The Strife Between Presence and Reading

Heidegger on Tools and Technology in Steve Tomsula's *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how to read the American experimental novel *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, a collaboration between Steve Tomasula and graphic designer Stephen Farrell. *VAS* demonstrates how twenty-first-century tools and technology can construct a narrative that resembles the human experience shaped by contemporary tools and technology. *VAS* includes not only a conventional story line but also narrative elements outside the story line, such as collage material and a multimodality, all of which contribute to the novel's emerging, posthuman narrative. The reading experience of the conventional novel is immersive; experiments with the novel disrupt the immersion of reading, and this disruption produces a presence: the reader becomes conscious of reading, of narrative structure, of the broken conventions, and even of the novel itself. Martin Heidegger's analyses of tools and technology can elucidate how novels produce presence by breaking conventions, for conventions are like tools, and broken tools, such as a broken hammer, become present to the user that was a moment ago immersed in their use. The reading of *VAS* that results is two-fold: (1) a stylistic comparison of *VAS* and *This Is Not a Novel* by David Markson, two experimental novels that differ in the technology used and represented and, ultimately, the presence made, and (2) a reading of *VAS* that considers how the novel makes present its narrative dimensions, out of which emerges the novel's narrative.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: TECHNOLOGICAL THINKING

The novel is a *work of art.* Art may or may not have a purpose, such as a building or computer, but it is a work; the novel takes work to make and work to read. When we consider the novel as a work or as work, we must consider the tools that make it: the tools the author uses to make the novel and the tools the reader uses to read the novel. I investigate the tools of the conventional novel to better grasp how to read the experimental novel *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* by Steve Tomasula and designer Stephen Farrell (2002).

VAS's publisher describes the novel as "a hybrid image-text novel," "combin[ing] a variety of voices, from journalism and libretto to poem and comic book . . . the meaning of the narrative emerges from their juxtapositions, harmonies, or discords" (The University of Chicago, n.d.). Experimental novels, such as *VAS*, rely on the reader to make sense of the novel as part of the way it makes meaning; for example, appropriated elements of a collage have an original context and collage context, and the reader brings the original context to the collage context to add to the meaning in the collage, to make it coherent. On the other hand, conventional novels will provide a linear sequence of events and unbroken sentences that cohere the meaning of the novel for the reader. So since *VAS* is a hybrid-image text that uses juxtaposition of images and writing to contribute to narrative meaning, the first dimension to consider is the cohesive conventional story line of *VAS,* a story line that is but a single juxtaposed element. Tomasula's website describes the story line as "a story of Square's decision to undergo an operation that will leave him sterile for the good of his wife, Circle, for the good of their daughter, Oval, and for the

good of society"; it is "the story of finding one's identity within the double-helix of language and lineage." Tomasula borrows the names from an 1884 novella *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin Abbott. While the main character in *Flatland* is a two-dimensional square living in two-dimensional space, *VAS*'s Square, Circle, and Oval are three-dimensional humans living in a suburb called Flatland. *Flatland*'s Square undergoes a crises when he is introduced to other spatial dimensions. On the other hand, *VAS*'s Square endures a crisis of his impending vasectomy, a crisis that makes Square's body present to him and which he contemplates in relation to language and lineage. However, the story line is but one dimension to the narrative of *VAS*.

Every novel starts with an opinion about what the novel can do. The conventional novel represents the world through a lens that the reader expects, such as plot, setting, characters, and action. A typical novel puts the human at the center, the point of view and voices connected to characters and a narrator. The reader reads the conventional novel largely immersed, absorbed in reading its writing, and only incidentally or briefly interrupted, such as by a typographic or grammatical error, a narrative intrusion (e.g., "Dear reader" or some other unexpected and abnormal direct address from the narrator), or a distraction from the readers environment that disrupts the reader, requiring the reader to become immersed again. Whether or not intended, all these disruptions in the reader reading affect the trance of reading, reminding the reader about what they're doing. These expectations about what the novel *can* and *should* do have been molded by culture. Experiments with the novel have always challenged these expectations, making the novel in an unconventional way that expands what the novel can say.

VAS uses tools of the contemporary moment to make a novel about the contemporary moment. When *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* was published in 2002, Steve Tomasula and designer Stephen Farrell represented a partnership in a new school of writing. In a review of *VAS* in a graphic design magazine, Poyner (2003) writes that the graphic design field had theorized a writing ushered in by new, innovative digital tools that would emphasize the equality between writer and designer, where the development of both verbal and nonverbal aspects of a text were both prominent to narrative meaning. *VAS* may have a conventional narrative, but it also uses multifarious typography; images and tabulated data; black, gray, and red font and smears, which look like blood; unconventional page layouts and positionality of text on the page; and other graphic elements that conventional publishing tools could not render. Tomasula, who was the instigator and director of *VAS*, acknowledges that the contemporary novel should reflect a world of increasing technological sophistication and specialization; the collaboration between writer and graphic designer reflected this. When Tomasula described the making of *VAS*, he "never really thought [he] was writing a hybrid novel . . . this was a way to write that seemed natural, given the times we live in . . . this just seemed like plain old realism" (Personal correspondence in Gibbons 2012, 87).

VAS straddles two genres of the experimental novel: collage literature and multimodality. In his survey of contemporary American collage literature, Drąg (2019, 2) includes *VAS* with other texts that fall into his strict formal collage parameters: "extensive appropriation, fragmentation, heterogeneity of material, multimodality, and reliance on juxtaposition" (Drag 2019, 2). *VAS* often juxtaposes contrasting images for the reader to make sense of; for example, a verso page includes the appropriated image of

a skull and a craniometer, a tool to measure the skull, and the recto page is of a scantron (Tomasula and Farrell 2002, 36–37). The juxtaposition of both appropriated fragments represents the past and present methods of how society measures intelligence.

Despite *VAS*'s obvious collage aspects, scholars often do a reading of *VAS* that does not refer to how the novels uses collage, instead focusing its multimodality. A mode, or modality, is "a socio-culturally specific semiotic source used in meaning making such as images, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech moving image, and so on" (Gibbons and Whiteley 2018, 249). Multimodality is part of everyday reality. Consider the visual and auditory modes in an everyday conversation, such as gestures and speech, that contribute to the conveyance of meaning. Typography, layout, and writing conventions of a conventional novel do contribute to the meaning of the novel, similar to a conversation's gestures and speech, the all caps and sans serif typeface of a stop sign, or the flowery script of a wedding invitation; however, while modalities, such as gesture, speech, typography, and writing often establish socio-cultural context, thereby contributing to the meaning of the message, "analysts generally reserve the term 'multimodality' for texts that *more noticeably* use multiple modes" (Gibbons and Whiteley 2018, 250) (emphasis mine). Multimodal art proliferates around technological turns, "tak[ing] on new strength in periods of significant communicative and technological development" (Gibbon 2012, 3), where the new tools and technology to make novels allow artists to represent how the new technology has shaped and will shape humans. The salience that multimodal novels produce is a way *VAS* holds up to the reader how contemporary technology shapes the human experience of reality and will shape our future.

