Afterword

The concluding chapter demands a separation and systematic laying out of thought precipitates from the more extensive, sometimes vagrant flow. If one thus intends to 'essentialize,' the key notes of the study would be the idea of 'time' as an attempt to conceptualize and represent "something felt about the nature of reality" (Tambling 88), and how the postmodern, poststructuralist "absence of meaning opens a rift in time" (Michael de Certeau, qtd. in Newman, Centuries' Ends 1).

In the kind of "limit-text" extolled by postmodern theory, the 'signifier' is no longer in union with the 'signified,' freed "from its enthrallment to representation" (Maltby 5). Maltby here refers to Barthes' idea of the text which, "bringing itself to the limits of speech [. . .] undoes nomination," which "brings to a crisis [the reader's] relation with language" (qtd.in Maltby 5). Barthes in S/Z dwells on the characteristics of a 'plural text' with "a galaxy of signifiers," 'infinite' and 'indeterminable' (5-6). The reader however becomes almost a figure caught unawares with his limited reading strategies, for, as McHale suggests in the case of GR, "the habits that would enable us to read [such] texts [. . .] adequately are still scarcely conceivable" (CP 112).
In our engagement with postmodern fiction we have constantly been reminding ourselves of our paradoxical imposition of meaning and coherence onto the unwieldy shapes of postmodernism. In that sense we are "meta readers" (McHale, CP 113) and our interpretation a recognition of "frames." The self-reflexive narratives of postmodernism make the reader exposed to their own 'boundaries' or "conditions of meaning," where the reader himself is implicated in the "formation of these conditions" (O'Donnell xi). The way the thesis generates interpretive categories for postmodern fiction can itself be considered a 'framing activity,' or "a framing of our desire for texts to mean something" (O'Donnell xxiv).

The texts analyzed are considered as attempts to break the 'frames' or limiting conditions/conventions of language and time. We have seen how they 'tend to' reach the dimensions of a labyrinthine narrative as related in "The Garden of Forking Paths." Borges' narrative conceives of "diverse futures" and proliferating 'times' by a simultaneous representation of all available alternatives. O'Donnell points out how Borges' conception, in its elimination of frames and temporality, creates a "hermeneutic fantasy" or impossibility of the reader following the narrative proliferations that fork in all directions at once (xxv). It is almost like confronting an 'all-inclusive' 'plural text' (Barthes 5). These forking paths, despite the proclamations of simultaneity, can be manifest only in succession—"a narrative, by its
very nature incapable of representing simultaneity except by sequence" (McHale, CP 76). This is how O’Donnell suggests the delimiting of the possibilities of narrative and interpretation:

[. . .] even with fictions that attempt to create the illusion of interpretive infinity, everything happening at once, endless plots, interconnections, and possibilities—the limits we have been discussing as origin, frame, and temporality keep appearing, if only as shadows or secrets. [. . .] to interpret is to recognize and repeat these limits [. . .] in the language of the critic. (xxvi-xxvii)

Our reading of these texts is an encounter with the limits of language—a preoccupation as well with the texts we have discussed—and how postmodern narratives in their experimental transgression of conventions are themselves determined by these limits. There are instances of ‘anti-language’ (MC Hale, PF 168) in several of the stories in PD, as with the ‘non language’ of the Lewis Carroll poem “Jabberwocky” in Through the Looking Glass. But such languages seem to be parenthetically realized in PD, almost ‘unwilling participants’ in the game. The ‘antilanguage’ here works as only dispersed signs of resistance against the repressive official language, however it might succeed in effecting ruptures in the limiting conventions of language and narrative. What one cannot deny is the
postmodern desperation and insistence to 'word' the experience of entrapment in language (Maltby 41).

It is on such shifting grounds, "between the determinate and the indeterminate" (O'Donnell 158) of representation and reading that we locate our 'temporal poetics' of postmodern fiction. The term alludes to McHale's category of "descriptive poetics" which constructs "the repertory of motifs and devices, and the system of relations and differences, shared by a particular class of texts" (PF xi). The thesis constructs narrative parallels and intersections from its analysis of the three texts, which can be discussed in terms of discontinuity and 'simultaneity' of narrative fragments; coexisting worlds or 'times' and ontological turmoil; metafictional musing on time and narrative; implications for history as narrative, and as ideological construct. In that sense the study identifies 'time' as the constituent element in novel which takes one closer to a "tenable poetics of the genre," as suggested in Towards a Poetics of Fiction: "[. . .] every test of the novel is a temporal test. [. . .] the writers who strain the genre strain it by flouting a temporal norm." (Hutchens 52).

