triumph—all held in the balance, all perspective-dependent” (Doob, “Aeneid” 7). Wendy Faris, in her study of labyrinths and language, describes the labyrinth as “orderly disorder”—an environment that is at once play *and* terror, horror *and* delight (Faris 1).

The labyrinth first emerged as a unicursal form (Veel 154). True to their name, unicursal labyrinths consist of a singular, twisting path (Doob 22). Such labyrinths define a singular course that may be taken, guiding the wanderer to its center (49). These labyrinths characteristically engender frustration and passive dependence on the design and, thereby, the designer (50). Their paths represent a fatalism that offers one choice: the choice to enter (a “*labor intus*”) (50). The guidance of their disorienting path mediates a conversion from disorder to order (52). What may appear as choices are, in fact, pre-determined paths (90). The unicursal labyrinth does not require the walker to make any choices, but inevitably leads to its own center (Kern 23). As such, the unicursal labyrinth is interpreted as a model for determinism (62).

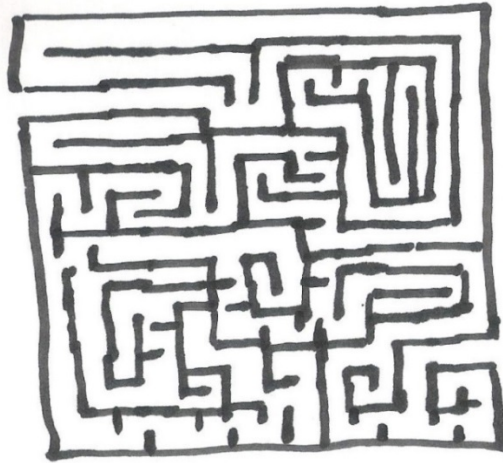


**Figure 1**

The unicursal labyrinth was primarily a religious-mythic figure of order (Veel 154). Unicursal cathedral labyrinths were thought to represent the divinely created order of the cosmos (Doob 67). For this reason, Christian labyrinths were circular (the circle being a universal symbol of unity, perfection and wholeness) (Attali 16). In medieval times the cathedral was, at times, interpreted as a labyrinth (Doob 82). This notion interpreted God at the center and the surrounding walls as protective barriers to a precious and sacred mystery, guarding against the unworthy (Doob 82, 193).

In both mythic and Christian symbolism, the unicursal labyrinth represented a process of orientation – a path towards familiarity that comes with experience (Kern 30). In Christian labyrinths, the path that leads to the center signified the death unto oneself that leads to spiritual rebirth (Kern 30). The journey outward, thus, signified an escape from hell as a result of that spiritual rebirth (Doob 128). The certainty of the designer (or teacher) contrasted with the ignorance of the wanderer who, through the wandering of paths, learned the shape of a worldview (Doob 83). This understanding of the labyrinth expressed the limits of human perspective amidst the underlying order of creation: the great chain of being (67).

First appearing in the literature of the middle-ages, the multicursal labyrinth (or maze) was the second form of the labyrinth (Veel 154). Multicursal labyrinths consist of multiple, forking paths (Doob 48). Because of their shape, multicursal labyrinths leave most choices to the wanderer and thereby emphasize the individual's responsibility over their own fate (Doob 48).



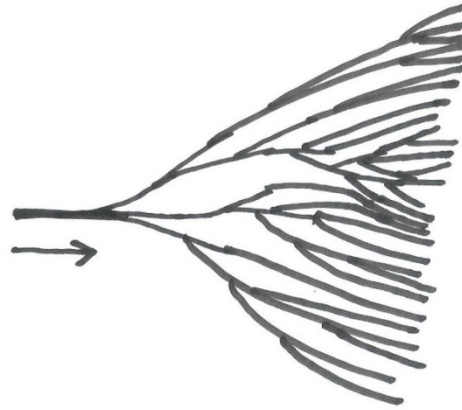
**Figure 2**

Multicursal labyrinths are apt metaphors for confusion and searching as the maze represents a “breaking open” of the simple, clearly marked path of the unicursal labyrinth (Kern 306). The notion of “going astray” in the mind’s wanderings is “only conceivable against the backdrop of certainty, order and orientation (Kern 306). Thus, the individual will to provide shape and meaning for an otherwise fragmentary experience is represented in the paradoxical form of the labyrinth – an image that traces the search for unity and wholeness within the mind (Kern 306). Medieval and renaissance literature often equated multicursal labyrinths with sin, error and confusion (Doob 112). The mind could all too easily become warped and confused by worldly entanglements which the Christian wayfarer must be guided through with the thread of the scriptures – the word of God (Kern 207). Christian ideas of the labyrinth, therefore, juxtaposed God’s intended

order with the ensnaring chaos of a fallen world – a world that must be navigated carefully by the worthy pilgrim (226). The multicursal labyrinth is, therefore, “a figure in which one risks losing one’s bearings” (Kern 316). As such, it has, in modernity, become a metaphor for the mental ensnarement of over-intellectualization (Faris 66).

In his study on the labyrinth’s cultural significance, Jacques Attali observes how the individual may be thought of as a multicursal labyrinth – a complex multiplicity of adopted ethnic, esthetic and sexual roles (Attali 73). The maze, according to Attali, is a spatial representation of the process through which the subject or self is negotiated. This process of individuation is where one finds the truth of one’s life, perceiving it over time from every angle (Jaskolski 77). Faris observes that the “being in the labyrinth is at once subject and object...losing itself in its own turnings” (Faris 11). The multicursal labyrinth, therefore, signifies both the subject *and* its process of formation – the voyage toward the self (Faris 121).

The third major form of the labyrinth is the rhizome. First conceived of by Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome is described as “a network in which all points can be connected with one another” (Veel 154). Unlike unicursal or multicursal labyrinths, the rhizome has “no center, periphery, exit” and is “potentially infinite” (Faris 159). Wendy Faris observes how post-modern systems of knowledge that are “decentered, ever-changing and complex” are also symbolized by the rhizome (166).



**Figure 3**

Early journeys of learning were thought of as a path to orientation vis-a-vis concrete worldviews and fixed systems of knowledge. As such, those journeys were symbolized by the single, winding path of the unicursal labyrinth. However, a contemporary initiation into knowledge is accompanied by a disruption of fixed paradigms and structures. Thus, the web-like rhizome shape has become a labyrinthine metaphor for initiation into post-modern complexity.

### **Labyrinthine Literature**

Robert Wilson, in his article on Godgames and the labyrinth, suggests two distinct types of labyrinths in literature: simulacra and conceptual (Wilson 11). Whereas simulacra create an illusion of physical appearance by suggesting the attributes of historical and mythological labyrinths, conceptual labyrinths have no necessary shape and relate the spatial features of the labyrinth to the conceptual qualities of a theme or idea (12). Millhauser creates and writes both these types of labyrinths in much, if not most, of his short fiction. Millhauser's stories that describe fictional architectures function as labyrinthine simulacra, involving the lengthy description of an immense, maze-like structure that is fantastic in size and often infinite in scale. These labyrinths are quite literal. Yet, Millhauser's architectures are related to real-world concepts and

themes. By using a meandering series of tunnels as an exploration of the psyche or a gigantic emporium as a discourse on consumerism, Millhauser's architectures are at once simulacra and conceptual labyrinths.

Labyrinthine rhetorical devices appear throughout Millhauser's short fiction. Penelope Doob proposes three specific types of labyrinthine rhetorical devices. The first, *dubatio*, hesitates between alternatives in the narrative of a story, suggesting the possibility of alternative paths (Doob 213). *Occupatio* allows the author or narrator to imagine an alternate sequence of events or sketch a path untaken (213). *Complexio* involves a series of phrases beginning and ending in the same manner, constituting a rereading of paths (213). Contradictory statements and narrative cut-offs suggest forking and dead ends in a storyline (Faris 169). Faris notes that Modernist literature employed stream-of-consciousness and other forms of linguistic experimentation in order to short-circuit a clear path through the text (21).

Millhauser's narrative voice often issues a variety of contradictory feelings and responses towards the fictional phenomena or setting, hesitating between alternative ways of thinking about a mysterious event or exploring a fictitious space. Such occurrences of *dubatio* simultaneously indicate the deliberation between paths of physical and mental exploration and suggest other paths untaken (*occupatio*). Millhauser's fiction, then, is "not a narrative of the linear, mimetic code, but a *stereoscopic* fiction" that reports, among other things, "the interchange between art and life" (Fowler, "Postmodern" 80).

Millhauser's labyrinth stories involve a narrative pattern of varying yet repeated patterns. Cecile Roudeau observes that Millhauser's architecture of words are a "place where meaning arabesques" ("Millhauser" 36). Indeed, Millhauser is fond of "repeating

phrases word for word” at different points within a short story (69). Such repetitions constitute a rhetorical retreading of paths or *complexio*. In her article “Succeeding Borges, Escaping Kafka: On the Fiction of Steven Millhauser”, Mary Kenzie observes that Millhauser often engages in a Borgesian emphasis on variants and interpolations (Kenzie, 127). Kenzie notes Millhauser’s tendency to list and continually readjust observations, providing a sense of constant adjustment and adaptation (120). Alexander, Ponce and Rodrieguez’s refer to this tendency as “leitmotif” (“Millhauser” 69). Likewise, Millhauser’s short fiction provides a sense of the familiar (realistic and/or repeated) before swiftly branching into new, unfamiliar and fantastic directions. The same could be said of Millhauser’s oeuvre which repeatedly engages in similar narrative patterns in order to create new permutations (24). Rhetorical ‘dead-ends’ are also a common occurrence in Millhauser’s fiction, particularly his ‘enigma’ stories. They are also a choice of style that supports and underscores the ideas associated with the labyrinth (Doob 23-24). Imagery pertaining to spatial details, searching, orientation, wandering and repetition may create a sense of literal physical structures and space within stories as well (Faris 17).

The often paradoxical narrative voice of Millhauser’s short stories corresponds to the contradictory nature of the labyrinth: chaotic yet orderly, alluring yet terrifying (Faris 1). Such patterns of paradox can be found in early labyrinthine fiction that attempted to blend an objective pattern with a subjective path, imposing the idea of design upon the seeming chaos of life (Doob 24-25). In an interview with Millhauser, I asked about his interest in form. Millhauser explains:



It's impossible to be a serious writer and not be obsessed by form. It depends of course on what is meant by "form." I tend to think of art as the result of a battle between two opposed but secretly related forces: *wildness and order*. Order, or form, is the shape given to the force that struggles to disrupt it. An interest in form alone, without any consideration for the force it wrestles with, strikes me as baffling, but if one could somehow separate the idea of form from everything else and pay attention to form alone, that would be a good definition of decadence (Millhauser, "Master's" 28 Apr) [Emphasis mine].

Millhauser, perceiving a battle between wilderness (or chaos) and order, often writes a narrative form that engages in deconstructing itself. The line or narrative path twists on itself and imposes chaos upon an otherwise orderly narrative. The breakdown of easy distinctions in language and narrative signals a labyrinthine complexity to the reader, transforming a simple, linear narrative path into a complex knot of many crossings (Wilson 73).

### **The First Meta-Wave: Postmodern Short Fiction in the 1960's and 70's**

A great deal of short fiction in the 1960's and 70's was marked by its metafictional and postmodern flavor. In her essay on postmodern metafiction, Amy J. Elias defines the genre (if one may call it that) as "fiction that calls attention to its representational techniques and knowledge claims" (Elias 15). Metafiction, she continues, is fiction that characteristically points to the author, structural architecture and the artificiality of its own characters through "self-conscious" and "lucid" narrative (15). Breaking the fourth wall through seemingly confessional language or the insertion of real-life people into the story were some of the methods used by metafictional writers in order to disrupt the reader's suspension of disbelief (18).

Writers identified with this era—John Barth, Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, to name a few—often wrote fiction that challenged familiar genres and literary

conventions. The experimental short story of this era, in other words, was a direct challenge to the 'slice of life' realism found in most magazines prior to the 1960's (Lohafer 74). Also referred to as "anti-story", metafiction of the 60's and 70's stood itself up against realist conventions in order to emphasize the postmodern writers' "disinterest in communicating meanings" (Boddy 61). Charles Newman observed that post-modern fiction was "no longer concerned with processing and disseminating information about 'how we live'," but "that its subject matter [was] essentially the endless interrogation of its own artifice" (Newman 171-2). The short story had become, in some ways, a form of literary criticism. (For example: drawing on Roland Barthes' statement that "a narrative is a large sentence," Donald Barthelme wrote "Sentence," "a six-and-a-half page fiction made up of a single, unfinished sentence...dealing with the process of writing a sentence" (Boddy 60).) "Metafiction," writes Elias, "invites criticism to consider itself as fiction, and fiction to consider itself as theory and criticism" (Elias 16). So thorough was the short story's metafictional 'interrogation' of itself that by the end of the 1960s, "the short story's reputation had shifted from that of the most conventional of contemporary literary genres to a position at 'the fore of the avant-garde'" (Boddy 59).

Insofar as the experimental short story of the 60's and 70's was a criticism of realism and genre, it was dependent on the reader's familiarity with the conventions of both. David Lodge observed that Barthelme's short story "Will You Tell Me?" consciously disrupted "all the attributes...that bind together the ingredients of realistic fiction" (qtd in Boddy 70). The story, therefore, has a "parodic effect" that "depends on our familiarity with realist novels" (Boddy 70). "'Deviations', says Lodge, 'can only be

perceived against a norm” (qtd in Boddy 70). Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter,” in which a labyrinthine parade of various genres plays out for the reader, promises a “release from genre itself” (Boddy 61). John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” too, plays on its audience’s familiarity with stories of adolescent turning-points (74). Elias, too, observes that American metafiction “self-consciously parodies themes and story elements of other texts” (Elias 22). As John Barth once observed, “metafiction is a regenerative form, always able to turn a parodic lens upon current art to generate new fiction” (qtd in Elias 24). But what happens when metafiction *becomes* current art? Metafiction is not only parodic, but necessarily parasitic. It could not, cannot exist without its hosts: realism and genre.