VAS was published twenty years ago, so we have a general knowledge about the extent the technology that the novel holds up to the reader has shaped society. *VAS* includes webpages; images of plastic surgery advertisements and medical documentation; genetic sequences and isolated DNA base pairs (ATCG); Punnet squares; and advertisements for gene editing. In 2022, we know how substantial the computer, in the form of social media and work, has shaped society; genetic sequencing is a consumer commodity with companies such as 23andMe; and as plastic surgery and other body modifications improve, more and more people undergo it. According to a recent *New York Times* article, an interviewed plastic surgeon said, "I have never done so many face-lifts in a summer as I've done this year. . . . Pretty much every face-lift patient that comes in says: 'I've been doing these Zoom calls and I don't know what happened but I look terrible" (Ritchel 2020, updated August 25, 2021). This is an interesting intersection between technology and the human body, where technology holds up the human body to the human, causing panic that motivates surgery. At this moment time, modern technology dominates everyday life, often motivating us to modify our bodies, and people are deciding to do it with increasing comfort.

VAS predicts a posthuman future where technology advances so far as to become further entrenched in human thinking, ultimately, modifying our sense of humanity. Squares daughter knows only a posthuman world, where modifying the genes, from which the body emerges, is common: "Composing a body as if it were a crossword puzzle was natural for Oval" (TF 2002, 179). In a posthuman world, the body is not something that gets in the way of everyday living. Undesirable genes could be removed, selecting the gene package for newborns, such as by

> knocking out genes for spina bifida, colon cancer, schizophrenia, dialing in the standard gene clip that everyone (who could afford it) received for concentration and memory, for facial symmetry for skin color. . . . Then there were the designer genes: genes from cod fish for increased tolerance to cold, genes from Gila monsters for increased tolerance to heat, and a thousand others." (178)

In Heideggerian terms, *VAS* holds up to the reader how the present *technological thinking* will result in a posthuman future that further severs the likeness between the historical human and the technologically-modified posthuman. Technological thinking for Heidegger is neither good nor bad, as long as humans remain rooted to human being; however, when technological thinking dominates humanity, "human beings . . . become a resource to be used—but more important, to be enhanced" (Dreyfus 2003, 306). Heidegger finds it problematic when humans are used by the technology they created, altered sufficiently to sever the sameness of being between the historical human body and the technologically-modified posthuman. Technology can be a suppressive force, but *VAS* conveys how the human can be either lost to technology or located within it.

In a sense, the larger aim of *VAS* is to make the human present to the reader, a presence that is lost in the immersion of reading the conventional, humanist novel. Experimental novels hold the reader to a state of presence, using presence to engage the reader in making narrative meaning. To make the human present to the reader, *VAS* makes the reader's body present in reading the novel. I use Heidegger's tool-analysis to examine how the experimental novel breaks the tools of the conventional novel, because the breaking is precisely how the experimental novel first makes the novel present to the reader.

CHAPTER 2

HEIDEGGER ON TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE NOVEL

Imagine the conscious experience of reading a conventional novel, how a reader situates themselves to read Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: The reader turns on the light, sits in their chair, opens the book, and begins reading it, front to back, top to bottom, left to right, turning the pages at a steady pace. While the light source, armchair, rug, bookshelf, four walls, and bird chirping are there, they are not present to the reader as they read. The reader doesn't grapple with how to read the novel, *they just do*. On the other hand, consider a reader of *VAS*, which "endeavors to disrupt the conventional reading pace, mostly through the diversity of media, bringing about constant shifts in the rhythms of apprehension of the book" (Tissut 2021, 18). The reader opens the front cover to the full title page, flips the page; then publication information and dedication, flips the page; a blank page and epigraph, flips the page; two blanks pages, flips the pages, another blank page, then on the first page of the novel, comic text in a comic book narrative rectangle that reads, "First pain," then flips the page; on the next page, narrow margins, text doesn't fill the page, ragged right, black 12-point type, with the first words a sentence fragment, "Then knowledge: a paper cut" (9–10). Bewilderment makes the reader pause, then flip back and forth. Likely, the reader initially assumes the first page serves a decorative purpose, but on second thought, they realize what they thought was decorative is essential to the discourse. Once the reader sees the connection between "First pain" and "Then knowledge: a paper cut," they are confronted with gray 10-point italic noun phrases surrounding the black 12-point regular type. The reader doesn't just read, *they scrutinize the novel as if it's broken*, often confronted with how to read a page, because

the reader could start anywhere, from the black 12-point writing to the gray noun phrases. From the flipping back and forth for the first two pages, the reader is notified of a presence that isn't there when reading *A Farewell to Arms*. In its experimentality, *VAS* breaks convention; it is the reader's concern over the breaking that is fundamentally significant to the presence of reading.

In his early career, Martin Heidegger wrote about tools (*Being and Time*) and later about technology (e.g., "The Question Concerning Technology"). In his writing on metaphysics, he developed an influential vocabulary, one in which presence is central. Heidegger's thought was largely concerned with being in the world and how thinking about the world produces a presence. Graham Harman (2002, 4), who has been influential in critiquing, elaborating, and expanding Heidegger's analysis of tools and technology, notes that despite Heidegger's prolific writing, his "obsessive genius repeats a single basic discovery for more than 17,000 pages," that discovery being, "there is strife between the *presence* of a thing and its *being*" (emphasis original). Experimental novelists share Heidegger's concern with how an entity calls attention to itself. Essential to the distinction between conventional and experimental novels is how presence is produced in the reader and for what purpose it calls attention to itself. When speaking of the presence of the novel, it is productive to consider the conventions of the novels as its tools or pieces of technology and the author and reader as user and manipulator of the tools or technology. In treating conventions as tools and technology, I will follow how Harman limits Heideggerian thought to the presence and being of a thing.

Heidegger's tool-analysis demonstrates how human experience constantly oscillates between the use of things and conscious presence of things. This everyday back

and forth between the presence and withdrawal from consciousness of objects is part of the human experience of the world; while this oscillation is largely unintentional, humans play a part in calling attention to something, holding the thing into focus, such as when philosophers ask, What is language? or literary scholars, What is a novel? However, when we scrutinize language or the novel, a crisis develops—a tension to answer the question. When humans use language or the novel (i.e., when speaking or reading), they are not questioning, they are not contemplating language or the novel. The readers of the conventional and the experimental novel are central to the characterization of the novel as conventional or experimental, because it is the readers interaction with the novel that indicates a disparate conscious experience: an experience of use, such as the trance of reading, and one of presence, the disruption of reading.