Both SF and GR have characteristically disjointed narrative fragments, which cannot be threaded along simple linear, causal chains. Vonnegut himself considers his fiction as "mosaics made up of a whole bunch of tiny little chips" (Wampeters 258) or as "a clump of symbols" to be read "all at once" (SF 64). Pynchon's mosaic
is in that sense more varied and entangled, hence characterized as "cosmic web" (Heise 174), or "fictional labyrinth" (Seed). Many of the short fiction in PD are in segments, some with numbered divisions, which do not provide any logical tying into a single story, but contradictory alterations of the same happening, all existing 'simultaneously.' The "telegraphic schizophrenic narrative" of SF, and GR, especially in its last section ("The Counterforce") of rapidly shifting episodes, are structured like "cinema montages," where two film pieces in juxtaposition combine into new concepts and associations (Cowart 58). We read these narratives, "deconditioned" (McHale, CP 81) of our conventional reading expectations for coherence. In our "progressive knotting into" (GR 3) 'ever-becoming' associations and interconnections, we attribute to narrative form the qualities of being 'spatial' or 'collage-like' or 'cinematic.'

Film becomes a significant structural parallel to such narratives with a succession of frames or stills. The sprocketed separations (□ □ □ □ □ □) between the narrative segments in our edition (Vintage, 1995) of GR suggest "the rapid flashing of successive stills" (GR 407) in film. SF and GR have instances of 'time reversal' derived from film's potential reversal of processes in its capacity to be 'run backwards' (McHale, CP 111). GR negotiates a reversal of 'history' when ships move in reverse in the Puritan voyage; SF's television movie run backwards gives an experience of the instruments of war
getting disintegrated into raw materials. This reworking of the “Great Irreversible” (GR 745) arrow of time becomes a significant way out of the conventions of linear narrative, and the unbearable ‘facts’ of existence.

Time gets realized in such narratives as ever-'present' moments to be seen ‘all at one time,’ and as with the novel of Tralfamadore, “there is no beginning, no middle, no end, [. . .] no causes, no effects” (SF 64). The fragmented narratives we study therefore tend to appropriate the “ongoing present” of a movie (Klinkowitz, Reforming the Novel 54). They also tend towards the kind of spatial relationships—"reflexive relationships among the units of meaning" (Frank, Spatial Form in Narratives 65)—that substitute temporal progression in Frank's conception of “spatial form.” These ‘temporal schisms’ also bring in the concept of “schizophrenia” which links postmodern narratives with the cultural experience of time (Jameson 25; Currie 102). All the texts we study exhibit ‘chrono-schizms.’

These narratives again manipulate their ‘times’ with a penetration of boundaries between different worlds (ontological levels). Vonnegut’s strategy of the ‘real world’ author ‘frame-breaking’ into the ‘fictional’ world, failing the reader to fix the ontological level of the text, can be called as “through the looking glass” into another universe. Vonnegut’s intertextual persona Kilgore Trout calls mirrors “leaks”: “It amused him to pretend that mirrors were holes between
two universes" (*Breakfast of Champions* 24). This ‘making of holes’ in
the ‘frames’ usually held impenetrable happens in Billy’s ‘time travel’
to another planet through the ‘fourth dimension’ of time. Such
‘displacement in space’ and ‘displacement in time’ (McHale, *PF* 60)
give *SF* typical science fiction characteristics, what McHale calls, “the
ontological genre par excellence” (*PF* 16).

Parallel worlds entail “parallel times” as posited by Borges’
“forking –paths” narrative, which can be considered paradigmatic in
our analysis of “self-erasing narratives” (Waugh 138) of the kind in
*PD*, where “bifurcating mutually-exclusive possibilities are jointly
realized, juxtaposed” (McHale, *PF* 107). This coexistence of contraries
or multiple times is ontologically unsettling in that it violates the
“law of excluded middles” that outlaws such ‘in-between modes of
existence’ (McHale, *PF* 106). *GR* proliferates in such ‘excluded middles’
or ‘possibilities’: for instance, in its construction of a ‘plural space’ of
the Zone; its blurring of distinction between ‘real’ and ‘illusory’; its
films ‘sowing seeds of reality’ (*GR* 388); and its ‘séances’ where past
and present, this-world and the ‘other’ world seem to coexist.

The study at this point gains some significant insights into the
politics of postmodern narrative time, in terms of the postmodern
novel’s rebellion against two major laws of philosophical logic:

The first is the law of non-contradiction which says that
an argument is flawed if it contradicts itself. The second
is the law of cause and effect which organizes not only philosophical argument but the events of a novel, the relation of the novel to criticism, the relation between modernism and postmodernism, or personal and historical experience in general, as a linear sequence. (Currie 64)

The texts we read give narrative specimens of contradictory possibilities existing simultaneously, and seek non-linear, 'acausal' modes of narrative.

These texts also pose self-reflexive resistance to the realist conventions of story telling like linear time and causality. SF as a reworking of the novel form proclaims its experiments in 'narrativizing' — the text unfolds as a 'process' of Vonnegut's coming to terms with his Dresden experience, in which he goes through many tellings, some abortive and conventional, with "beginning, middle, and end" (SF 4). The novel's structural resistance to realist narrative and time gets thematically augmented in the Tralfamadorian vision of narrative, and fantastically realized in Billy's time-travels. Coover's stories in PD also announce themselves to be experiments in the exhausted narrative form, projecting parodic reworking, plays with language, and the "forking-paths" narratives. There are instances of the 'teller' imprinting himself as the 'maker' of the world ("The Magic Poker"), the narrative negotiating categories of existence like time ("The
Elevator”) and ironic invocation of reading conventions like causality (“Klee Dead”).