The interrogational focus of metafiction in this era was primarily about the text—about literature and writing in general. “The postmodern,” says Izarra, “incorporates critical perspectives on the process of writing itself” (Izarra 2). Newman observes that “above all” postmodern metafiction “is concerned with language, if not as the creator of reality, then as the ultimate shaper of consciousness” (Newman 172). Text, in other words, is thought to encompass reality. Thus, any interrogation of text constitutes an interrogation of reality. For the postmodern, language “is never framed by a dominant outside reality, and it thus tends eventually to reduce all distinctions to linguistic ones” (172). Boddy observes how stories such as Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” demonstrate metafiction’s fixation with text through their “commentary on the creative process,” “insistence on the medium as the message” and “foregrounding of fiction’s mechanisms” (Boddy 74). For Postmodernist authors like John Barth, fiction was—among other things—a means of demonstrating that the domain of language and literature contains all

reality and that the real world contains none (Stark 5). Metafiction of this era suggests that once we become “aware of the enclosure in which we are entrapped, we are...released from its power” (Boddy 63).

Despite its goals of reader liberation, much postmodern metafiction in the 60’s and 70’s harbored a sense of hostility towards reader (Elias 16). As such, much short fiction of the era was characteristically at “war with the audience,” providing “false clues” through its “self-consciousness” (Stark 3). Newman observes:

Insofar as it acknowledges *any* audience, [postmodern fiction] often intimidates it in both a practical and metaphysical sense: often such reflexive works can be read not merely as an act of contempt but even an act of hatred against the reader (or perhaps the absence of not only an *ideal* but *any* reader). In its suspicion of its audience, it exudes misgivings about its own procedure, and evolves a curiously antagonistic strategy, which is something more powerful than the mere unwillingness to yield itself up to recognizable narrative conventions. (Newman 172)

The easy pleasure of the magazine story was under attack and its reader along with it.

Proposing to re-categorize the short story as ‘high art,’ the postmodernists of the 60’s and 70’s attempted to alienate an audience which had previously known the short story as a form of entertainment, pleasure and pedagogy. It was, therefore, not uncommon for metafiction to target popular and pleasurable art forms in order to “revel” in their “emptiness” (Elias 17).

### **Experimenting with the Real: The Contemporary Postmodern Story**

Experimental short fiction of the past two decades has shifted in its priorities and, therefore, its characteristics. As Robert Rebein argues, “It is not the job of later writers to simply *repeat* these experiments but rather to take what has been proven useful and put it to work where and how they may” (Rebein 21). Whereas the experimental short story of the 60’s and 70’s was most often concerned with the text itself, Millhauser engages in

experimental techniques to explore contemporary, thematic issues. Rather than perceiving all language as *containing* reality, Millhauser's experimental short fiction proposes a mutual *exchange* between language and external reality. Newman, in response to the first wave of postmodern fiction, argues that he cannot "go along" with those who would claim that "literature exists to remind us that the world is made up of 'mere' words" (Newman 176).

There is more to fiction than fiction. To discover that there is no experience without language is not blithely to assume that language is divorced from experience. When formalism becomes self-ironic and facetious, masquerading as "pure style," the hypocrisy of mimeticism is cancelled out by the fatuity of form as final consolation. (Newman 180)

To this point, Newman argues that the distinction between experimentalism and realism—between the quaint magazine story and the high art of the 60's—was, and is, a "phony dualism" (179).

In an interview with Steven Millhauser, I asked him what he perceived as characterizing the current era of fiction-writing. Millhauser comments:

The present era of fiction strikes me as extremely diverse. The one thing that remains unchanged is the battle that I see as having been waged in American literature since the nineteenth century. It's the battle between a kind of radical fantasy or inner vision, of the kind found in Poe and Hawthorne, and a very different kind of fiction imported from France, in which the external world is meticulously transcribed in carefully painted images. It's the battle itself that interests me. *And I don't see it as a battle between realism and fabulism. I see it as a battle between two visions of the real.* (Millhauser, "Master's" 30 Sep) [Emphasis mine]

For Millhauser, both fabulism and realism offer *differing*, but valid visions of reality. His concern for the battle between these two visions, then, suggests a postmodern hybridity that is just as concerned with self-investigation as with the experience of phenomena in the world. Lohafer asserts that "past the turn of the new century, the very idea of genre

seems unnecessary...narrative and non-narrative, verbal and graphic media combine in hybrid texts that, in brief tell a tale” (Lohafer 80). In the case of Millhauser one might add ‘story and anti-story’ to Lohafer’s list. Millhauser’s hybridity is found in his often heavy handed attention to both realistic *and* fantastic digressions. Millhauser writes the labyrinth in significant and diverse ways to negotiate this hybridity. Since the labyrinth was also a prevalent image in works of the 60’s and 70’s postmodernists, it provides a key point of comparison between Millhauser and his experimental predecessors.

### **The New Daedalus: Mapping Heterotopia**

Millhauser’s labyrinths are described physically and/or suggested in his narrative form; they are, in other words, spatial and/or discursive. Millhauser’s spatial labyrinths (which I will refer to as ‘architecture’ stories) involve the lengthy description of some immense or underground structure. The structures are fantastic in their size and often seem infinite in scale. These labyrinths are quite literal. Millhauser’s discursive labyrinths, on the other hand, demonstrate the labyrinthine through forking, branching and repetitive narrative form.

Through repetition and meticulous detail, Millhauser’s fiction initially poses itself as realism before turning toward the fantastic. Fowler observes: “Millhauser’s surface world is as palpable in its thereness as a Vermeer still-life. But of course down beneath this world there lies another kingdom, just as we always knew it did” (Fowler, “Postmodern” 80-1). The narrative still functions somewhat as a reflective surface, presenting lists of exhaustive detail that would suggest a mode of realism. However, Millhauser’s narrative is “a looking glass through which the characters (and frequently the reader) are encouraged to pass to and fro from one kingdom to another” (Fowler,

“Postmodern” 80). In Millhauser’s attempts to investigate the ‘real’ in self-reflexive terms, he writes an experimental, postmodern ‘realism’: “And in this dark realm...distortions are not distortions at all, but precise impression scrupulously conveyed” (*Edwin* 266). Millhauser’s fantastic visions—juxtaposed with careful detail—persuade and remind the reader that an inner vision is always dependent upon and responding to an external reality.

Millhauser’s labyrinthine narrative also functions as metagram. Foucault explains that a word is like a “cardboard face” hiding “what it duplicates” (Foucault 20). A metagram, he continues, is a repetition of a word “highlighting all the impediments to its being the exact representation of what it tries to duplicate, or else filling the void with an enigma that it fails to solve” (25). Just as Millhauser’s narrative voice seems to be desperately seeking *something*, but never finding it, the metagram reveals the inadequacy and instability of language through duplicate words with varying meanings. Millhauser’s narrative demonstrates a repetitive oscillation between realism and fantasy. Like the metagram, his fiction becomes “both the truth and the mask” (27). By juxtaposing the devices of realism with the fantastic, Millhauser’s fiction reveals that both modes are dependent upon an external reality and are ultimately inadequate to replicate it (27).

The labyrinthine elements of Millhauser’s fiction also function as heterotopia. Heterotopias, as Kristin Veel summarizes, “are spaces... simultaneously real and unreal and their function is to represent, contest and invert real places” (Veel 152). This definition comes from Foucault’s idea of heterotopia, which he explains through the metaphor of a mirror.

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once

absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which over there. (qtd in Veel 125)

Fiction—another virtual space—is very much dependent on the physical world. “The fallacy,” Veel argues, occurs when the virtual, imaginary space is “cut off” and we forget that the experience of physical space is what makes us able to relate to virtual spaces, such as fiction, in the first place (169-70).

In his labyrinthine heterotopias, Millhauser demonstrates the construction of ‘reality’ and collective consciousness. By repeatedly grounding fantastic visions with realistic detail (and vice versa), Millhauser demonstrates a pattern of historical development wherein new developments are entangled within structures of thought, power and, in time, become more of the same. His narratives, like history, are a labyrinth that forks and branches yet circles around the same center. In an essay, Millhauser writes:

At the moment of repetition, past and present become one, or rather are held in the mind separately but concurrently. For an instant, confluence abolishes chronology. Time is deceived, outwitted, overcome. (qtd in “Millhauser” 69)

Deleuze and Guattari, in their writings on the rhizome, envision the simultaneous ‘mapping’ of new paths and the ‘tracing’ of hierarchical structures (Deleuze 18).

Whereas, the imagination may challenge the status quo to ‘map’ new territory, it isn’t too long before mapping becomes a mere ‘tracing’, or retreading of pre-existing hierarchical structures. Millhauser’s emphasis on variation within repeated patterns expresses this pattern of ‘mapping’ yet ‘tracing’—‘new’ and at once ‘more of the same.’ It is this relationship between new and the same—utterance and echo—that interests Millhauser most. Yet, Millhauser does not point to a reality constructed through language in order to



argue that all reality exists within it, but rather to point out that *something* (albeit inexpressible) exists beyond it.

Millhauser's fiction is also interested in the exploration of human desire. Repetition and variance in Millhauser's work echoes the tension between a need for security (or predictability) and a desire for novelty. The twin desires are embodied in the idea of the labyrinth which is at once a safe haven and a prison—a place of terror and/or delight. The explanations offered by the narrative voice in Millhauser's 'enigma' stories, for instance, reflect this tension. Confronted with an outsider or unknown phenomenon, the narrative voice considers explanations in order to understand the mystery of what has occurred. However, the dread of the unknown leads to the disappointment of normality or the known. Just as a phenomenon shifts between being mysterious and becoming (allegedly) understood, the narrative voice often shifts from dread of to a desire for the unknown.

Steven Millhauser's labyrinths are multicursal (forking or multi-pathed) by implication *and* demonstration. Millhauser often sounds maximalist in his lengthy lists of detail, but is never truly exhaustive, leaving the reader with a sense of paths untravelled. Exhaustion is, therefore, implicit rather than demonstrated. His 'architecture' labyrinths are paths described in traditional, linear prose, threading the reader through paths of an often inexhaustibly forking structure. Millhauser's lengthy lists of description are not meant to give the reader a sense of complete knowledge, but leave the reader with a sense of wonder—a sense of paths yet untravelled. The single path through the text does not imply a unicursal labyrinth, but one of many possible paths to be taken: a multicursal structure.

Each chapter of this study will focus on a specific type of labyrinthine story by Millhauser. ‘Architecture,’ ‘enigma’ and ‘acme’ stories will each, therefore, be considered in separate chapters of analysis. The analysis and illustrations within these chapters will support the following conclusions:

- 1.) The idea of the labyrinth (the labyrinthine) is demonstratively present in literal descriptions and narrative form throughout Steven Millhauser’s short fiction.
- 2.) Millhauser juxtaposes the narrative devices of realism and the fantastic as a metagram, revealing a constructed reality within language *and* pointing to an inexpressible realm beyond it.
- 3.) Millhauser’s short fiction uses the labyrinth as a heterotopia—a virtual space in which history and collective consciousness are explored.
- 4.) Millhauser’s short fiction revises the postmodernist notion that all reality exists *within* language, proposing the mutual dependency of both.
- 5.) Millhauser’s short fiction is most often a hybridity of realism and the fantastic. In this hybridity, Millhauser proposes that competing visions of reality are equally important *and* equally insufficient.

### **Review of Literature**

This project will focus its analysis on the short fiction of Steven Millhauser (although his novels and novellas may be referred to from time to time). ‘Architecture’ Stories I will discuss include: “The Barnum Museum,” “The Dream of the Consortium,” “Paradise Park,” “Beneath the Cellars of our Town,” “The Other Town,” “Balloon Flight, 1870” and “The Next Thing”. ‘Enigma’ stories I will address include: “The Sisterhood of Night,” “Beneath the Cellars of our Town,” “The Slap,” and “Phantoms”. ‘Acme’

stories I will discuss include: “August Eschenberg,” “Eisenheim the Illusionist,” “The Invention of Robert Herendeen,” “A Precursor to the Cinema,” “Snowmen,” “The New Automaton Theatre,” and “The Knife Thrower”.

In addition to those primary texts, I will reference those few (but increasing) articles which have been published on Millhauser. I will also reference a few primary sources on the subject of short fiction. Kasia Boddy’s *The American Short Story since 1950* surveys the major turning points and phases of American short fiction. From the popular magazine shorts of the 50’s, Boddy traces the evolution of the short story through the experimentalism of the 60’s and 70’s to the neo-realism of the 80’s and the magical realism of the 90’s. In addition to Boddy, I will reference John Stark’s book on postmodern literature, *The Literature of Exhaustion*. In it, Stark explores the common ties between the work of Nabakov, Barth and Borges (no stranger to the labyrinth, indeed). The analysis of how these writers regarded the reader and the labyrinth will provide context for my comparative analysis between recent experimental fiction and that of the 60’s-70’s. In reference to the fiction of that era, I will also refer to Charles Newman’s *The Post-Modern Aura*. Additionally, I will reference various articles found in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*: Amy J Elias’ “Postmodern Metafiction” and Susan Lohafer’s “The Short Story”. I will also refer to Rust Hills’ *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular* as a reference to the traditional short story narrative and form. Hills, a pre-eminent editor of magazine short fiction, edited for Esquire magazine from 1957 to 1964. Thus, he provides an authoritative perspective on the craft of short fiction, particularly in the era preceding the post-modern wave of the high 60’s.