The Conventions of the Novel as Tools

Heidegger centers his early thought on tools, such as his famous hammer example. The hammer is encountered in two ways: (1) when the hammer is used for hammering and (2) when the hammer breaks, causing us to stare and consider the hammer that is no longer usable. While this is a simplistic description of the two hammer encounters, Heidegger first draws the distinction between action and observation, how in the former—using the hammer—the hammer withdraws from concern against the overall work of the task or project, such as building a bedframe, and how observing the broken hammer will bring the broken hammer into prominence, in which the hammer becomes present and activates a network, perhaps of tools in the toolbox that are not broken that can be used.

Although, while one does not find novelistic conventions in a toolbox, conventions are still used in order to do something, such as a hammer is used in order to hammer: “where something is put to use, our concern subordinates itself to the ‘in-order-to’ which is constitutive for the equipment we are employing at the time” (Heidegger 1962, 98). Heidegger’s analysis does not exclude other objects beyond carpentry tools or utensils, but includes the use of all objects, which can be used “in order to”: “neither Heidegger’s tool analysis nor his views on technology are limited to a narrow range of specific *kinds* of entities.” (Harman 2009, 17) (emphasis original). To follow Heidegger’s treatment of presence through tool analysis, we can begin by thinking of the conventions as a tool. The same as a tool, conventions have a function, such as “serviceability, helpfulness, useability, handiness” (Heidegger 2010, 68). When making a conventional novel, novelistic conventions structure and organize, guiding the author; similarly, when a reader is reading a conventional novel, the convents are used to guide the reader in reading. These conventions are as familiar to the author and the reader as a hammer to a carpenter.

In his tool analysis, Heidegger is concerned with “elucidate[ing] the kind of being of useful things” (Heidegger 2010, 68), or in other words, an ontology; useful things, such as tools, are called *equipment*. Equipment is always in relation to other equipment, comprising a totality of useful things. Similar to equipment we use, the tools of an experimental novel are in relation to the tools of the conventional novel, as well as to every object that gives rise to its being, which includes the author; the materiality of the novel, such as pages and ink or digitization; the circumstances of the novel’s making, both authorship and technology of its composition and publishing; and, in general, all

aspects of reality it encounters. According to Heidegger, we connect to the being of equipment through use: "The less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—equipment" (Heidegger 1962, 98). When I read a book, I am not aware of the table the book lays on, the carpeted-floor and light-blue walls of the room, the illumination from a light bulb and moonlight from the window; despite the conventions relation to all these things that provide a background to its use, only through reading—using conventions—do I engage with the novelistic conventions as equipment. However, when we stare at or isolate equipment, it becomes consciously present to us.

Heidegger refers to equipment as having modes of being, which he calls *ready-to-hand* and *present-at-hand*. Modes of being should not be considered as types of being; for example, in one instance, conventions can be ready-to-hand, and in another, the conventions can be present-at-hand. Readiness-to-hand is the being of the equipment itself, whereas equipment becomes present-at-hand as conscious phenomena. An object becomes present to our consciousness when we just stare at it, or otherwise bring it out from concealment and isolate it from its ready-to-hand relations: "The presence-at-hand of entities is thrust to the fore by the possible breaks in that referential totality" (Heidegger 1962, 107). Equipment that is functional is ready-to-hand, because functional equipment does not call attention to itself; rather it remains concealed in its system of relations to other invisible equipment. When a hammer breaks, it becomes present, because in that moment of staring at the broken hammer, it is no longer useable as equipment but "'stands in the way' of our concern" (Heidegger 1977, 103). When a novel

has a mistake, such as a layout or typographic error, it becomes present only in that it impedes our matter of concern, which is to read (i.e., follow the conventions). However, the break is not a clean separation between ready-to-hand and presence-at-hand; the breaking "bring[s] to the fore the characteristic of presence-at-hand in what is ready-to-hand. . . . the presence-at-hand which makes itself known is still bound up in the readiness-to-hand of equipment" (Heidegger 1977, 104). Because the present-at-hand mode of being arises from readiness-to-hand, Heidegger regards presence as both an obstruction and a revelation to that primordial connection between humans and being.

Graham Harman (2010, 20) notes a significant misunderstanding of ready-to-hand and present-at-hand, which he corrects when he writes, "presence-at-hand is *never* independent and readiness-to-hand *always* is, however paradoxical this may sound" (emphasis original). The paradox is how Heidegger couches present-at-hand entities as isolated and individual, whereas ready-to-hand entities belong to a system of references; however, this system of references refer to the collective being of equipment, not a relation derived from a network. On the other hand, present-at-hand entities activate a network of associations with other objects held in human consciousness, such as a broken hammer and other tools in the toolbox. This potential misunderstanding is important to my analysis, because experimental novels incorporate readers into the meaning-making process—in a sense establishing the reader as a co-author—by using presence to activate the network of relations required to make meaning (this point is developed in the next chapter), such as when the rule-governing conventions of the novel are broken; this requires the reader to think about how to read.

Conventional novels do not provoke presence, or the network of objects, in the reader to make meaning. Conventional novels aim to immerse the reader in a story, not call attention to their writing, materiality, or other modalities, such as typography and layout. Conventional novels are typically defined by their narrative prose, from beginning to end. Prose writing uses language to provide a fluid causal experience, where sentences are cohesive with other sentences—old information is followed by new information, the new information becomes old and is followed by new information—each phrase, clause, sentence, paragraph, section, and chapter follows a causal sequence syntactically cohering the conventional novel, so that it does not become present. When a novel breaks convention, whether it be in format, genre, or writing, such as for effect (e.g., narrative intrusion), the reader takes notice and is forced into wondering, Why the break? What does it mean? However, in the conventional novel, these disruptions in the reading process briefly emphasize the narrative situation and the reader can return to immersive reading.

However, the questioning is essential to how the experimental novel goes a step further, by engaging the reader through the questioning, then compounding the crisis of the questioning throughout the novel. For example, *VAS* follows typographic conventions of prose literature (10–12-point black serif typeface) for the narrative story throughout the novel. But, discourses disconnected from the conventional narrative—sometimes termed *voices* or *hypertext*— maintain typographic prominence through their multifarious typographic treatments, such as black bold sans serif noun phrases or gray italic serif predicates in 10-point font surrounding and integrated within the conventional prose story. Through unconventional and multifarious typography, *VAS* sustains the disruptive

force of its unconventional typographic distinctions. While the presence of crisis is momentary in a conventional novel, experimental novels sustain or repeat this crisis, never allowing the reader to rest, to get immersed into reading, for long if at all.