In *GR* also there is the authorial voice nudging the reader to hint at his expectation for cause and effect (663). Pynchon’s world holds many alternatives to simple causal reasoning, with ‘probabilistic,’ representational, and socio-political ‘other’-readings posited against the cause-effect determinism of some of its characters. *GR* in fact becomes a representational model of resistance it envisions with its severally worded critiques of “rational arrangements and Western meaning systems” (Maltby 160). What is implicit is the narrative’s preoccupation with language as an ideological repository, and how it ‘constructs’ history.

*SF* and *GR* are occupied with history not only for their context of war and global politics, but more pertinently for their realization of the inadequacy of conventional historical retelling. Any rethinking in terms of the temporal foundations of narrative has as much to do with history as fiction, for both as narratives rely on selection and sequence to impart process and telos in renderings. Both *SF* and *GR* can be qualified as ‘historiographic metafiction’ (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 117) or ‘theoretical fiction’ in the sense that they give fictional form to the poststructuralist notions of historical narrative (Currie 65). We can identify their functions of foregrounding the subjectivity and ideology of conventional historical telling, their experiments with form
leading to 'apocryphal' or 'alternative' history (McHale, PF 90). Vonnegut has been identified as deriving his popularity from the need of many readers for "a novelist who could write away history while seeming to write about it" (Alter 26). *GR* strikes one with its impulse to 'dehistoricize' history, with "the proliferation of historical and pseudohistorical detail," and the confusion of levels of ontology, which undermines any "truly historical grasp of events" (Alter 29). Even the stories in *PD*, in their highlighting of the "role of narrativity in shaping" the story can be claimed to exhibit a certain "historiographic self-consciousness" (Currie 68).

All these interpretive categories we have identified in fact betray the "end-directedness" (Munslow 211) or teleology of the analysis, in which the 'end' directs the cause/course of the study. It is also a sign of how much our ways are linear and "temporally directional" (Munslow 213). It is our pre-formed ideas on postmodern time and fictional form that determine the methods and assumptions of our analysis. In the impulse to homogenize the heterogeneous narratives of postmodernism our study constitutes a "structure of exclusion" (Currie 79).

For a smack of things we have been excluding from the study, one might refer to this statement of contemporary American fiction as an inconclusive intertextual world:
[...]

the certainty about American fiction as a definite body of texts—a fixed and decidable set of books—has all but vanished. American fiction [...] is now widely conceived to be an intertext in several senses, an a-literate, surfictional cyborg [...] of multimedia events and influences—a monstrosity of partial and potential significations. Thus, like intertextuality itself, this collection 'coheres' only through the co-presence of constituent differences. (O'Donnell and Davis x)

O'Donnell again in his introductory section on contemporary fiction in The Columbia History of the American Novel comments significantly on the "rhizomic" development of American novel in the postmodern period. The term is used in the sense of French philosophers Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's conception of "the 'rhizome' as a weedy growth, like crabgrass, with multiple crossings and branchings, growing everywhere" (Elliot 513). Emphasizing the impossibility of a comprehensive history of such an open-ended and dynamic period—"a mosaic in process, unfinished, with indefinite frame and border"—he says, "In fact, it is this very openness, this sense of 'presentness,' that forms one of the most attractive features of the contemporary American novel that challenges the 'the,' the 'contemporary,' the 'American,' and the 'novel' as the defining limits of its exfoliations" (514). The study has to admit its confinement to
three texts, conveniently excluding a 'boundless' domain of intertextual influence. The title of the thesis itself in its generalization of 'time in postmodern American fiction' can be alleged to be non-specific and extravagant.

Time calls for a 'concluding consolation' in this elegiac self-reflection. Our date with 'time,' narrative and postmodernism does not break or stop at the end of a sentence or the thesis. 'Endings,' as with the deconstructionists, "both 'ravel' and 'unravel' the text, with interpretation a constant and constantly self-canceling act" (Torgovnick 4). The text we have conceived, any text, is "always in process," 'ever-becoming,' not only involving "the continual play of referentiality between and within texts" (O'Donnell and Davis x) but also our own historical and cultural reconditioning as ever-evolving readers. Though limited by this 'time-bound' and methodical volume, we do not bring to an 'end' our drive to transgress the 'moment' to its 'possibilities.' The impulse is to keep oneself open, like Tchitcherine in GR:

[. . .] a giant super molecule with so many open bonds available at any given time, and in the drift of things . . . in the dance of things [. . .] others latch on, and the pharmacology of the Tchitcherine thus modified, its onwardly revealed side-effects, can't necessarily be calculated ahead of time. (346)