Finally, I will reference texts that provide information on the labyrinth and its theoretical applications. Hermann Kern's *Through the Labyrinth* provides a detailed analysis of the labyrinth concept throughout history. Whereas the primary focus of Kern's book is in the artistic depictions of the labyrinth, his analysis overlaps and is applicable to historical literary themes as well. Penelope Reed Doob's *The Idea of the Labyrinth: from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* provides detailed analysis of how the labyrinth idea changed from its mythological beginnings to the renaissance. Moreover, Doob's observation of medieval literary narrative as multicursal, and, therefore, *labyrinthine*, is not unlike this current project (Doob 3). Wendy Faris' *Labyrinths of Language* analyzes the labyrinth as thematic content and structural design, observing how labyrinths may be expressed in the features of a text (Faris 13). In consideration of the rhizome concept, I will refer to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. In discussing Foucault's notion of the metagram and heterotopia, I will refer to Foucault's *Death and The Labyrinth*, Eyal Chower's *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth* and Kristin Veel's "The Irreducibility of Space: Labyrinths, Cities, Cyberspace".

## Chapter One: Architecture Stories

*At the most enigmatic moment...the labyrinth suddenly again offers the same: its last puzzle, the trap hidden in the center – it is a mirror behind which the identical is located*

- Michele Foucault

There can be no doubt that Steven Millhauser is interested in spaces, places and architecture. His 1996 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Martin Dressler: Tale of an American Dreamer*, chronicles the life of a fictional hotel architect and entrepreneur. As the profession of the protagonist, architecture is central to the details and descriptions prevalent in the pages of *Dressler*. Alicia Rodriguez notes how Dressler's buildings seem grounded in realistic detail, but continually cross and re-cross into the realm into fantasy (Rodriguez 115). It should come as no surprise, then, that architecture is prevalent in many short stories by Millhauser.

Millhauser's architecture's consistently demonstrate labyrinthine qualities. And it is in those fictional, labyrinthine spaces that Millhauser's fiction virtually explores contemporary themes and issues. Moreover, Millhauser blends fantastic scope with realistic detail in order to blur the line between battling visions of the real, perpetually dwelling on the "frontier between two adjacent realms" (Rodriguez 115). In this chapter, I will illustrate how Millhauser's architecture stories exhibit labyrinthine qualities and render heterotopic visions that are at once interior and exterior, fantastic and realistic—chaotic and orderly.

Millhauser has multiple architectural stories which create or describe a space of commerce or consumerism. "The Dream of the Consortium" from 1998's *The Knife Thrower* describes a large and particularly maze-like department store:

So great an effort had been made by the interior designers to avoid clear vistas that many of the aisles were elaborately curved. From a shadowy, meandering pathway of highboys, glass-front bookcases, and rolltop desks with pigeonholes, there burst into view a bright unsettling place of long-legged mannequins... (*Knife* 149)

The labyrinthine store entices the collective narrative voice (“we”) with disorientation and mystery: “Such transitions and confusions invite us to lose our way...and we who wanted nothing better than to lose our way plunged deeper into the winding aisles, grateful for anything that increased our sense of the store’s abundance, that satisfied our secret longing for an endless multiplication of departments” (149-50). The desire for mystery, for novelty, leads the narrating voice “from a maze of meandering departments” into “broad, open areas” with distinct regional styles—“a foggy London street”, “a Victorian parlor” (150-1). The narrative voice hypothesizes that the consortium’s open plazas are meant to “to interrupt the inevitable boredom of displayed merchandise with refreshing surprises” (150). The oscillation between open and closed spaces—vast and meandering, familiar and mysterious—is meant to interrupt the eventual boredom that the narrative voice expresses. As the narrator’s desire turns to boredom, a shift occurs within the structure of the store to beckon them on: “We returned with the sharp sense that we had barely begun to explore the store, further explorations were in fact necessary if we were to penetrate its still elusive nature” (153). The oscillation between disorientation and familiarity provides an ever-renewed sense interest from the narrator. This oscillation reflects the simultaneous plausibility and implausibility of the consortium.

The reality/unreality of the consortium is not merely an investigation of the supposed realism/fabulism dichotomy—it is an investigation of desire in the form of consumerism. The desire to want, to possess the world entire seems to be the purpose of the consortium: “Wasn’t the secret premise of such places that the whole world was a

bazaar” (*Knife* 155). Yet, the desire to possess is never satisfied, but spurred on by the endless construction of new departments “as if to keep pace with our desires” (157). Indeed, the store seemingly offers up *everything*, selling such vast and fantastic items as full-size “Scottish Castles”, “Neolithic villages”, “African diamond mines”, “Coca-Cola bottling plants” and “the Colossus of Rhodes” (160). By offering up such fantastic items, the narrator admits, the consortium is “determined to satisfy the buyer’s secret desire: to appropriate the world, to possess it entirely” (161). So over-whelming has the consortium and its allure become that the communal narrative voice begins to feel itself trapped within its walls, even after leaving the consortium behind. “We have an absurd sensation [outside of the consortium] that we have entered still another department...that we are forever condemned to hurry forever through these artificial halls, bright with late afternoon light, in search of a way out” (163).

The ever-elusive promise of possessing the world turns the dream of consumerism into a nightmarish enslavement. The inner vision of consumption, which the consortium provides, is a place of playful exploration. Yet, the promise of the inner vision is revealed as an external structure of imprisonment. As the mysterious becomes reality it loses its luster and mapping becomes a tracing: “The consortium, in a bold leap designed to counter the power of the mall, has simply extended the boundaries of the buyable” (*Knife* 155).

“The Next Thing” from 2011’s *We Others* is another of Millhauser’s spaces of consumerism. Immediately upon entering a large and vast building labeled as the “Next Thing”, the narrative voice reports “aisles going off in every direction” and escalators “crossing over other escalators” (*Others* 77). (This image specifically echoes “The

Dream of the Consortium” in which “a series of zigzag escalators” are described (*Knife* 162.) The meandering aisles of “the Next Thing” lead to open “relaxation spaces” (*Others* 78). Yet, there is a sense of incompleteness, of paths not only untraveled, but un-built as the seemingly endless aisles come to a halt: “it all ended in the dark, with a promise of more to come” (78-9). For the narrator, the darkness of the unknown entices with its possibilities.

Upon repeated visits, the narrator notes further innovations and additions to the “next thing”. Low roofs, which had not existed before, have been added “to overcome the oppressive height of the shelves” and “to keep you from feeling uneasy in the presence of vast spaces...tame the bigness, break it up into little neighborhoods” (*Others* 83). Rodriguez notes how verticality, in a similar manner, may “be divided into ‘the rationality of the roof to the irrationality of the cellar’” (Rodriguez 117). The fear of immense, vast and irrational space pairs with the enticement of un-built paths to provoke the narrator’s ambivalent desire for *interiority*: “It pleased me that The Next Thing had understood its mistake and done something about it...but that isn’t all of what I felt. It bothered me, too” (*Others* 82). Desire and dread are both responses to the same structure as the narrator describes feeling both “interested” and “wary” about the ever-increasing interiority of The Next Thing (85). The narrator’s desire, thus, leads to a form of mental imprisonment: “I found myself walking along...searching for a place where it all came to an end” (83). Yet, to turn around would cause the wanderer to be drawn back in: “it was as if the place was too powerful, so that if you went back you’d be caught in some way” (85).



Commerce in the Next Thing becomes increasingly digitized. Products begin to appear on display screens: “[W]hen you touched a picture [on the screen] with your finger, different versions of the item were shown” and, upon selection of the item version, “the item was released from its upper shelf to a bin at your feet” (*Others* 83). These “product displays” powered by “virtual boxes” suggest the development from one type of commerce to another—the shopping mall or department store has evolved into internet commerce. More and more, the appearance of the shopper’s autonomy slips away and the shopping experience becomes automated, intuitive.

[A]udio surveillance units...permitted personnel in distant listening stations to overhear and record customer responses to merchandise... Your purchases would be selected for you by computer. The selection was based on your shopping history and your answers to a detailed questionnaire...customers were invited to experience the atmosphere of shopping without the tiring effort associated with the act itself. (89)

The evolution of technology only increases the interiority of the spaces where consumption takes place. And in depicting the vision of digital commerce in a spatially interior setting, Millhauser suggests that the internet, the shopping mall, the consortium and the bazaar were and are newly forged paths *and* re-treadings. Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome of infinite interconnected paths, like Millhauser’s variations on the bazaar, involves the simultaneous ‘mapping’ of new paths and the ‘tracing’ of old ones.

The ever-increasing interiority of the Next Thing is reflected in its customers. Visitors become employees and employees become residents in a space under the Next Thing appropriately called the “Under” (*Others* 86). “Some people moved directly from their current line of work into the same line of work at The Next Thing, at a higher salary and with a wide range of investment opportunities” (82). The appeal of the Next Thing is no longer exclusively that of consumption. It has become a place central to employment

and wealth opportunities. The Next Thing, thus, begins to encompass both ends of the consumer cycle: a place to consume and a means by which to consume. The narrator receives a letter enticing him with an opportunity for career advancement at The Next Thing (86). Although, the narrator isn't "all that happy" with their current job, the prospect of a career at the Next Thing produces a feeling of "uneasiness"—dread and desire are simultaneous (86). Houses in the town (above ground) are sold to The Next Thing. "People who were selling their homes had all recently been hired by The Next Thing" and begin to move "into homes down below" (86).

Increasingly, the space of commerce becomes the space of dwelling. Yet, the narrator expresses a communal wariness about underground living. "[W]e had trouble imagining a life...of the sun, though we heard that the lighting was exceptionally good, and of course you were free to come up into the sunny world on your lunch break"

(*Others* 87). Yet, underground living prevails:

Floodlights shone down from every house, and I noticed that long fluorescent lights ran under all the eaves. A dog lay in a driveway; a young mother was pushing a stroller along a sidewalk. Despite the darkness, I realized that it was the middle of a summer afternoon... It wasn't our town, but it felt like a version of our town, a town born from our town, a town more at peace with itself than ours could ever be...[D]own here, it seemed, you could lead a different kind of life. (90-91)

The movement to underground dwelling is, at first, an *escape* into the labyrinth—a 'mapping' into new and unexplored ventures.

Yet, this underground dwelling soon proves itself a 'tracing' and a place of imprisonment to pre-existing power structures. The narrator begins to work "longer and longer" hours and soon describes "a tiredness...a heaviness...you work till you drop, it's how things are" (*Others* 94). Although some would idealize the world "up there", the

narrator asks “Isn’t that what people always say, about someplace else?”, arguing “[T]hings weren’t perfect up there” (93-95). Yet, the idealization of another time and place was precisely the appeal of the Next Thing. Despite its allure, The Next Thing has become a mere tracing and evolution of economic imprisonment. It is nothing new at all. The story ends with rumors of new tunnels beneath the town. The narrator declares “It’s hard to know what to make of all that. These are interesting times” (96).

Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* catalogues the arcades of Paris circa 1935, arguing that the arcades “are the forerunners of department stores” (Benjamin 3). Much as Millhauser’s Next Thing has succeeded the shopping mall, so the department store replaces the arcade. Yet, these variations in consumptive space are also repetitions. The space of consumerism, the bazaar, in its many iterations is recursive. Benjamin quotes an *Illustrated Guide to Paris*:

These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the *passage* is a city, a world in miniature. (Benjamin 3)

With his fantastic spaces of commerce, Millhauser illustrates the ever-increasing interiority of consumer culture. More and more does the bazaar begin to look like the world and, in turn, the world like a bazaar. In time, the maze of exploration becomes the labyrinth of dwelling—the mapping becomes a tracing. Benjamin writes:

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production...are images in the collective consciousness in which the old and new interpenetrate. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past... In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its

successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history...that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society—as stored in the unconscious of the collective—engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions. (Benjamin 5)

The “dream” of the consortium and the “next thing” are both—initially—visions of a classless ‘utopia’ in which the entire world may be experienced and possessed. Yet, both the fantastic consortium and the underground ‘thing’ eventually become new permutations of existing power structures and collective consciousness.

The title story from “The Barnum Museum”, though not a place of trade, is a place of consumption in another sense: that of entertainment and amusement. The Barnum Museum, like the surreal Consortium and The Next Thing, “seems calculated to lead the eye restlessly from point to point without permitting it to take in the whole” (*Barnum* 73). The “[e]lusive design” of the museum is not only inviting, but disorienting.

In fact the structure is so difficult to grasp that we cannot tell whether the Barnum Museum is a single complex building with numerous wings, annexes, additions, and extensions, or whether it is many buildings artfully connected by roofed walkways, stone bridges, flowering arbors, booth-lined arcades, colonnaded passageways...The Barnum Museum contains a bewildering and incalculable number of rooms, each with at least two and often twelve or even fourteen door-ways. Through every doorway can be seen further rooms and doorways (74).

Yet, the disorienting characteristics that lure the visitor may later entrap them within:

It is said that if you enter the Barnum Museum by a particular doorway at noon and manage to find your way back by three, the doorway through which you entered will no longer lead to the street, but to a new room, whose doors give glimpses of further rooms and doorways. (74)

The structure, by itself very nature, seems to suggest the infinite branching and interconnectedness of the rhizome. A carpet is described with an “arabesque” pattern,

mirroring the infinite branching of the museum (76). Any dread of the infinite, however, is tempered by the suggestion of forbidden paths or dead ends, further enticing explorers. “We inevitably come to a closed door or blue velvet rope stretching across a stairway...[R]efused admittance...increases our sense of unexplored regions” (74). Like the Next Thing, the narrative voice expresses that the Museum lures others “out of the sun...and renders us dissatisfied with our daily lives” (75). The narrator theorizes “that the directors...merely wish to pique our interest, to stimulate our curiosity, to lure us by whatever means deeper and deeper into the museum” (81).