A central organizing principle of *VAS* is collage (i.e., juxtaposing appropriated ready-made material, such as illustrations or phases), as well as the metaphor of collage (e.g., the prevalent use of juxtaposition for designed and authored, not just appropriated, objects, such as illustrations and writing). Since its arrival in fine arts a century ago, collage has had uncanny endurance as an experimental form. I put forth that this is because collage is a powerful metaphor for the oscillation between readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand. A principle of collage in general is the fragmentation (breaking) and appropriation of discourse that is then placed into a new context. In literary collage, verbal elements, such as quotations from a speech, newspaper clippings, or a sentence from a scientific article, and nonverbal elements, such as images, coloring, and tabulated data, are frequently appropriated, making the reader encounter things as present-at-hand that they would normally encounter as ready-to-hand in their original context. The appropriated material is then juxtaposed, making a new network of relations for the reader to make meaning. Double reading is an essential part of reading collage literature, where "that of the fragment [is] perceived in relation to its text of origin" and "that of the same fragment [is] perceived as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality" (from the Group Mu [1978] manifesto in Brockelman 2001, 2). The connection between the original context and the collage context bears analogy to the human experience of the ready-to-hand to the present-at-hand. When a reader double reads, the original context of the appropriated fragment withdraws as the reader considers the collage context of the

appropriated fragment, and vice versa, until from the oscillation new meaning emerges, meaning that cannot be accounted for if the reader considers only the original context or only the new context. The conventional novel eschews this oscillation emblematic of the human experience of reality in order to immerse the reader in the novel at hand.

Technology in the Novel

There can be a confusion about how Heidegger writes abouts tools and technology. Tools and technology are synonymous; whether something is low- or high-tech, it is a tool. In his later treatment of technology, Heidegger develops his tool-analysis by looking at how modern machines and other advanced tools bear on the ready-to-hand and present-at-hand modes of being. Ready-to-hand is a mode of being that is concealed but revealed to us through present-at-hand: we think of the work, not the tools used to complete the work, so the being of the tool is concealed to consciousness but, nevertheless, part of the work. However, when writing about technology, Heidegger notes that modern technology often prevents connection to the ready-to-hand being of things, maintaining a presence in space and time that far exceeds that of low-tech tools. For example, how the billboard and other advertising tools, represented in *VAS*, are ubiquitous and vying for our constant attention. The billboard after billboard on the highway especially obfuscates the scenery behind it from the viewer, drawing in with its presence.

Heidegger's tool-analysis is useful for considering the novelistic conventions as instruments of human use. Both conventional novels and experimental novels use tools, but the reading experience of the former conceals the conventions of the novel, whereas

the latter makes them consciously present. While later Heidegger does not use the term present-at-hand, he uses a term synonymous with it: “Another word in Heidegger’s constellation of technology terms is *danger*, which turns out to be yet another synonym for a presence-at-hand that strips the world of all concealed mystery” (Harman 2010, 23). The danger of technology is a matter of extent and duration of presence. Low-tech equipment, such as a hammer or walking stick, imposes a limited presence in space and time; on the other hand, high-tech machinery, such as a hydroelectric dam, maintains its presence to the world over a large amount of space for a long time. The danger is how technology can inhibit the oscillation between ready-to-hand and presence-at-hand, severing the experienced relation between something present and its ready-to-hand mode of being. While technological thinking is unavoidable, thinking dominated by technology is dangerous to the oscillation between presence and being. When “nature reports itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remains orderable as a system of information” (Heidegger 1977, 23), technology dominates how we perceive and experience the world.

As Harman notes, even though Heidegger no longer uses the term *present-at-hand*, Heidegger asserts that technology turns everything into present-at-hand objects by “plac[ing] things before our view” (Harman 2010, 22). And technology does this through *enframing*, which “drives out every other possibility of revealing” (Heidegger 1977, 27). This is significant because he is claiming that technology can prevent the revealing of being, that is, the readiness-to-hand in the presence-at-hand. Enframing is how technology sections and, if the enframing lasts long enough in space and time, holds the world present:

> But the danger is the entrapping that is the way in which Being itself, in the mode of Enframing, pursues with oblivion the safekeeping belonging to Being. In the entrapping, what comes to presence is this, that Being dismisses and puts away its truth into oblivion in such a way that Being denies its own coming to presence. (Heidegger 1977, 43)

Consider Heidegger's example of the hydroelectric dam in the Rhine river. A hydroelectric dam—a substantial piece of modern technology imposed on the world—in the Rhine maintains the Rhine's presence through the technology that enframes the river. A kayaker on the river is impeded by the hydroelectric dam from the being of the river, from using the river as readiness-to-hand, which "dismisses and puts away its truth in oblivion." However, the kayaker can encounter the Rhine, such as the upper part of the Rhine, as oscillating ready-to-hand and present-at-hand, that is, only if the kayaker's drifting down the river doesn't become present by the limits and obstruction formed by the enframing of the dam.

Throughout history, every advance in technology stands as another layer that enframes human experience of the world. Drawing on the wall of a cave with a burnt stick enframes just as drawing in a sketchbook with a ballpoint pen; however, there is an obvious difference between the cave artist in a cave and modern artist in a house on a couch. The expansiveness and power of modern technology enframes experience in an entrapped state of danger. *VAS*'s use of color, typography, writing, images, webpages, graphic art, footnotes, page layout, genetic code, binary code, music notes, and so on is how the novel of holds up to the reader the modern technology that enframes human experience of the world.

We might also consider how the novel obscures the reality it intends to represent. Despite a conventional realists novel's attempt to better represent reality, the novel

cannot mimic the countless facets of perception that shapes how a person experiences it; for example, the phenomenal barrage of merely walking into a crowded room. While recognizing Heidegger's thinking on the dangers (i.e., presence) technology incurs, he is not against technology absolutely, but how overpowering its presence can be. When experimental novels, such as *VAS*, represent modern technology *and* make novels with modern technology, the technology allows the novel to say something about human experience, as well as contemporary human experience, that the conventional novel, with its conventional technology, fails to represent. When the experimental novel uses modern technology, it demonstrates how a novel can reveal being.

VAS is an example of a novel that uses twenty-first-century technology to make an experimental novel that considers modern human experience. *VAS*—using the innovative publishing tools of the time to produce a novel of a sophisticated blend of images, typography, colors, and textual arrangement, all of which are both appropriated or authored—not only reveals the conventions of the novel but requires the reader to refer outside the novel, bringing meaning to it from the reader's experience of reality, a reality enframed by modern technology. Unlike the conventional realist novel, *VAS* does not rely only on reflection, correspondence, or mimesis to produce the human experience of reality, but holds up modern technology to the reader, then coerces the reader to look outside the novel, confronting anew the technology that has become essential to how they think about the world and their body.