Slowly, the line between external reality and the interior of the museum is blurred. The narrator hypothesizes that the whole town may be simultaneously visiting the museum. “Outside, the streets and buildings will grow vague; street corners will begin to dissolve” (*Barnum* 80). Slowly, the familiar external world slips away as the fantastic, shifting interior world of the museum becomes more concrete. The detailed account of the museum provides a sense of plausibility to its fantastic scale. “Along the inner rim of the platform stand many iron posts about six feet apart, joined by velvet ropes: at the top of every third post glows a red or yellow lantern” (75). Just as the fantastic museum exhibits realistic elements, so does the museum subsume reality for those within. The space of consumption is, yet again, the place of dwelling. Museum guards are “offered inexpensive lodgings for themselves and their families on the top floor of one wing; few are wealthy enough to resist such enticements, and so it comes about that the guards spend their lives within the walls of the museum” (81). Although, the museum seems a fantasy, its reality—its gravity—is the desire it stirs.

We may doubt the museum, but we do not doubt our need to return...And is it possible that the secret of the museum lies precisely here, in its

knowledge that we can never be satisfied?...For us it is enough, for us it is almost enough. (91)

“Paradise Park”, from 1998’s *The Knife Thrower*, traces the history of a mysterious and fantastic, ever-changing theme-park. Again, a disorienting and branching space of many levels is described. With its “many levels” and “twisting escalators, stairs”, Paradise Park is a “continual invitation to half-glimpsed excitements” (*Knife* 185,187). Like Millhauser’s other spaces of consumption, the park’s allure is in the mystery of the unseen and the promise of possibility. Pages of wandering details describing the park lend to a feeling of labyrinthine wandering within the reader. One attraction of note is, itself, “a replica of the labyrinthine salt mines of Hallstatt, Austria” (204). As the salt mine attraction illustrates, the attractions of Paradise Park begin to replicate aspects of the world that were not merely for pleasure, but rendered a variety of reactions such as “anger, disgust, uneasiness, self-abandonment” (213). Visitors are given a choice to pass through other parts of the parks or to descend directly to new portions of the park (213). An attraction called the “House of eros” is described as causing “weeping...insane terror...ecstasy” and even “suicide leaps” (215). The attractions of the park have evolved from the pleasurable to the provocative, leading the narrator to ask: “It may be art, but is it fun?” (210).

The park begins to replicate the world in seemingly infinite and ever-expansive ways. A “[p]alace of statues divided into a labyrinth of small rooms, in which replicas of famous classical statues are said to satisfy unspeakable desires” is listed along with an “[o]riental palace...filled with hundreds upon hundreds of chambers, corridors and stairways” (*Knife* 215). A pattern of infinite recursion begins to appear within these attractions. As the park continues to divide itself into attractions, those attractions are

divided into smaller chambers themselves. The microcosm develops its own microcosms. Branching of paths begets more branching.

Yet, the desire for interiority—for boundaries—is what threatens the park’s success. The narrator notes that “the absence of limits” is what endangers the park’s continuance. The fear of infinite and the desire to possess are the dual desires that appeal to the park’s guests, despite their fears about what the park may contain. The paradoxical desire for both novelty and security leads the park developers to create a “magical...park from which the unwary visitor would never return” (*Knife* 219). In it, guests would “experience [the] entire range of human emotion” (219). The park presents a final paradox as the narrator describes this final permutation of the park as “invisible” and “infinite”, yet “on the head of a pin” (219).

Paradise Park appeals to its visitors by offering novelty in its attractions. The escalation of the park to feed this consumptive urge culminates in the final park which offers the whole range of human emotion. As new, unique and fantastic attractions are mapped, they are doomed to become mere tracings. As the absolute replication of human emotions is achieved within the park, the park no longer exists as a separate structure outside and transcendent of life, but becomes the very experience it sets out to imitate. As the labyrinthine amusement park (itself containing many labyrinths within) virtually explores the nature of human desire and consumption, the dividing line between looking-glass and real world disappears. The “shape” of those inner desires which drive collective consciousness in the form of consumerism and power structures is, like those external structures, a labyrinth. With the disappearance of discernible borders between

reflection and reality, both visions—inner and external—are presented as valid and inadequate:

The brief history of Paradise Park... may lead even the most cautious historian to wonder whether certain kinds of pleasure, by their very nature, do not seek more and more extreme forms until, utterly exhausted but unable to rest, they culminate in the black ecstasy of annihilation (*Knife* 222).

In “The Dream of the Consortium”, “The Next Thing”, “The Barnum Museum” and “Paradise Park”, the labyrinthine space of consumption functions as a heterotopia—a virtual space where the consumer is endlessly enticed. This spatial vision of desire is also a heterotopic image of historical process as Millhauser’s bazaars offer an externalized vision of power structures which continually appeal to and imprison the communal narrative voice—the collective consciousness. The promise of something ‘new’ merely provides permutations of existing structures. As revolution may lead to tyranny and innovation is used to feed primal urges, so, too, do evolutions and forkings prove to be revolutions around the same center of power. Millhauser, characteristically, conflates the “dream and reality” of consumerism by juxtaposing interior and exterior dimensions (Rodriguez 119). Juxtaposed, Millhauser’s dual visions of the bazaar—internal and external—are equally and mutually dependent explorations of consumerism and historical power structures. Both the *process* of formation (the interior) and the *shape* (the exterior) of the structure are equally, and simultaneously, considered in these fictions.

*The Knife Thrower’s* “Beneath the Cellars of Our Town” describes a series of underground, cave-like tunnels. The labyrinth is not at all a subtle, but immediate image in this story:



Beneath the cellars of our town, far down, there lies a maze of twisting and intersecting passageways, stretching away in every direction and connected to the upper surface by stairways of rough stone (*Knife* 239).

Unlike Millhauser's architectures of commerce and amusement, the nature of this labyrinth's construction is a mystery: "our historians are unable to decide whether the passageways are the result of natural process or whether they represent an ancient form of subterranean architecture" (239). Unlike many of Millhauser's fictional architectures, this one does not seem to be undergoing a process of human construction. The passages, however, are "always changing" as "old passageways become suddenly or gradually impassable, and new wall-openings and small connecting corridors are continually being formed by the fall of rock fragments or the gradual loosening of rock along fault lines" (243). Changes to the structure are both natural and accidental.

No one knows how many openings actually exist, for new ones are continually being discovered, while old ones collapse or are condemned as unsafe or are covered over by forest growth or the clumsiness of backhoes and bulldozers. (241)

Unlike Millhauser's other architectures, the constructive process of the tunnels isn't controlled by some un-named corporation, architect or entity, but is chaotically occurring.

The townspeople's interaction with the tunnels is described in stages as they develop from children to adults. The children of the town are said to have a variety of reactions to the tunnels (as do all who wander in labyrinths): "Some of us are frightened, and pull away, toward the stairway and the sunlight. Others are enchanted, as if they have stepped into a storybook" (*Knife* 241). As adolescents, children are allowed "wander freely" and unaccompanied, "seeing in the dark and turning distances images of our secret rapture or despair" (242). The absolute wonder and newness of youth is embodied in the mysterious turnings of the tunnels—novelty which is both dreadful and

exhilarating. With age, however, the townspeople spend less and less time in the underground passageways.

As we grow older we tend to spend less time in the passageways, for the cares of life pull us away, and it may happen that some of us recall the winding pathways beneath our town as one recalls some half-forgotten journey far back in the depths of childhood. Often in old age we find ourselves spending more and more hours in the cool passageways, which are believed to be healthful, though a small number of our older citizens avoid them altogether. (242)

The enclosed and subterranean space of the tunnels reflects a turn inward as the space provokes the deepest desire and fears that imagination, memory and fiction itself may provoke. This echoes Rodriguez's afore-mentioned statement, dividing verticality into "the rationality of the roof" and "the irrationality of the cellar" (Rodriguez 117). The turn inward, for some, may be avoided at all costs. Yet, for many, possibility beckons them to wander below.

At the bottom of a familiar stairway we enter uncertain ground. But this is by no means the same thing as losing our way, so that if we descend for that reason, then we continually fail. Perhaps it would be better...to say that we descend in order to have before us the perpetual possibility of losing our way (*Knife* 243).

The movement below ground is an attempt to escape inward to a space that is chaotic, irrational. The narrator notes that this "implies our lives aboveground are simple, orderly, and calm...This is not the case" (243). Thus, posing the question, "who dares to say what passion draws us into the dark?" The same question may be asked of those inward activities where the mind dwells in the space of memory, imagination and fiction—all of which are as paradoxically chaotic and orderly as the world itself.

The concept of verticality is briefly examined in two other non-architecture stories by Millhauser "A Game of Clue" and "Balloon Flight, 1870". "A Game of Clue", from 1990's collection *The Barnum Museum*, describes the simultaneous events of the

players and fictional characters in a game of the board game Clue. The board is described through the story in great detail:

Viewed from above the Library is a symmetrical figure that may be thought of as a modified rectangle...the furniture is pictured from above and drawn in black outline...the standing lamp beside the fireplace reveals the top and side of its shade..." (*Barnum* 12)

The precise and careful description of the board is coupled with the imagining of spaces unseen by the eye. In a section entitled 'Other Rooms', the narrative voice argues that other rooms are "implied by the board and have their own life apart from the game: the three wine cellars with their tiers of bottles in slanting rows, the two beer cellars..." (29). Other rooms of many levels are described, but it is in the space unseen and imagined where Professor Plum—a piece we learn has gone missing from the game—dwells endlessly: "Plum experiences a delicious confusion, Although he passed this way before, he cannot remember whether the black passage proceeds straight for the next few steps, or continues to turn in the same direction, or turns the other way" (31-2). The orderliness and precision of the grid-shaped board above is contrasted with that of the chaos in the secret passage below—a "proliferating realm of crisscrossing passages" (49). The cellar is a chaos which is imagined, fictional, internal and subterranean. "Each time he descends from the civilized world of well-appointed rooms...he has the pleasurable sensation of losing his way, of immersing himself in an alluring and alien realm of flickering lantern-lit walls" (32). As in "Beneath the Cellars of Our Town", familiarity is less a reason for returning above than for continuing to search below: "the growth of familiarity releases [Professor Plum] to search for new details, not seen before" (32).

Just as the irrationality of the cellar is depicted in "A Game of Clue", the rationality of the roof is longed for in "Balloon Flight, 1870" from *The Knife Thrower*. In

it, the leader of a French resistance group journals his travels as he escapes Prussian-occupied territory in a hot-air balloon. As he rises higher and higher, the narrator notes his growing angst: “I fear this blue nothingness” (*Knife* 173). For him, the absolute and infinite sky above cleaves “the spirit like an axblade” (178). In an attempt to keep his sanity, the narrator fixates his gaze on the interior of the basket: “the strands of wicker woven...the coil of rope...I am calm now” (173). The spatial boundaries of the basket and shapes of objects provide a comfortable limit to the vastness of the sky. “Give me the sight and touch of things...[the] shape of a hand, curve of a chin, weight of a stone; the heft of earthly things. Edges! Edges!” (178). His longing is for that of shape and of interiority—the coil of rope is, itself, an image of a unicursal labyrinth associated with orderly design. In the sky, the narrator’s world consists of endless blue without categorization, taxonomy and national borders. The narrator’s desired ‘rationality of the roof’ is an interior escape *from* the infinite. The ‘irrationality of the cellar’, accordingly, is an escape *into* the infinite—something that the people of “Beneath the Cellars of Our Town” both pursue and avoid.

“Beneath the Cellars of Our Town”, although a spatial labyrinth, also demonstrates the deconstructive, labyrinthine narrative form found in Millhauser’s ‘enigma’ stories. In this story, and his ‘enigma’ stories in general, the process of spatial ‘construction’ and ‘exploration’ (mapping/tracing) is not occurring externally, but internally as the narrative voice seeks to decipher and explain the mystery of the passageways. Before contemplating this aspect of the story, a brief introduction to Millhauser’s ‘engima’ stories is essential.

## Chapter Two: Enigma Stories

*Minds will grow perplexed...All life, all death, will seem to you a great riddle, which you can never solve...you will search for a way out, and there will be no way out...Lift your eyes to the heaven-shelves on every wall... the living and breathing words that surround you... We are older than all who came before, but we are dying the moment we are born.*  
- from "People of the Book"

*We can only make guesses about that other past, which stretches back through a few blurry centuries to the black beginnings of the world. But the New Past gives us hope. It stands before us in a nearly unfaded richness. It tempts us with the promise of total precision. Yet even as we record it, even as we reach out to touch it, we see it dissolving before our eyes, revealing a piece of the next past that has already replaced it.*  
- from "Here at the Historical Society"

Chaos, a definitive characteristic of the labyrinth, is a word often used to describe human experience—particularly in the post-modern era. Millhauser's approach to creating chaos within his own fiction involves the disruption of a traditional, linear narrative structure. Although many post-modernist writers of the 60's and 70's also sought to disrupt established literary forms by writing stories that were self-investigative and reflexive, Millhauser's self-investigative narrative does more than interrogate its own textuality. For Millhauser, self-reflexive form also provides a meaningful discussion connected to real-world ideas of desire, culture and psychology. As Millhauser's 'enigma' stories demonstrate, a narrative's deconstruction of itself need not be an exercise in 'cleverness', but proves a powerful and effective means of investigating human experience.

In her article "Succeeding Borges, Escaping Kafka: On the Fiction of Steven Millhauser", Mary Kenzie observes that Millhauser often engages in an otherwise Borgesian emphasis on variants and interpolations (Kenzie, 127). Kenzie notes

Millhauser's tendency to list and continually readjust his observations and interpretations of events occurring within his fiction, providing a sense of constant branching and bifurcation (120). The constant forking of ideas and theories in these stories provide a sense of chaos in the unexplained mysteries they highlight.