CHAPTER 3

STYLISTIC COMPARISON OF THE LOW-TECH *THIS IS NOT A NOVEL* BY DAVID MARKSON AND THE HIGH-TECH *VAS: AN OPERA IN FLATLAND*

In this chapter, I compare *VAS* with David Markson's *This Is Not a Novel*. Both novels are experimental and follow collage principles, but both diverge in their technological approaches to their respective novel's composition, which is a major point of deviation for *VAS* from *TINN*. We first might consider how "collage points to an artistic commons; anyone can do collage and, at one point or another, everyone has" (Foster 2022), a point that illuminates the mundaneness of collage, which is chiefly predicated on recontextualizing appropriated discourses, whether verbal or nonverbal. Despite both using collage principles and published a year apart in the early 2000s, Markson and Tomasula diverge in the tools and technology they used to make their novels, a divergence that shapes their novels and the meaning made. *VAS*'s technologically-driven multimodality allows it to go beyond simple collage. Technology shapes what and how the two novels foreground, juxtapose, and rely on reader coherence to make meaning. Specifically, a stylistic comparison will demonstrate how *TINN* and *VAS* use experimental tools, such as collage principles for *TINN* and multimodality for *VAS*, to say something about human experience that the conventions of the conventional novel stymie.

While Markson did not wish his four novels, *Reader's Block* (1996), *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004)¸ and *The Last Novel* (2007), be categorized together, scholars generally refer to the four novels as comprising a tetralogy: the novels maintain the same aesthetics and method of composition across the series, as well as

similar themes, such as death and sickness, calamities of artists, physicality of writing, solitude, and questioning the novel. Aesthetically, the novels are around 130 pages of discrete paragraphs, from one word to several sentences long, with a line space between each paragraph, half-inch justified margins, and the black, 12-point, serif typeface found in a conventional novel. From a publishing standpoint, the typesetting and layout of the four novels is conventional, and the reader reads top to bottom, left to right. However, Markson's creative methodology is almost unconventional by how low-tech it was. An often preferred variant to Markson's Tetralogy is *Notecard Quartet*, which implies the musical quality of his literary collage of juxtaposed anecdotes, quotations, and narrative voice, *but also* implies the technologically unsophisticated method Markson followed when composing *TINN*: that the paragraphs—located not online, such as through Google or other digital tools but books and his personal library—were originally written down on notecards, collected in shoe boxes, and ordered afterward into a manuscript. And it should be noted that Markson did not have a computer (Sims 2015, 44), ordering each paragraph on a typewriter all the way through *The Last Novel* in 2007. In a correspondence with Tyler Malone on 9/6/07, Markson wrote, on a notecard sent in the mail, "I'm just too old and too beat to do what you ask . . . I read less + less of everything new these days" (Markson 2015, 66). Presumably, Malone suggested something like: Markson should update his low-tech process that looks backward at bygone artists and apply his talents to more contemporary issues and art, which would involve engaging with different artistic media than found in his personal library. Markson's resistance to representing the human experience through contemporary technology is the antithesis of Tomasula's high-tech methodology and representation of humans.

Tomasula (2011, 5) writes about staging the new novel: “It is in this zone, from working alone to working with others to ‘stage’ the novel, that we begin to see what a novel can be at a time when the book is being transformed more than it ever has been since Johannes Gutenberg.” The novel emerges from the materiality of its medium, such as print or digital, shaping what can be conveyed about the human experience and, consequently, shaping the stories that can be told. Unlike Markson’s solo collage methodology, Tomasula demonstrates how collaboration and specialization is needed in order to use the new technologies of the twenty-first century, as well as future iterations of technological innovation. To be of the moment, the methodology an author employs needs to track with the tools and technology that shape not only the world but the humans that live there. While multimodality can be low-tech, *VAS* demonstrates how using contemporary technology can say something different about human experience of contemporary technology.

The genre of multimodal literature hinges on the term *noticeable*. A conventional novel may add images as decoration, but the images do not play a part in how a narrative is constructed; on the other hand, multimodal literature might have a character draw a picture and then that image is integrated into the narrative. *VAS* is quite sophisticated in its multimodality, such as unconventional layout and typography, images, tabulated data, colors, texture of pages, footenotes, using text to make images, such as the concrete textual image of a double-helix structure (TF 2002, 57). All these modes are novelistic tools that were either too expensive or not possible before publishing technology and collaborative effort allowed it.

As a multimodal novel, *VAS* consists of turn of the twenty-first-century technology: “multimodal documents . . . rely crucially, and in a way that verbal language does not, on *technology*—be it burnt stick on a cave wall or graphics workstation” (Batemen 2008, 12). While all novels are in a sense multimodal, theorist of the multimodal genre would not include the conventional novel or many experimental novels, such as *TINN*, that appear with conventional modes, modes that do not noticeably contribute to the narrative meaning. Accordingly, a stylistic approach to multimodal texts considers how they are developed and how modes encounter one another. Traditional tools were used to compose *TINN*, such as notecards and a typewriter; also, *TINN* is neither a multimodal text nor a collaboration. However, both *VAS* and *TINN* are experimental, but the technology they use and represent shapes what and how the two novels foreground, juxtapose, and rely on reader coherence to make meaning.

The Low-Tech *This Is Not a Novel*

Foregrounding

Foregrounding is when “the aesthetic exploitation of language takes the form of surprising a reader into a fresh awareness of, and sensitivity to, the linguistic medium which is normally taken for granted as an ‘automatized’ background of communication” (Leech and Short 2006, 28). *TINN* can be both immersive and disruptive to read. Negation in the title of the novel—*This Is Not a Novel*—is the first and perhaps most prominent instance of foregrounding in *TINN*. *TINN* looks like a novel to the reader: front cover, spine, back cover, and around 135 pages, depending on the reader’s copy. The front matter is conventional, including the half and full title pages, Also By page,

copyright, dedication, and epigraph. However, the beginning of the novel and the following pages makes the reader ask, Is this a novel? If not, why? What is a novel then? Foregrounding "may take the form of denying the normally expected clues of context and coherence" (Leech and Short 2006, 28). The negation in the title foregrounds the novel, both materially and immaterially: the former because the reader imagines what the conventional novel looks, the novels that they *know* are novels, and the latter because, once the first two single-line paragrahs of *TINN* are read—"Writer is pretty much tempted to quit writing" and "Writer is weary unto death of making up stories" (Markson 2016, 13)—the reader recognizes that this is not a conventional novel. Formally, having a space between every paragraph is unconventional but also is a writer referring to himself; also, if the writer is not going to write a story, what kind of novel is this? Negating foregrounds the thing it negates by having the reader imagine otherwise, and because the title encompasses the entire novel, the novel becomes entirely foregrounded.