Millhauser's 'enigma' stories focus on the interaction of mysterious phenomena and its hypothetical, often communal, observer. In an article on the presence of theatrical audience in Millhauser's fiction, Pedro Ponce observes that "theatrical performance is unique in its potential for representing cultural flux as mediated by art" (Ponce 92). Although "text is a fixed and finished product which cannot be directly affected by its audiences...Culture cannot be held as a fixed entity...but instead it must be seen in a position of inevitable flux" (92). Millhauser's involvement of the audience (or communal) voice in his own writing creates a fictional environment which considers this exchange between phenomena (art object) and those experiencing and responding to it (the audience). Susan Bennett, a theorist of theatrical reception, argues:

Like the individual reader, the audience inevitably proceeds through the construction of hypotheses about the fictional world which are subsequently substantiated, revised, or negated. The horizon of expectations constructed in the period leading up to the opening frame of the performance is also subject to similar substantiation, revision, or negation. (qtd in Ponce 93)

The chaotic flux of cultural values, collective and individual consciousness constantly interacts with fixed objects and events (texts, films, etc) to derive new permutations of audience response. "The study of audience," Ponce observes in Bennett, "is one in which 'text, context, and reader all play vital roles in shaping interpretations'" (Ponce 92).

Millhauser's labyrinthine fiction not only investigates the conceptual audience, but the more general themes such as mental perplexity, psychology, and desire.

Moreover, Millhauser's labyrinthine narratives are not dependent on the presence of a physical space, but envision the conceptual space of the human mind. Doob notes that the medieval idea of "mind as maze" represented the individual soul as trapped in the mental perplexities and fleshly entanglements of the fall (Doob 84, 86). Doob notes, however, that the labyrinth has historically indicated both moral *and* intellectual confusion. Just as a labyrinth represents the paradoxical embodiment of order and chaos, contemporary thought operates between the will to power and the will to chance (Faris, 190). As Millhauser's 'enigma' stories demonstrate, the labyrinth can be a mental space where a "patternless series of events" are continuously mediated by the "ordering impulse of... human consciousness" (Conte, 144). The labyrinth, in these stories, maps a struggle to grasp the incomprehensible. Such is the case in Millhauser's 'enigma' stories. Robert Coover observes: "we invent constellations that permit an illusion of order... Thus, in a sense, we are all creating fictions all the time... constantly test[ing] them against the experience of life" (qtd in Conte 142). Indeed, Millhauser's narrative voice often conveys mental patterns of "overly conscious elaboration" and "over-intellectualization" (Faris 65-66). Such patterns often result in a state of mental imprisonment or suspension: "The being in the labyrinth is at once subject and object... losing itself in its own turnings" (Faris 11). Thus, Millhauser's narrators (collective and individual) often find themselves lost "in a labyrinth of [their] own devising" (Faris 130).

The presence of physical labyrinths, of course, does not negate the simultaneous presence of a conceptual one. "Beneath the Cellars of Our Town" is both an 'architecture' and 'enigma' story because it engages in mapping the physical and mental

turnings of the community it describes. The presence of the mysterious tunnels beneath the town leads to a variety of theories and debates about their nature:

One school of philosophy has suggested that all towns are like our town, but that only we believe in our passageways. It is our belief that permits us to descend, just as it is incredulity that condemns them to the surface of earth. A corollary to this theory, proposed by a rival school, is that our passageways do not exist except insofar as we believe in them—that the entire structure of stairways, shadows, an turning paths lies solely within us. Members of this school insist that the only way to find an opening to our underground world is to seek out a quiet and secluded spot. Close your eyes. Concentrate your attention inward. Descend. (*Knife* 254-55)

The turnings of theoretical explanations and responses to the tunnels are not the only way in which the townspeople construct mental meanderings. Practical debates about what ought to be done with the tunnels also take place—revealing a fractured and multi-paradigmatic voice from the community.

Some years ago a town meeting was held to consider this proposal: that we leave our homes and move permanently into the passageways. Arguments of all kinds were advanced by the advocates of the proposal, who claimed that our repeated descents were proof of our deepest desires. It was even said that the town itself served no purpose other than to make descent possible...The strongest counterargument was...not a defense of the town, or praise of the virtues of life in the upper world, or a meticulous explanation of the impracticability of living below the ground, but rather this: our absolute certainty that, should we actually leave the upper world and move into our passageways, not a week would pass before, in the blackness beneath the dark paths, we began digging new, deeper passageways. (*Knife* 252)

The multiple voices within this debate mirrors the wandering arabesques of the tunnels. Physical and mental turnings, then, are each proposed as theoretical spaces that may be explored. As such, the underground tunnels function as a heterotopia to the fractured collective consciousness expressed in debates responding and reacting to it—a reflection of the mental turnings that are, in a sense, ‘explored’ by the townsfolk.



Moreover, the debate in the previously quoted passage depicts a key consideration of Millhauser's fiction: desire. Whereas the desire for predictability and familiarity is often expressed in a reluctance or outright refusal to dwell in the tunnels, the desire for novelty and mystery is expressed in the proposal to move into the tunnels. Moreover, the counter-argument that such a move would inevitably lead to deeper exploration reflects an awareness of such cravings. The labyrinth's paradox of chaos and order is ever-present in the community's simultaneous desire for familiarity and mystery, predictability and novelty.

Like "Beneath the Cellars of Our Town", "The Slap" records a community's pattern of explanatory adjustment in the face of an impenetrable mystery. The story begins when a man is slapped in the face by a complete stranger for no conceivable reason (*Others*, 3). The night after, the victim of the slap concludes that the slapper may have been someone whose nose he once broke in a fight (6). Yet, as others fall victim to the mysterious, trench-coated slapper, other, less personal, explanations arise: "some argued the man was mentally unstable...Others insisted that he knew his victims...[others] claimed that the attacks were some form of social statement" (9). Explanations about the slapper's outfit, the location of the attacks and the victims are continually listed as each attack (and subsequent response to it) alters the community's perception of the phenomena. In all this, the narrative voice's forking explanations express a desire that some pattern may be observed in the attacks. Yet, the attacker remains nameless, uncaught and shrouded in mystery. The only pattern that may be observed is the inevitability of the next attack: "Each attack, no matter how random, began to feel inevitable even as it seemed silly and illogical to suppose such an

occurrence” (22-23). Even that pattern, however, is disrupted once the attacks cease altogether (31).

The recurrence, or ‘retreading’, of familiar events and phenomena are amplified by the language that Millhauser uses. Repeated phrases within a repeating narrative lend to a tone of refrain (or leitmotif): “a man stepped out...and slapped him hard” (*Others* 3); “His cheek stung: the man had slapped him hard” (3); “The man had come right up to him and slapped him: hard” (4); “The man had struck him hard” (6). “The man had swung hard” (7); “The man... slapped him hard in the face” (9). The repeated phrases are strikingly similar, and yet, distinctive. The language, itself, reflecting the narrative’s circular pattern of near-identical occurrences met with individualized reactions. Like the community in the story, the reader begins to feel a sense of *inevitability* about the next attack (22-23).

In his handbook, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*, Hills observes the elements of and characteristics of “successful” short fiction (Hills 1). Hills argues that in the short story (and fiction in general) every turn of action must seem inevitable, but also surprising to the reader (7). A sense of inevitability, Hills argues, may be accomplished through the regular habits of characters: “with new enthusiasm and firm resolve to break out of their maze, they waste their vitality by inevitably rushing into the same corridor as before” (7-8). Inevitability may also be accomplished as a result of retrospect wherein the path the fiction takes is constructed so that the choices the writer has made for the story are not apparent, but appear to be a singular, fated line (24-25). Metafiction, Hills notes, consciously considers other possible paths in order to emphasize the frailty of a “single, inevitable movement” (25). Thus, Hills concludes that

metafiction fails to convince and satisfy the reader because it does not provide the desired effect of inevitability (26).

Millhauser's 'enigma' stories point to multiple paths of possibility. Carefully, every sense of a unified, linear path in the text is eroded by new waves of explanation. According to Hills, this feature of Millhauser's fiction ought to lessen the significance of action, stymie the success of the story and short-circuit the evocation of theme (Hills 26). For Hills, the "successful" fiction might use *parallelism* or parallel circumstances to contribute to its symmetry and a sense of the theme's universality. Millhauser's labyrinthine 'enigma' stories, notably, maintain the opposite effect—that of an asymmetricality, a *perpendicularism*. By providing variance and adjustment with each occurrence of the slap, symmetry is fractured as a cacophony of voices, opinions and responses arise from the communal narrative voice. On one hand, Hills argues: "a story can be thought of as moving through complexity to unity...confusion to order" (95). On the other hand, metafiction may be thought of as moving in the opposite direction. Millhauser avoids both movements, however, by evoking a perpetual suspension between these two poles—order and confusion. The story's initiation moves to complication, but never resolution (as Hills argues it ought to) (96). Instead, Millhauser oscillates between repeated 'initiations' and subsequent 'complications,' never allowing resolution to enter the story. Criticizing the "new fiction" or "anti-fiction" of the 60's and 70's, Hills observes how stories were deliberately static, circular and cyclical "gimmicks" (186). Yet, the static nature of Millhauser's narratives is less a gimmick than a formal expression of theme. It is, paradoxically, in his fiction's fragmentation that it is most thematically unified.

The deliberate suspension which Millhauser evokes in cyclical narrative patterns is, itself, an expression of theme, one being desire. Despite “spreading fear,” the mysterious slapper provides a sense of novelty for the townspeople: “As the weekend passed without incident...[o]ur sense of relief was accompanied by a ripple of disappointment” (*Others* 13). Yet, the desire for more unpredictable incidents is at once a desire to understand their nature: “Many of us...secretly admitted that we would have been happier if something worse had happened in our town, even much worse, so long as it was something we were able to understand, like murder” (14). Desire is a paradox, a thread pulled in opposite directions. One direction leads toward the comfort of familiarity. The other yearns for the intrigue of the unknown. The narrator’s deconstruction of the slap is telling: “[T]he pain of a slap is a sign of greater pain not inflicted. But looked at another way, the slap doesn’t merely withhold: the slap imparts. What it imparts is precisely the knowledge of greater power withheld” (18). Knowing and unknowing are equally expressed in the slap, just as both are equally alluring to the narrative voice. Thus, in a strange paradox, Millhauser’s unity of theme is provided by fractured narrative.

A more recent fiction, “Phantoms”, published first in 2010 and recently included in *The Best American Short Stories 2011*, describes a fictional town’s regular encounters with phantom figures. The encounters are “brief,” but common: “So many of us have seen them that it’s uncommon to meet someone who has not” (*Best* 210). The figures are “not easy to distinguish from ordinary citizens” and “swiftly withdraw” when encountered (210). The explanations for these phantoms are numerous. “One explanation is that our phantoms are the auras, or visible traces, of earlier inhabitants of

our town” (210). Another explanation contends that those “who see them are experiencing delusions or hallucinations brought about by beliefs instilled in us as young children” (215). Still another argues that the townspeople “and the phantoms were once a single race, which at some point in the remote history of our town divided into two societies. Further explanations follow as individual anecdotes and aspects of the phenomena (“the feeling of a ripple along the skin of our forearms”) are interspersed between analysis and discussion of the various explanations for the phantoms.

The form of “Phantoms” bears a striking resemblance to that of “The Slap”. Like “The Slap”, “Phantoms” consists of a series of titled sections, suggesting academic organization (“The Phenomenon...Explanation #1...Case Study #1”) (*Best* 210-12). The textual topography of the pages, like the narrative itself, is fragmented and compartmentalized. The sections are autonomous in that (aside from, perhaps, the first section) could be read in any subsequent order. The fragmented topography of Millhauser’s sections expresses not only the deconstructive quality of the narrative, but the fiction’s perpetual suspension between establishing order and inciting further mystery. Mystery prompts explanation and explanation prompts further mystery. The unraveling of one thread incurs the knotting of another. The complexity and vaporous nature of phenomena like the slapper and phantoms reflects those aspects of human experience which have no explanation, only a shadow.

It’s true that a question runs through our town, because of the phantoms, but we don’t believe we are the only ones who live with unanswered questions. Most of us would say we’re no different from anyone else. When you come to think about us, from time to time, you’ll see we really are just like you. (*Best* 230)

Millhauser’s perpetual suspension of mystery in both “The Slap” and “Phantoms” expresses both the perceptual and intellectual fragmentation of human experience *and* the

inadequacy of fiction to fully render an adequate expression of it. As Hills observes, “The more successful a story based on mystery is in the middle, the more likely it is to fail in the end” (Hills 38). Indeed, the mystery around Millhauser’s enigmas is continually adjusted and made more complicated until, in the end, no explanation is adequate. Desire, human experience and collective memory are fractured experiences that are, accordingly, expressed in a narrative that is, itself, fractured. Thus, what Hills considers a disruption in thematic unity is, for Millhauser, a concise expression of it. Or, as Barth states: “Fiction isn’t a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life” (Hills 145).

Found in *The Knife Thrower*, Millhauser’s third collection of stories, “The Sisterhood of Night” describes a small town where young girls are rumored to have been holding secret gatherings at night. The mysterious nature of the sisterhood consumes the town with desire—a desire not only for mystery, but for understanding: “It is possible that our loathing of the unknown, our need to dispel it, to destroy it, to violate it through sharp, glittering acts of understanding, makes the unknown swell with dark power, as if it were some beast feeding on our swords?” (60). Contradictory explanations extend from one another, revising and adjusting claims along the way: “Some insisted that [they] had invented the whole thing”; “[They] disagreed about the nature of [the sisterhood’s] trustworthiness” (*Knife*, 57). The narrator’s continuous revision of explanations constitutes a retreading of previous paths in order to go in a new direction. As the multiplying explanations are forking paths, the sisterhood itself sits at the impenetrable center: “[the sisterhood] is a high wall, a locked door, a face turning away” (61). Like Millhauser’s other enigmas, the sisterhood’s appearance simultaneously coincides with

their disappearance—understanding is eroded by confusion. “They wish...*not to be known*. In a world dense with understanding, oppressive with explanation and insight...the members of the silent sisterhood long to evade definition, to remain mysterious and ungraspable” (61). To quote Millhauser’s “Here at the Historical Society”: The sisterhood “tempts... with the promise of total precision. Yet even as we record it, even as we reach out to touch it, we see it dissolving before our eyes, revealing a piece of the next past that has already replaced it” (*Laughter* 169). The curse of the present is that it is always already gone. Time and entropy erode established order.