The foregrounding of the title comes and goes, oscillating throughout reading *TINN*. The reader can be immersed in reading paragraph after paragraph, when suddenly the title hits them or a pattern emerges that the reader cannot ignore. Foregrounding may be qualitative or quantitative; for example, the foregrounding of an underlined word is qualitative; on the other hand, quantitative foregrounding can occur through repetition. By repeatedly using paragraphs that focus on an artist's death—on every page, in fact—*TINN* quantitatively foregrounds death:

Page 13[1]

Lord Byron died of rheumatic fever, or typhus, or uremia, or malaria.
Or was inadvertently murdered by his doctors, who had bled him incessantly.

Stephen Crane died of tuberculosis in 1900. Granted an ordinary modern lifespan, he would have lived well into WWII.

Bertolt Brecht died of a stroke. Terrified of being buried alive, he pleaded that a stiletto be driven through his heart once he was declared illegally dead. An attending physician did so.

Page 14

Nietzsche died after a sequence of strokes.

Verdi died of a stroke.

Page 15

Puccini died of throat cancer.

Page 16

Andrè Gide died of a disease of the lungs
Rereading the *Aeneid* on his deathbed.

Gustav Muller died of endocarditis.

From the first page, death becomes a present feature throughout the novel. And the fact that these are the deaths of artists, whose famous work lives on in the present, and the deaths of their creators almost never referenced, not only the artist and manner of death but also the famous works they are known for become foregrounded, become present.

Primarily, *TINN* foregrounds patterns through the repetition of paragraphs, which is how cohesive themes emerge, despite the lack of plot, characters, and setting.

[1] The following paragraphs sometimes have other paragraphs that are not about death appearing before and after them.

Foregrounding is a technique used by novels to make something salient to the reader. This salience is a presence produced in the consciousness of the reader. The presence that emerges from the novel can also be found in how it makes connections.

Juxtaposition

According to Leech and Short (2006: 234), juxtaposition is "the syntactic relations of words characteristically imitating relations between the objects and events which those words signify." Take for example the correlative conjunction *either . . . or*: A mother gives a choice, *You can have either the blue one or the red one*, and she holds up two pieces of candy in her hand. The candy is juxtaposed syntactically by *either . . . or* , but in reality, the candy is held side by side. In reality, *either . . . or* is present only in the language that gives context to the situation. If the mother just held up the pieces of candy, the child would probably know what she means, because of the familiar context of holding up candy for one to choose; however, if the child has not been in a situation like this, the child will not be prompted to make a choice but bewildered. At the very least, the child will recognize a confrontation represented by the nearness of the red candy and the blue candy. Collage juxtaposes objects—whether the objects be verbal or nonverbal—and it is up to the reader to supply the connection and meaning to the encounter between objects: coordination or disjunction, agreement or contradiction, and so on. In a sense, one could say collage literature more closely represents reality than conventionally written novels, because all objects are in some way juxtaposed before context and language makes explicit a syntactic relationship between them.

TINN does not use language to provide syntactic connection between its paragraphs. In *TINN*, there is the juxtaposition between two paragraphs set one after the other and juxtaposition between the original context of the paragraph and *TINN*'s collage context. Consider the juxtaposition of two paragraphs (137):

> Bertrand Russel, at seventy-six, survived an ocean plane crash in which a number of passengers were killed.
>
> I know death hath ten thousand several doors
> For men to take their exits
> —Says Webster.

Right away we see some association between the Russell anecdote and a quotation from *The Duchess of Malfi* by the English playwright John Webster (c. 1578–1626). In addition to the further foregrounding of death, the juxtaposition suggests that Webster's quotation is associated with Russell's anecdote. Russell has a near-death experience; the statement that "death hath ten thousand several doors" seems to connect to Russell's near death and foreshadow Russell's eventual death, a death for another time and place.

When the reader chooses a fragment to research, the reader foregrounds the fragment, and the fragment becomes present to the reader, rather than just reading it and moving on to the next paragraph. However, upon learning more about Russell's near death, the original context further informs the juxtaposition of the collage context. The fragment activates a network from which further meaning can be made. Russell lived to be 98 (1872–1970), so it is likely Markson came across this story in a newspaper article, magazine, or book. But prior to reading *TINN*, I came across the story through a BBC interview of an 87-year-old Russel (BBC 1959). When Russell states his love of tobacco, the interviewer asks, "Hasn't that shortened your life?" To which Russell responds,

> I took to it some seventy years ago, so it doesn't seem to have had a very great effect so far. In fact, you know, on one occasion it saved my life. I was in an airplane, and a man was getting a seat for me, and I said get me a seat in the smoking part: if I can't smoke, I should die. And sure enough, there was an accident, a bad accident, and all the people in the non-smoking part of the plane were drowned. And the people in the smoking part jumped into the Norwegian fjord where we landed and were saved, so that I owe my life to smoking.

Tobacco saved Russell's life here, despite it and other substances being the reason for many artists' deaths in *TINN*. Although, toward the bottom of the very same page in *TINN*, "Russell died at ninety-eight, of bronchial pneumonia" (137), a disease common among habitual users of tobacco. Without examining the original context of Russell's anecdote, the reader would not have made the ironic connection of his smoking related death, despite having evaded it ten years prior because of tobacco. Between the quotation from the *Duchess of Malfi* and Russell's death from bronchial pneumonia, the full story of tobacco saving Russell is a juxtaposition Markson all but certainly intended. However, meaning-making in an experimental novel is largely driven by the presence of a connection that appears implicit or unintentional, which is similar to how language results in (mis)communication.

Coherence

Coherence is the knowledge the reader brings to the novel. A reader knows that a building has doors, walls, and a roof, so the narrator does not need to describe how a character enters a building or why the building shelters a character from the rain. In a literary collage, coherence supports some orientation within the novel (e.g., how the Russell interview allowed a reading of the text that used outside information), but the meaning made is not strictly defined by the text. I find the juxtaposition of the above

paragraphs associated with Russell extra humorous precisely because of the knowledge of planes that I bring to the text. An airplane has many exits; in fact, every airplane door, aside from the cockpit and lavatory doors, is explicitly an exit, their location drilled into passengers by the pre-flight safety announcement. The joke, whether Markson intended it or not, seems to be that death may have ten thousand several doors for men to take their exits, but against the odds, because of Russell's tobacco use, he exited a door that does not belong to death. However, what saved him eventually killed him.

In experimental novels, the coherence of presence is used to make meaning. *TINN* doesn't lead me to the humor I find in the two paragraphs juxtaposed together. Between double reading, my knowledge of airplanes, and the word "exit" I develop a meaning from the text that is not mentioned, just vaguely gestured to if at all—but present to me, the reader. Meaning-making in experimental novels is supposed to be an unspecified generative process, which matches the undirected way meaning is generated in human language. While a reader may go outside the conventional novel for clarification that better helps them understand the narrative, going outside a collage novel to the original context of the appropriated fragment significantly contributes to making narrative meaning. Even though the paragraphs of *TINN* are of juxtaposed events that are connected in neither time nor space, they come together in the reader, who inhabits a single point in time and space. Created by foregrounding, juxtaposition, and coherence, meaning emerges due to the presence—therefore, the network of associations—these stylistic devices create.