The shadowy, evasive mysteries in these tales function as metagram—revealing, through their instability, the inadequacy and instability of explanation. As Foucault explains it, the metagram is a repetition of a word “highlighting all the impediments to its being the exact representation of what it tries to duplicate, or else filling the void with an enigma that it fails to solve” (Foucault 25). Thus, the repeated appearance of a mystery (a slap, a phantom, a sisterhood) brings to light the inexactness of every explanation.

“Alice, Falling”, found in Millhauser’s second collection, *The Barnum Museum*, inventively enters the thoughts of Lewis Carroll’s Alice as she falls down the rabbit hole, away from the real world and into wonderland. Even as Alice has just begun to fall through a multitude of cupboards, shelves, “lamplit bumps and hollows”, the “upper world grows shadowy and strange; as she falls she has to remind herself that somewhere far above...on a sloping bank her sister sits reading in sun-checked shade” (*Barnum* 164).

The present makes the past moment, which seemed so real, murky and vaporous.

Would the fall *never* end?...But if the fall never ends, then everything is changed: the fall itself becomes the adventure, and the tunnel through which she is falling becomes the unknown world, with its magic and

mystery. Alice, looking about uncertainly, tries to decide whether she is on her way to an adventure or whether she is in the middle of one. (165)

The constant flux of events brings into question not only the future, but the past and present as well. All moments in the narrative of Alice are constantly called into question because of the present moment—a moment of ceaseless suspension. “But a true fall, Alice thinks to herself, is nothing like this: it’s a swoon, a release, it’s like a tugging at a drawer that suddenly comes unstuck” (168). Unlike the fall that Alice is imagining—one event in a linear course of action—she is stuck in an endless loop.

Alice is suspended in darkness. “In the darkness...Alice feels a sudden revulsion: the tunnel walls oppress her, the cupboards bore her to death, she can’t stand it for another second” (*Barnum* 172). The predictability of her is frustrating to her. Boredom, the opposite of terror, makes her long for something. And yet, “Is it possible, Alice wonders, to resist the tug of the upper world, which even now, as she falls in darkness, entices her to wake?...She would like to fall...so far that she will separate herself forever from the dreamer above” (180). The oppression of the dark tunnel and the world above are both particularly undesirable in their own ways to Alice. The realm of darkness or “the realm of chaos”, as Conte calls it, exists in both the tunnel Alice falls in and the world above. Alice imagines the above world in which “a brown stream, glinting with sunlight, winds like a path into the shimmering distance, vanishes into a dark wood” (181). The final image of a dark juxtaposes the present darkness of the dream with the reality ‘above’, which has now become a dream itself. The interweaving of reality and dream is expressed in Alice’s poignant question: “And who’s to say...that one’s more a dream than the other?” (180). Dream and reality become elusively inseparable as forking



passages begin to look the same. Alice, like the narrator's of Millhauser's enigma stories, is left in a state of suspension.

In his book *Beautiful Chaos*, Gordon Slethaug observes the relationship between chaotics and fiction as well as the broad conjunction of art and scientific theory – a concept Barth calls “coaxial esemplasy” (Slethaug 6). Slethaug observes that a postmodern context catalyzed the formation of modern science by providing an emergent awareness of the relationship between disorder and complex systems – chaos and order (5). Metachaotic texts, as Slethaug calls them, display patterns of recursion (or duplication) and iteration (or variation). In chaotics, the concept of “recursive symmetry” observes instances in which patterns are repeated on differing scales (Conte, 20). Slethaug compares this concept with Zeno's paradox in which time or distance is halved and halved again into infinity (21). Much of Borges' fiction is concerned with the idea of endless recurrence, the involuntary rewriting of past masterpieces in one's own way (Borges xii). Moreover, the imagery of mirrors within mirrors or dreams within dreams is a common aspect emphasizing this kind of infinite replication in Borges' fiction. In *The Literature of Exhaustion*, John Stark discusses how the mirror represents realism – the duplication or dissemination of the universe – in the fiction of Borges, noting that, for Borges, literature is “positively good” when it does not mirror, but adds one more thing to the world (Stark 51). Duplication, however, does not take on the role of dissemination in metachaotic fiction as it does in realism. In metachaotic fiction, models of life are not presented as life itself, but as life previously modeled in systems and fiction (Slethaug 15). The repetition of exact patterns leads to a state of “totalization” wherein the pattern is deadened and requires new energy or destruction (53). Recursions then are coupled

with iterations (or variations). Whereas recursive symmetry observes similar patterns occurring on differing scales, iteration is the phenomena of infinite nuance – patterns that differ from their previous incarnations, no matter how similar (Slethaug 124). These constant variations or “bifurcation points” constitute an infinite number of branches or possibilities (59). The relationship between recursion and iteration is reflexive in that *both* aspects are simultaneously shaping the patterns of the physical universe. Iteration and recursion may be said, therefore, to represent the delicate balance of emergent patterns (order) and unpredictability (chaos) of a labyrinth. Whereas recursion may constitute a retreading, iteration represents a deviation or forking from known paths. Millhauser’s narrators, likewise, continuously oscillate between the excitement/danger of a mystery and the security/boredom in its explanation. The narrators in Millhauser’s enigma stories are always perpetually in flux between total chaos and order. What results is the shape of Millhauser’s fiction, “a model of the human condition,” an attempt to spatially represent the human awareness of complexity (Wilson 12). It is the shape of postmodern chaotics. It is the shape of the labyrinth.

“The Eight Voyage of Sinbad”, also from *The Barnum Museum*, finds Millhauser engaging in a Borgesian exercise of fictional bibliography. In it, the elusive voyages of Sinbad are investigated. Do they exist? If so, what is their nature? Even Sinbad struggles to remember:

He is no longer certain of the order of voyages, or of the order of adventures within each voyage, Sinbad can summon to mind, with sharp precision, entire adventures or parts of adventures, as well as isolated images that suddenly spring to enchanted life behind his eyelids...and so it comes about that within the seven voyages new voyages arise, which gradually replace the earlier voyages as the face of an old man replaces the face of a child. (*Barnum* 115)

Sinbad's own memory is eroded, perplexed by the passage of time so that his adventures begin to change the moment they have ended. The movement from ascertainment to befuddlement exists in the mind as the movement toward entropy exists in the world. Like Sinbad, the scholars puzzle over the eighth voyage. "According to Gerhardt (*The Art of Story-Telling*), the story of Sinbad was probably composed at the end of the ninth or beginning of the tenth century. According to Joseph Campbell (*The Portable Arabian Nights*, 1592), the story probably dates from the early fifteenth century" (*Barnum* 115). On and on, the fiction oscillates between Sinbad's own mental wanderings and the bibliographic efforts to understand his adventures. Individual memory and collective memory are juxtaposed to indicate that neither are sufficient to recall what has already passed. Instead, the invention of the present will collaborate with shadows of the past in order to create new permutations, new branchings:

At first the telling had made the voyages so vivid to him that it was as if the words had given them life, it was as if, without the words, the voyages had been slowly darkening or disappearing. Thus the voyages took shape about the words, or perhaps took shape within the words. But a change had been wrought, by the telling. For once the voyages had been summoned by the words, a separation had seemed to take place as if, just to one side of the words, half-hidden by their shadows, the voyages lay dreaming in the grass... Before the telling, what were the voyages? Unspoken, did they exist at all? (*Barnum* 119)

The ever-changing present, at once recursion *and* iteration, is a chaotic experience for the mind. Within this flux, the mind grasps to what it can in order to cope, establish some sense of order. Kinzie observes in Millhauser how passages such as this one "indicate how imperious the senses can become when the mind wanders off course" (Kinzie 125). Indeed, according to Millhauser it always is.

The wandering paths within the narrative continue as Millhauser engages in labyrinthine *occupatio* (the rhetorical consideration of other paths not taken) by allowing the reader to imagine other possibilities, other voyages. The narrator notes: “we may wonder whether Sheherazade has omitted details for the sake of shaping her tale effectively, we may wonder whether there are episodes from the seven voyages, or even entire voyages, that did not reach her” (*Barnum* 120). Sinbad, too, asks himself: “Is it necessary to order them chronologically? Are not other arrangements possible?” (128). The narrator, finally, proposes “no two readings are alike. In this sense there are as many voyages as there are readers...From an infinite number of possible readings, let us imagine one” (138). The elusive voyages of Sinbad, like Millhauser’s enigmas in general, function as a metagram—revealing, through their instability, the inadequacy and instability of their explanation. Neither the mystery nor its explanation can be stabilized or maintained. Both are in constant flux. Both the mind of Sinbad and the scholastic tradition are forever fractured and imperfect ways of drawing upon explanation. Just as realism seeks to carefully paint images while fabulism pursues an inner vision, both are, in Millhauser, equally truthful yet inadequate representations of the real. Sinbad’s eighth voyage, like many of Millhauser’s enigmas, is an immense labyrinth.

Other stories of Millhauser’s are worth mentioning in this category in that they revolve around the desire to understand, to *know* some strange enigma. In “The Room in the Attic” from 2008’s *Dangerous Laughter*, a young boy befriends a girl named Isabel who lives in the absolute darkness of her upstairs attic. He never sees her face, but is filled with a desire to. He is consumed by what she may look like. And, when given the opportunity to see her face, runs out of the house (*Laughter* 73). In “Tales of Darkness

and the Unknown Vol. XIV: The White Glove” (the title, itself, suggesting untraveled paths), the narrator befriends a young girl named Emily (*Others* 32). Like Isabel “The Room in the Attic,” Emily is partially hidden from sight as a white glove appears on her hand one day (40). The mystery of the white glove and what it is covering consumes the narrator. The glove does eventually come off and the narrator, unlike that of “Attic”, looks at her hand “which is covered in twists of hair...raw and shiny” (56). The story, despite this, ends in a characteristic state of suspension: “I felt that I was about to understand something of immense importance, everything was about to become clear to me, but a boy came running along the sandbar and kicked the beach ball and I watched it fly lazily into the blue air...” (57). Such is the way of Millhauser’s enigma stories, which lead the reader to the point of epiphany only to find another dead end in its place.

Millhauser’s enigmas, therefore, map the space of the mind as it copes with inexplicable wonders. Yet, this is not the stuff of fiction, but everyday life. The perplexing riddles of phantoms, slappers and a sisterhood shrouded in secrecy are not altogether different than the mysteries of life, death and the meaning of existence. All have a variety of explanations within culture, religion and philosophy. Yet, in the space of his narrative labyrinths, Millhauser asks which is the dream and which the reality—the enigma or its explanation? Fiction, thus, becomes a creative act which “searches for principles by which order might arise out of the disorder of materials” (Conte 2). Yet, the search is what interests Millhauser, not epiphany. Perhaps, for Millhauser, the search is the best and closest thing to epiphany. The extent to which the creative act seeks a perfect order may be observed in Millhauser’s acme stories—the subject of the following chapter.

### **Chapter Three: Acme Stories**

*A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.*

-Jorge Luis Borges

*A cage went in search of a bird.*

-Franz Kafka

Millhauser's 'acme' stories involve a pattern of technological or performative escalation. The artist or creative individual begins by performing in plausible ways before their work/performance escalates into the realm fantastic, the magical. Of all three story types, it is Millhauser's acme stories that most strongly resonate with the thematic concerns of postmodern fiction in the 60's and 70's. Most postmodern fiction in the high 60's was concerned with language or the text itself. Likewise, Millhauser's 'acme' stories are primarily concerned with the creative act and its reception—the art object or performance (automatons, knife throwing, etc.) usually functioning as a surrogate for the fiction text, itself. For Millhauser, these types of stories involve some fixed attention upon one or more actors in a triangle of reception: the creative act/object, its creator/performer and its audience (Ponce specifically talks about Millhauser's writing of audience). The interaction of these three elements is observed in differing, yet similar patterns throughout the 'acme' stories.

A pattern of creative recursion and iteration is also apparent within these stories. The creative act is repeated over and over through the same medium. Although each repetition is similar to what came before, it is also new and different. As is usually the case with Millhauser, the creative act begins in the realm of the plausible, but is

metamorphosed into a fantastic vision. The ambitions of the creator/inventor/artist in combination with the demands of the audience/consumer spur a continual process of innovation and creative proliferation. A perfect and exact ‘something’ is sought by artist and/or audience, but can it ever exist? Even if it did, would it be enough? These questions—issues of creative form and human desire—are central to Millhauser’s ‘acme’ stories.

In each of these stories there is a Daedalus figure (or figures), a labyrinth and even, occasionally, a minotaur. The labyrinth itself is the mystery of the creative act: what does it mean? What is its purpose? What is its pinnacle? In the course of attempting to answer these questions, a web of influence is formed between artist, audience and art object. The labyrinth in these stories is a place of possibility—the exploration of a form or technology. An understanding of all possible variants and degrees of precision is sought after by audience and/or artist. The goal of these actors is not to pass through, but to map the entire labyrinth—to “exhaust” it (just as the post-modernists sought to “exhaust” the potential of text).

Categorization of Millhauser’s writings is widely varied and, in many ways, based upon how his fiction approaches to the creative act. Earl Ingersoll claims that Millhauser belongs to the tradition of modernism, citing Millhauser’s focused concern with “art and the artist’s audience” (Ingersoll 114). Conversely, Douglas Fowler argues that Millhauser belongs to the “postmodernist firmament” (Fowler, “Postmodern” 80). Fowler argues that Millhauser does “not operate so obviously as do Pynchon or Barth or Coover” (81). Yet, his fiction represents the same “departure from the mainstream”: “Millhauser’s practice is to use the seemingly solid properties of literary ‘realism’ for an

examination of the artist and the impulses that come to dominate him ruthlessly from within” (81, 85). The confusion between how and where to categorize Millhauser is plainly a symptom of his fusion of surface detail and thematic unity with postmodernist fragmentation. The inner vision of fantasy and the carefully painted images of realism are regularly combined in his fiction and, thus, defy categorization. Millhauser, therefore, is neither a traditional realist (though he has mastered its formal techniques) nor a pure postmodernist. Instead, Millhauser employs the formal devices of both camps in order to negotiate his own unique vision of the real.

It is easy to understand how early short fiction by Millhauser could be reasoned as ‘modernist’. “August Eschenburg” from Millhauser’s first collection of short stories, *In the Penny Arcade*, suggests a normative attitude about the integrity of the artist and his or her art. The story is that of an automaton maker, August Eschenburg, who will be considered the best of his day and age. August’s ambition is the precise imitation of human motions (*Arcade* 25). In his early career, August builds an automaton mannequin for a store front window. The automaton is placed next to a real man and pedestrians are challenged to guess which is the real person (20). Yet, August’s ambitions eventually transcend the imitative as his desire becomes to “insert his dreams into the world” (53). August’s pure and absolute commitment to his art is contrasted with the economic success of his rival, Hausenstein, whose automaton shows feed his audiences’ “appetite for ‘soft porn’” and eroticism (Ingersoll 116). August, however, remains committed to creating automatons that play, with beauty and precision, the great classics of composers like Chopin (*Arcade* 47). With each stage of his life, August’s craft becomes more intricate and precise. Economic factors are a frustration, but never the goal for



Eschenburg: “if [his dreams] were the wrong dreams, then he would dream them in solitude” (53). For this reason, Ingersoll argues that

August is something of a throwback to the modernist era in which creators and writers could think of their work as Art within a quasi-religious mode. One recalls Joyce’s Steven Daedalus who tropes himself as ‘a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everlasting life’. (Ingersoll 116)

In this same manner, “August” is “wholly invested in his art” (116). Hausenstein, although his rival, is an admirer of Eschenburg and partners with him, funding August’s art by means of the cheap pornographic automatons of Hausenstein’s “Black Boot” theatre (*Arcade* 42). Eventually, Hausenstein reasons that automatons have gone out of fashion and he cuts August off. The story ends with Eschenburg travelling home—a committed artist devoid of relevance to any audience.

According to Rust Hills, the short story is methodically crafted and demonstrates a harmonious relationship between all of its aspects—thematic unity (Hills 1). Quoting Poe, Hills argues: “there should be no word written, of which the tendency...is not to the pre-established design” (2). The transcendent order of a short story ought to make every character’s action seem inevitable: “character is fate” (7). Hills explanation of character habits is defined in maze-like terms: “With new enthusiasm and firm resolve to break out of their maze, they waste their vitality by inevitably rushing into the same corridor as before” (8). Likewise, Hills envisions the design of plot as a forking structure of possibilities along which the character will plausibly make their decisions (24). Yet, in retrospect, forkings are not visible—only the appearance of inevitability remains (24). What appears to be a singular, unicursal path is, in fact, the design of an architect chosen from a multitude of possible paths. Hills also defines epiphany of a story is the moment of revelation of “luminous, divine manifestation” (23). Quoting Joyce, Hills asserts that

the epiphany is when the “whatness of character or situation” has been shone forth or made manifest by the story (23). Both inevitability and epiphany, then, are values which suggest a transcendent order. In modernism, this order was thought to be reflected and revealed in the art of the author/genius.

August Eschenburg, from his early fascination with machinery, seems destined to become the artist he will become (*Arcade* 5). Yet, the narrative voice gives pause to briefly meditate on the idea of fate, of inevitability:

It sometimes happens that way: Fate blunders into a blind alley, and to everyone’s embarrassment must pick itself up and try again....Yet perhaps they are not blunders at all, these false turnings, perhaps they are necessary developments in a pattern too complex to be grasped at once. Or perhaps the truth was that there is no Fate, no pattern, nothing at all except a tired man looking back and forgetting everything but this and that detail which the very act of memory composes into a fate. Eschenburg, remembering his childhood, wondered whether fate was merely a form of forgetfulness. (*Arcade* 8)

Fate could simply be a pattern too large to be grasped. Looking at the narrative of a story, the modernist would likely propose that the false turnings and seeming chaos of it all is, in fact, the inner working of some complex design fashioned together by the genius of a master craftsman. More than that, the master craftsman may, at his or her most clairvoyant moment, reveal the transcendent order of the universe through art. Yet, Millhauser, with this passage, leaves the question of transcendent order unanswered. Is fate a form of forgetfulness? Is transcendent order a myth? Likewise, is the author/genius just as much a sham as the supposed truths they express? Carefully, Millhauser examines the machinery of this thing called ‘fate’ and makes a thorough and distant assessment. Rather than leaving readers with an epiphany, he leaves them with

questions. The questions, however, may be closer to the truth than a comforting answer.

Millhauser, in an interview, states:

To say I prefer distance isn't to say I prefer coldness, haughtiness, lack of feeling, deadness. In my view, it's precisely that 'little distance' that permits genuine feeling to be expressed. My dislike of warm, cozy, chummy writing is that it always strikes me as fraudulent—a failure of feeling. Passion, beauty intensity—everything I care about in art—is made possible through the discipline of distance. Or to say it another way: Powerful feeling in art takes place only through the particular kind of distance known as form (120-1).

It is distance, Millhauser's objective commitment to truth in his fiction that makes him both like *and* unlike the modernists. Millhauser's commitment to distant and exhaustive assessment inevitably turns his fiction as a mirror onto itself. The distance Millhauser evokes in his evaluative and, often, academic sounding narrative points to the mediation of language, even as he attempts to transcend it. "All words are masks, and the lovelier they are, the more they are meant to conceal" (58). Here, Millhauser alludes to metagram, *by defining it*. And like Dorothy of Oz, he brashly pulls back the curtain to see what is behind—a postmodernist move, indeed. Although the idealistic protagonist in "August Eschenburg" would suggest Millhauser's embrace of modernist values, the narrative is, in post-modern fashion, both self-aware and investigative. It is equally important to note that while "August Eschenberg" from Millhauser's first collection, 1986's *In the Penny Arcade*, is written in a traditional third person omniscient perspective, Millhauser's subsequent 'acme' stories about the artist are generally written from the vantage point of an audience. By doing so, Millhauser has implemented a sense of distance that, I believe, aims to dispel the notion that he is simply celebrating the artist/genius of modernism. In an interview with Millhauser, my theory was confirmed. Millhauser states:

If anyone describes me or anyone else as a “very late modernist,” I immediately want to know what exactly is meant by “modernist.” If, as I think, a modernist is a writer for whom the inherited forms and structures of an earlier generation are no longer vital, then I consider myself a modernist. But I’m skeptical about schools and labels, which often carry implications that lead to distortion. Certain modernists, like Eliot, are associated with religious and political views that I find grotesque. As for the phrase “very late modernist”: this can suggest someone who, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is doing more or less what was done by writers in the early twentieth century. To call someone a very late modernist is therefore to imply that his modernism is a kind of throwback. It’s a back-handed compliment, a secret criticism. In that sense, I reject it. (Millhauser, “Master’s” 28 Apr)

Millhauser’s defiance of clear categorization and commitment to distance reflects his protagonist’s commitment to his craft. Indeed, the artist characters in “August Eschenberg,” “The Invention of Robert Herendeen” and “Eisenheim the Illusionist” pose themselves as “author-surrogate” (Ingersoll 114). Even the syllabic pattern of the artists’ names invites comparison: Eschenberg, Herendeen, Eisenheim, Millhauser. Other formal aspects of Millhauser’s fiction must be considered as well. I asked Millhauser about his choice of the pronoun “we” in many of his stories, Millhauser states:

“[W]e” lacks the intimacy of an “I,” so that it becomes paradoxical: a kind of communal, impersonal confession is possible. But what’s truly exciting about “we” is simply that it isn’t “he” or “she” or “I”—it’s a virtually unexplored pronoun. I’m not done with it. (Millhauser, “Master’s” 30 Sep)

When asked about his attraction to writing stories with topical headings, Millhauser responded:

What attracts me to that kind of story is that it isn’t the other kind of story. To put it another way: there’s something disruptive and liberating for me in writing such a story. Usually it begins as a more conventional structure, which bores me and makes me restless. (Millhauser, “Master’s” 30 Sep)

Millhauser’s own fascination with form and his professed restlessness with convention mirror the innovative desires of both his artists and his audiences. Whereas Millhauser may write with a sense of distance, he is always close by.

“Eisenheim the Illusionist”, from Millhauser’s second collection, *The Barnum Museum*, chronicles the life of a master magician. Like August Eschenburg, Eisenheim’s initial attempts at his craft are un-impactful and derivative: “The first public performances were noted less for their daring than for their subtle mastery of the stage illusions of the day” (*Barnum* 218). Repetition, as usual, comes with some form of iteration: “even then there were always twists and variations” (218). Eisenheim first becomes notable for his originality in an illusion involving a mirror and a spectator from the audience. The spectator, donning a red robe and standing in front of the mirror, moves about as their reflection becomes disobedient and refuses to follow their movements (220). Suddenly “the reflection grimaced, removed a knife, and stabbed itself in the chest” (220). Although master magicians and audience alike are mystified, they attempt to explain away the illusion by hypothesizing lanterns and light tricks (220). In this sense, the story takes on the characteristics of an ‘enigma’ story as well.

An illusionist names Benedetti arrives to challenge Eisenheim by “presenting imitations of original Eisenheim illusions, with clever variations” (*Barnum* 222). The pattern or recursion/iteration provokes a proliferation of illusion, an arms race.

It was noted that as his rival presented illusions of bold originality, Eisenheim’s own illusions became more daring and dangerous; it was as if the two of them had outsoared the confines of the magician’s art and existed in some new realm of dexterous wonder, of sinister beauty. (223)

The master illusion turns out to be Benedetti, who, in a climactic illusion, reveals that he is none other than Eisenheim in disguise (224-5).

Even without a rival, Eisenheim remains committed to his craft and develops the ability to conjure phantoms. Unlike all his previous illusions, these “immaterial materializations...made use of no machinery at all—they appeared to emerge from the

mind of the magician” (*Barnum* 229). Even smoke and mirrors cannot explain this illusion for the audience (229). What began as clever and precise trickery became the expression of an inner vision. The trajectory of Eisenheim’s practice of form is that of Millhauser’s own fiction. Like Millhauser, Eisenheim defies categorization: “The long review...was the first of several that placed Eisenheim beyond the world of conjuring and saw in him an expression of spiritual striving, as if his art could no longer be talked about in the old way” (229).

Yet, the trajectory of Eisenheim’s craft continues beyond this point of mastery until Eisenheim, when conjuring his phantoms on stage, conjures a child of about six years old in the audience: “the child...was of the race of [the conjured phantoms]. Although the mysterious child never appeared again, spectators began to look nervously at their neighbors” (*Barnum* 234). Eisenheim, literally, breaks the fourth wall and a sense of self-doubt emerges within the audience. This is the prestige of the post-modern metafiction that turns a mirror onto itself, its fictionality and the mediation of language to reality. Just as the metafiction’s self-awareness leads the reader into an equal state of self-awareness, Eisenheim leads the audience into an awareness (and wariness) of one another. After Eisenheim’s performance, the papers of the chief of police read:

The phrase ‘crossing of boundaries’ occurs pejoratively more than once in his notebooks; by it he appears to mean that certain distinctions must be strictly maintained. Art and life constituted one such distinction; illusion and reality, another. Eisenheim deliberately crossed boundaries and there for disturbed the essence of things. In effect, [the chief of police] was accusing Eisenheim of shaking the foundations of the universe, of undermining reality, and in consequence of doing something far worse: subverting the Empire. For where would the Empire be, once the idea of boundaries became blurred and uncertain? (234-35)

The trajectory of Eisenheim's craft brings his audience into an awareness of post-modern complexity. Eisenheim escapes arrest, but is never seen again (237). The narrative raises some self-doubts as the recollection of these events are called into question: "Someone suggested that [the chief of police] was himself an illusion...Arguments arose over whether it was done with lenses and mirrors...precise memories faded" (237). The collective consciousness is chaotically and constantly eroding the events of history and the truth lies somewhere, gone forever. Yet there is comfort in that "a secret relief penetrated the souls of the faithful, who knew that the Master has passed safely out of the crumbling order of history into the indestructible realm of mystery and dream" (237). Millhauser's fictional audience remains fractured between faithfulness to the ideals of modernism and an awareness of the post-modern complexity. By allowing his narrative to maintain a level of distance from its characters, the story's final shape is not that of a singular, inevitable path, but of a web of contradictory ideas and conclusions—a labyrinth.

Like "Eisenheim the Illusionist," the story "Snowmen" from his first collection, *In the Penny Arcade*, traces the trajectory of artistic and literary development through history. It begins simply, plausibly. A soft snow has fallen and a neighborhood is blanketed with white mounds of precipitation. Snowmen begin to appear, noticeable to the narrative "we" because of their detail: "They were not commonplace snowmen composed of three big snowballs...they were passionately detailed ...with noses and mouths and chins of snow. They wore hats of snow and coats of snow" (*Arcade* 127). The precise and carefully crafted images of these snowmen, women and children provoke wonder within the children of the neighborhood, but it is short lived: "Restless and

unappeased, we set out again through the neighborhood, where already a change was evident” (128). New poses and scenes featuring snowmen are built, and when “the art of the snowman appeared to reach a fullness...when it seemed that nothing further could be dreamed, the snow animals began to appear” (129). Not only animals, but intricate trees of snow with their “visible veins” appear in patterns that imitate the very proliferation of snow art (130). Soon the “rigidity” of realistic imagery is protested with snow gargoyles and creatures of fantasy (131). Further yet, even fantastic forms are soon replaced by “distorted forms” which attempt to escape the very limits of snow itself (132). An air of exhaustion permeates the neighborhood as the limits of the form are pushed and tested. Delight turns into dread as the snow becomes a draining and “difficult joy”: “I was not unhappy when the rain came” (132). Already the memory of the past few days has begun to fade, seeming “as fantastic as vanished icicles, as unseizable as fading dreams” (133). The erosion of memory, again, plays an important role in the historical cycle and in the continuous evolution of form which is both recursive and iterative, the same and somehow different.