The High-Tech *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*

Similar to *TINN*, *VAS* uses collage organizing principles. There are discourses cut from their original context and pasted into *VAS*'s collage context, where quotations, phrases, illustrations, tabulated data, and graphics are appropriated, ordered, and juxtaposed. However, the metaphor of collage is strong; for example, the conventional narrative that runs from the beginning to the end of *VAS* is a piece of the collage, despite it being authored. Also, the design elements, such as the typography or page layout, while not appropriated, serve a discursive purpose just as significant as the conventional narrative and other appropriated discourses. These authored elements are foregrounded, juxtaposed, and use reader coherence just as in *TINN*. While double reading is a component of reading *VAS*, the reader's coherence of the technology represented in *VAS*, of the everyday contemporary technological field, produces a different double experience than collage. The reader must consider how in *VAS* modern technology—such as a webpages, genetic sequencing, binary code, textbook illustrations—interacts with the narrative. The type of typography—e.g., color, size, typeface, position on the page—is just as, if not more, significant as the writing the typography characterizes. Multimodality is a more overpowering presence than its collage features or the discourses that belong to a given mode; multimodality is how *VAS* holds up to reader's their technological enframing and their dominate technological thinking. And it is *VAS*'s multimodality I will characterize using the same stylistic tools as with *TINN*: foregrounding, juxtaposition, and coherence.

Foregrounding

Almost every page in *VAS* is aesthetically different from the page before or after it. The exception being the 24-page DNA sequence of chromosome 12 of SHGC-110205, where each page is a steady string of justified, left aligned text, with conventional typesetting and layout (202–26). This conventionality for something unreadable is an instance of foregrounding in itself: the DNA sequence is a potential metaphor for the ease with which we will read DNA bases in a posthuman future. However, in general, the unique page after page disrupts a conventional reading strategy, producing a reading strategy according to foregrounding, what first attracts the reader's eye on a given page.

Consider, on page 58, how four single sentence paragraphs are in black, 12-point, serif type, surrounded by noun phrases that are either bold, 10-point, sans serif type; italic, 10-point, serif type; or regular, 10-point, serif type. All these clauses are staggered on the page in the shape of DNA's double helix structure. Four thin vertical gray lines go through the structure from the top of the page to the bottom; the lines frequently appear on the pages of the novel, seeming to represent both strings on an instrument and page margins that the text frequently touches or overruns. The writing on page 58 alternates between the left side and the right side of the lines, phrases beginning or ending within the vertical lines. On the next page, page 59, the reader is confronted by a page from an adolescent textbook. Scrawled across the top, as if written in black chalk, are the words "Science Rocks," and the *s* in "Rocks" does not entirely fit on the page. Set below the title is "EXPERIMENT No. 103 **RECESSIVE GENES**." The title and subtitle are followed by a Punnett square, which has what appears to be a black-and-white sketch of a cutting from a pea plant in each square, with red smudges coloring some pea plants. On both pages,

the varied typography, vertical lines, double helix shape, graphics, and color are all nonverbal elements that foreground one another in their distinction, as well as the writing they characterize.

Foregrounding in *VAS* is largely a product of design elements and positionality. The reader is required to approach every page with a different reading strategy. On page 58, the double helix structure is the foregrounded feature that appears to structure the other modalities, as if the concrete realization of text into a double helix is the grand modality. The reader cannot read *VAS* like a conventional novel or like other experimental novels of conventional design qualities, such as *TINN*—beginning a page at the top on the lefthand side and ending at the bottom on the righthand side of the page. On page 58, the reader could read conventionally, line by line to the bottom of the page, but meanings of the bolded sans serif type seem to cohere together; reading the clauses in a downward order of appearance—the regular, then bold, then regular, then bold, then italic, then regular—seems insufficient; rather, a better reading strategy might be to initially read like typeface with like, grasping their distinct meanings, then reading the other text to determine how it all interacts—but the point seems to be that there is no single strategy. In addition, on page 59, which appears to be a cut-and-pasted page from a children's science textbook, is read by the element that first catches the readers eye; for example, the red attracts the eye to the Punnett square, then to the large title in black chalk typeface, "Science Rocks."

However, the meanings conveyed by the writing must be considered against one another and together, as well as against the nonverbal elements, such as the DNA structure the writing composes or the strings that run through the writing, because there is

a thematic connection—of DNA and lineage—between pages 58 and 59 made by the DNA double helix and the Punnett square, a diagram that depicts genetic variation.

Juxtaposition

In a multimodal text, a significant amount of meaning-making is through the juxtaposition of different modes, called the transmodal construction of meaning. *VAS* juxtaposes modalities on every page, such as colors, writing, typography, page layout, images, sheet music, and genre-mixing, such as comic books, textbooks, and science fiction. Each mode is an object, organized like appropriated pieces of a collage. Objects collide on the page or across pages to make meaning. For example, on a verso page (176), U.S. patent no. 517384 "Methods for making transgenic mice" has a diagonal line drawn from it to points of the conventional narrative on the recto page (177), eventually ending when the line encounters an illustration of music notes. According to a classically trained violinist and violist I consulted, the notes represent a complex piece of music, played in an abnormal key and very fast, with multiple notes played at the same time; also, this piece likely must be played on a keyboard of some kind, such as a piano. Just as the notes resemble abnormal music, so too does the U.S. patent resemble abnormal biology based on designer genes. In this instance, the meaning arises from the juxtaposition of the U.S. patent of genetically-modified organisms and abnormally modified music notes.

Juxtaposing the body of the reader external to *VAS* and the novel itself emphasizes the interdimensional parallel between *VAS: An opera in Flatland* and Edwin Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), in which a two-dimensional

being, Square, is introduced to one-dimensional and three-dimensional beings. To bring the body of the reader into the narrative, *VAS* makes the reader's body present to the reader. For example, the red line connecting the patent to the music notes foregrounds the reader's gaze following the red line across the pages; also, since the music notes are vertically oriented on the page, the reader must turn their head or rotate the book to read them, further foregrounding how the body interacts with the physicality of the text. The body of the reader, music, and transgenic mice emerge from the text, making them present together and juxtaposed together.