The imitative, however, cannot replace the phenomenon of life itself. Alluding to the limits of language, of art, form, and the human attention span, Millhauser’s characters hear the squawk of a blue jay and look on with fascination: “Look at that!” (*Arcade* 133). The bird flies away and immediately comes the suggestion: “Let’s do something” (133). Absolute imitation in the form of snow provokes a passing sense of wonder, but the subject itself—the reality that art attempts to express or embody—can do no better. The desire of the audience is to perpetually dream of newer and bigger possibilities that artistic forms and even natural phenomena may only briefly inspire. The audience is



paradoxically, perpetually dissatisfied even as they are provoked to a sense of wonder by new forms and permeations. Human desire itself becomes a labyrinth in which one is perpetually drawn inward whilst attempting to escape—curiosity leads to dread and dread to curiosity. Realism and fantastic inner visions of snow are both inadequate for maintaining the interest of the audience. Perhaps the most accurate vision of reality is that distant assessment which Millhauser makes of human desire: a perpetually oscillating disdain *and* desire for novelty/familiarity. It is the paradox of desire which Millhauser builds up in order to leave the reader, like the audience in “Snowmen,” longing for something more.

Like “Snowmen,” “The Knife Thrower”, from Millhauser’s third collection, *The Knife Thrower*, observes the escalation of an art form from the perspective of the audience. The knife thrower masterfully demonstrates his skill by hurling blades into the air, allowing them to land between his splayed fingers on a table-top (*Knife* 14). The fascination and wonder that overtakes the audience is short lived: “as we pounded out our applause, we felt a little restless, a little dissatisfied, as if some unspoken promise had failed to be kept” (14). In the case of knife throwing, that “unspoken promise” is the imminent danger of the act itself—the exciting possibility of witnessing catastrophe as the performer teeters on the edge. Indeed, the edge becomes blurred as the knife throwers next tricks involve the “marking” of his assistant by throwing the blade so close that a small trickle of blood can be seen (17). This delights and fascinates the audience, who are then asked if they, too, would like to “receive the mark of the master” (18). As in Eisenheim, the escalation of the form eventually must break the barrier of the fourth wall. This very pattern hints at Millhauser’s formal approach, which will always make

him something more than a realist. The imminent danger to the knife thrower and his assistant advances its way into the audience: “in the silence, in the very rhythm of the evening, the promise of entering a dark dream” (21). The first volunteer receives a mere cut on her skin, but the second is struck in the center of his palm (20-21). Finally, the assistant asks if a volunteer would like to receive the “final mark, the mark that can only be received once” (22). A volunteer is chosen, a longer, thinner blade is brought out and the knife thrower throws:

Some of us heard the girl cry out, others were struck by her silence, but what stayed with all of us was the absence of the sound of the knife striking wood. Instead there was a softer sound, a more disturbing sound, a sound almost like silence, and some said the girl looked down, as if in surprise. Others claimed to see in her face, in the expression of her eyes, a look of rapture. (23)

Once on stage, the girl who will die at the hands of the knife thrower becomes an object of interpretation. Even as the possibilities of knife throwing are exhaustively explored, so, too, are the multiplicity of reactions and interpretations of the act listed out. As the knife thrower’s audience restlessly longs to exhaust all paths and possibilities, they, themselves, construct a labyrinth of recollection and responses. The thread they weave through the labyrinth becomes a maze in and of itself.

As in “August Eschenburg,” “The New Automaton Theatre” explores the form of automaton creation, an art form which strives “for the absolute imitation of nature” (*Knife* 110). The narrator reports that the goal of the theatre has a profound effect on the artists it employs—the strain of invention leaving “deep lines on the faces” of the master craftsmen (120). This passage brings to mind Borges’ image of labyrinthine lines in the face of the creator:

A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays,

ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face. (*Dreamtigers* 93)

Millhauser's "Automaton" narrator asks "whether the highest form of an art contains within it the elements of its own destruction" (*Knife* 119). Indeed, the exhaustion and eventual obsolescence of forms is a concern of this and all of Millhauser's 'acme' stories. The new automatons are described as being built with little concern for strict imitation, but invention, impression and essence (124). Again, the allure of precise duplication is eroded by a desire for the inner vision and abstract expression. The new theatre features clumsy automatons who "assert their unreal nature at every jerk of a limb" (126). The art of the automaton has become self-investigative. These are meta-automatons. Yet,

[t]he old art flourishes, and its presence comforts us, but something new and strange has come into the world. Whether our art has fallen into an unholy decadence, as many have charged, or whether it has achieved its deepest and darkest flowering, who among us can say? We know only that nothing can ever be the same. (127)

Whereas the devices of realism were used as parody in postmodernist writings in the 60's and 70's, Millhauser avoids using such a parodic tone about his imitative forms. Instead, his stories present the imitative as a stage of exploration or investigation in an art form. In an interview with Millhauser, I asked specifically whether replication is meant as a criticism of realism in his fiction. Millhauser responded:

Most of what I do is hurled at the heart of so-called realism. And yes, when I write explicitly about replication and repetition, questions about what constitutes the Real are inevitable. But my interest in replication is more immediate than that. Any artist spends a lifetime producing things that in some sense reflect the world. Exactly what that means is mysterious, even and perhaps especially for the one doing it. Replication is a way of exploring the question of how an artifact is related to an original -- or how a work of art is related to a world. Replication and

repetition are methods of investigation, rather than forms of criticism.  
(Millhauser, “Master’s” 30 Sep)

Millhauser’s commitment to objectively investigating reality within his own fiction—examining the “battle” between multiple visions of the real—is not only a source of difficulty in categorizing his fiction, but also a means of using language to point to what lies beyond its capacity.

The exploration of formal innovation is most particularly compared with the labyrinth in the opening lines of “A Precursor of the Cinema.” Millhauser writes:

Every great invention is preceded by a rich history of error. Those false paths, wrong turn, and dead ends, those branchings and veerings, those wild swerves and delirious wanderings—how can they fail to entice the attention of the historian, who sees in error itself a promise of revelation?  
(*Laughter* 179)

Those “wanderings” involve the evolution of paintings that come to magically life in the darkened theatre, astounding and amusing audiences. Eventually, the paintings seem to break their own limitations as dancers within one painting appear to step out of the frame and onto the stage (194). Later, a piece entitled *Terra Incognita* is shown, displaying vague shapes and abstract images:

Some claimed that the painting represented a dark cavern with rocks and ledges. Others spoke of a dark sea. All witnesses agreed that they gradually became aware of shadowy figures, who seemed to float up from the depths of the painting and to move closer to the surface....One woman later spoke of a sensation of cold on the back of her neck...Others, men and women, reported ‘a sensation of being rubbed up against, as by a cat...not all impressions were gentle. (201)

The confusing piece leads to eventual panic and terror as people, many sobbing, attempt to quickly evacuate the theatre (202). Crane, the master artist of the magical paintings, disappears before an audience in a manner as miraculous as his art (206). He is never

seen again. Like Eisenheim, the final illusion involves the disappearance of the artist and, like Eschenburg, the eventual irrelevance of his craft.

“The Invention of Robert Herendeen” is a first-person account of imaginative artistry that allows the title character to manifest imagined beings with his mind. From the age of one, Herendeen recalls imagining “detailed houses with many-paned windows and precise fireplaces” (*Barnum* 185). Herendeen professes a creative urge without a formal outlet: “it’s cure depends on the discovery and mastery of a medium” (188).

Speaking in plain language, Millhauser again alludes to the very limits of his own form.

Herendeen states:

Instead of resorting to words, which merely obscured and distorted the crystalline clarity of my inner vision, I would employ the stuff of imagination itself. That is to say, I would mentally mold a being whose existence would be sustained by the detail and energy of my relentless dreaming.” (189)

Herendeen commits himself so fully to imagining this being that he spends two days and nights simply imagining her hands (189-90). The erosion of memory erodes his vision (Olivia) when, upon taking a break to contemplate some “inner landscape,” he returns in “alarm to find odd gaps and distortions in her,” as if without my sustained attention she tended toward dissolution” (190). Herendeen constructs a “wondrous dwelling” for Olivia of many rooms, “complete with towers and cross gables...an overgrown English garden containing meandering paths, dim pools and moldering statues” (193). The story is self-aware in its own way. Herendeen’s father, concerned about his son’s lack of ambition, interrupts his son’s imaginings by visiting the attic where Herendeen spends his time. Light his pipe, the father states, ‘I’m afraid what I have to say drearily predictable...Trite scene, the elderly father admonishing his wayward son.’ The

awareness with which the father addresses his son brings the focus of Herendeen's outer world into question. Herendeen starts to suffer horrible headaches, but reasons that "such are the headaches that must be distinguished from those others, for these are creations dark sisters, shadows of the brilliant dream" (198). The place of delight and creation becomes a place of labor, pain and imprisonment (202). Orville, an imagined villain, appears in Herendeen's carefully crafted world. In one scene where Herendeen arrives to visit Olivia, Orville is there instead, lighting his pipe in a manner that mirrors his father (203). Orville, in moment of self-narration states: "A pause as the villain of this piece strikes a match. In the sudden spurt of the hellish match-flam his pale satanic features—which reminds me, Robert, that line of yours is awful...But then, Robert, how does that line go? I forget...Oh, I have it. We are such stuff as and nonsense as dreams are made of" (203-4). This misremembering of the exact line fits the precise pattern of memory, which erodes and changes the remembrance of things. In another allusion to Lewis Carroll, Herendeen swipes his hand at Orville, crying "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (205). Orville retorts: "Very nice, Robert. Very nicely done. A nice effect" (205). The construction of Herendeen's imagination has become a place of torment and imprisonment for him and here before him stands the minotaur, Orville, threatens his very existence with riddles.

Following his encounter with Orville, Herendeen journeys back into his imaginary world to search for Olivia. His journey is that of the maze-walker:

As I proceeded along the almost dark corridor, past closed doors, the black gleam of a mirror...I realized I only had a vague sense of this part of the house, which seemed to extend back and back. Here other hallways began to branch left and right...and as I continued I felt that I was penetrating deeper and deeper into a region where rooms and corridors sprouted in lush, extravagant dark... Short flights of stair began at my left and my

right. I chose a flight and made my way along a hall that was intersected by another hall, and it seemed to me that I was going to spend the rest of my life wandering the prolific hallways of that always branching house (208).

Herendeen, like Daedalus, is confused and bewildered by the turnings of his own creation. He does find the 'center', however, when he finds Olivia studying herself in a mirror (210). As in Foucault, we find the mirror at the center of the labyrinth. Olivia acknowledges his presence before transforming into a sort of inanimate object. Orville runs in and lays Olivia "against the reading chair like an old lamp. And indeed she had begun to resemble an old standing lamp" (212). Oliver removes the mirror, saying "We won't be needing this anymore" (212). Indeed, the reflective surface won't be necessary anymore as the world around Herendeen begins to crumble, the walls of plaster falling as he escapes through branching corridors (214). The story ends with Herendeen reflecting: "it seemed to me that if only I could remain calm remain calm remain calm then I might be able to imagine what would happen next" (214). The artist, the creator of this world, is consumed by it and vanishes with it. The irreality of the imaginary world, the crumbling walls of plaster around him, mirrors the instability of the fiction as the form is pushed to its limit before finally falling apart.

This story could largely be read as a retelling of Jorge Luis Borges' "The Circular Ruins" in which an obscure man is guided by a supernatural purpose "He wanted to dream a man: he wanted to dream him with minute integrity and insert him into reality" (*Labyrinths* 46). Near the end of his meditations, the obscure man—the "magician"—is ready to meet his death, but a strange thing happens:

He walked into the shred of flame. But they did not bite into his flesh, they caressed him and engulfed him without heat or combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another. (*Labyrinths*, 50)

The dreamer thinks himself Daedalus, but turns out to be the Minotaur. So, too, is the author/genius situated within the labyrinth of history. He or she cannot escape having somehow been engendered by those who came before them. Thus, Herendeen, in the final lines, finds himself crumbling along with the world he created—no less a dream than Oliver, Olivia. You. I. Millhauser.

The trajectory of “Herendeen” should be a familiar one, as it is the same trajectory of many stories by Millhauser. Imitative and detailed precision evolves into the expression of inner realms, dreams and chaos. As external and inner visions are subsequently expressed, an imagined pinnacle is all-the-while pursued, but never realized. The limits of form are tested and none prove enough to reach the pinnacle that artist and audience crave. It is, however, not the acme which Millhauser is most concerned with, but the struggle to reach it. The process of creation, formal experimentation, expression and interpretation are the primary concerns for Millhauser in these stories. Moreover, the realities of desire and memory are of concern as they are in his enigma and architecture stories. Indeed, the collective memory fades as history forgets many of Millhauser’s artists. What remains are mere fragments, changing even as they are re-examined: “For we are imagined carelessly and in patches, you and I, we’re ghosts and phantoms all, fading away and reappearing at the whim of amateur imaginers” (192).

Millhauser’s distant and pluralistic writing provokes inner-contradiction and a multiplicity of interpretation so much that he is assessed as both a modernist and post-modernist by scholars. As I have argued, Millhauser is most decidedly *not* a modernist. He is, however, not purely a post-modernist either. His fiction, in the same vein, defies



clean categorization as it exhibits both careful images of realism and inner visions of the fantastic. And it is through his fiction that Millhauser proposes the truth—the real—lies somewhere in-between categories, or in many, or in none. The truth, perhaps, is something of a sprawling web work which can never be wholly observed, but only endlessly traversed. As an emerging order begins to reveal itself, that too will be called into question by these things called humans who are as complex as the structures they inhabit, elusive as the center they seek.

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