The most prominent juxtaposition of *VAS* is between the book and the body of the reader. The front, spine, and back cover are flesh colored with faint blue veins and the title of the book is in blood red type. The entire novel can be seen as extending the common, everyday metaphors that People are Books (e.g., He *read* the poker player across the table; The next *chapter* of my life), or that Books are People (e.g., The *spine* of the book; The *body* or *life* of the book; A *living* document). Like language or discourse in general, the genetic sequence is a code that can be represented textually in a book. So when *VAS* draws attention to the body of the reader reading, it is juxtaposing the body with the text it represents, such as the 24-page DNA sequence that presents as the text of a conventional novel.

Coherence

The multimodality of *VAS* holds up to the reader how technology of the twenty-first century enframes, challenging how the reader relates to the world by forcing the reader to bring their coherence of the world to bear on the novel. Awareness of the present technological moment—for example, that technology is exponentially expanding

the consumer market of genetically modified living things, using tools that were not develop during the eugenic craze of the first half of the twentieth century—allows for the effective juxtaposition of eugenic ideas reemerging in the future, such as the how the craniometer established the extent and importance the recent past put on discriminating according to scientifically-established biological differences. When tools for genetic editing become more sophisticated, the past tells us that discrimination will likely emerge between the genetically-modified humans.

A future advertisement states, "At **$2.80** *per base*, OPERON'S **DNA makes** *anything* **POSSIBLE.**" (262). This is followed by two images, one of an "applorange" and the other a "zucchana" (a genetically-modified apple/orange and zucchini/banana). The typographic distinctions of the advertisement correspond to the typography that runs throughout the novel, demonstrating how typographic decisions by advertisers direct everyday human awareness, an awareness the reader brings to the novel. Also, dark, semicircle thumb tabs mark the edge many of the pages in *VAS*, such as a reader would find in a dictionary, encyclopedia, or other reference book. The page with the Operon advertisement has a thumb tab that reads "OPER." The reader brings their coherence of reference books to *VAS*, making meaning out of how unexpected these thumb tabs are in a work of fiction. Often these thumb tabs in *VAS* refer to the names of people, such as characters or authors of the appropriated epigraphs. When the book is closed and one looks along the long-side of the pages, the dark thumb tabs—which refer to people and corporations—reflect a DNA sequencing gradient.

Because of their unusual placement in a novel, thumb tabs are foregrounded, after which the reader's network of associations outside the novel bring coherence to the

thumb tab's position within it. Thumb tabs normally represent the letters of the alphabet for the alphabetically arranged entries of the book, such as a dictionary. So there is a coherence of searching that the tabs activate, where the user (1) has an entry in mind, (2) locates the corresponding thumb tab with their thumb, and (3) searches the page for the entry. However, in *VAS*, the reader first identifies the thumb tab, searches the page for the entry the thumb tab represent, then once the corresponding entry is found, the entry comes to mind. The thumb tabs in *VAS* mimic how we engage with references, putting our hands on the page, searching for correlation in order to *find* meaning.

CHAPTER 4

READING THE NARRATIVE DIMENSIONS OF *VAS*

With the metaphysical terms—particularly, presence and enframing—and the stylistic terms— foregrounding, juxtaposition, and coherence—detailed in chapters 2 and 3, I can now bring these stylistic tools to bear on how *VAS* uses presence and enframing to make-meaning.

VAS: An Opera in Flatland derives its title from *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, a story in which Square—who is a geometric, two-dimensional square shape and lives in a two-dimensional world called Flatland—experiences one-dimensional space (Lineland) and three-dimensional space (Spaceland). In *VAS*, Square is not a shape but has a human body and lives in a suburb called Flatland. Unlike *Flatland*'s Square, *VAS*'s Square is three dimensional, meaning he has knowledge of and can easily imagine one, two, and three dimensional space. Consider how the flatness of Square is juxtaposed with the three-dimensions of *VAS*'s Square. This juxtaposition introduces the reader to a central theme of the novel, that is, the flattening of the posthuman being. The flattening of the posthuman being is partly derived from two of the novel's explicit metaphors, that Books are People and that People are Books: books are three dimensional like people, and people are flat, like the pages of a book. The fleshy cover of the novel, blood-colored type and smears on the page, and DNA base pairs embedded in the writing explicitly serve the metaphors that Books are People and People are Books. In addition to these explicit metaphors, I argue for an implicit metaphor according to how the spatial dimensionality of *Flatland* maps onto *VAS*. The fundamental interdimensional aspects of

VAS do not emerge from plot points and character development, like in *Flatland*, but from how Tomasula structures the narrative.

In this chapter, I argue that Tomasula constructs a novel metaphor that is structured on and repurposes the spatial dimensionality of *Flatland*. The metaphor is Modes of Narrative Reading are Spatial Dimensions; how we read the narrative is structured on spatial dimensions. The metaphorical mapping of this grand metaphor answers the question, What are the dimensions of *VAS*?, explaining how the three spatial dimensions of Abbot's *Flatland*—Lineland, Flatland, and Spaceland—map onto the narrative dimensionality of *VAS*.

In aligning with the spatial features of each dimension, I have identified three dimensions that contribute to *VAS*'s narrative: (1) the first dimension corresponds to the traditional narrative—the story line—of Square's crisis, (2) the second dimension corresponds to the flat page, consisting of collage objects and modalities outside and extending beyond the story line, such as images, hypertext, colors, typography, quotations and design elements interacting to contribute to the posthuman narrative, and (3) the third dimension corresponds to the narrative contribution of the physicality of the book and reader's body, both three-dimensional objects. The reader connects how each dimension of *VAS* is juxtaposed against the other for *VAS*'s narrative meaning to emerge. Presence produced at each narrative dimension of *VAS* gives rise to the next dimension, ultimately every dimension contributing to *VAS*'s experimental narrative.

The First Dimension: The Story Line of Square's Crisis

According to Abbott's *Flatland*, the first dimension is length: a line with neither width nor height. In a dream, Square visits the king of Lineland, who is a line, with retainers in front of and behind him and nothing to the sides; also, the king of Lineland has no conception of "to the side." When Square calls out to the king from the side, the king is bewildered. When Square's body briefly enters Lineland—only a point of his two-dimensional body can be seen by the king—the rest of his body extends in two-dimensional space outside Lineland.

The first dimension is only of a line that connects two points. In *VAS*, we can imagine that one-dimensional space corresponds to the traditional narrative, or the *story line* of Square's personal crisis. Consider the line of the story line, a straight line we would draw to describe the structure of Square's story, the beginning is one point and the end the other. We can plot the beats of Square's story on a line, and title the line as Square's Crisis. The story has a third-person narrative, told from Square's point of view, and includes his wife, Circle; daughter, Oval; and mother-in-law, Mother. Square's crisis begins on the first page with the words "First pain" and extends to the last page, with a doctor, preparing for the vasectomy, casually chatting while Square is anxious about the imminent vasectomy.

The one dimensionality of a traditional storyline consists of its linear sequence of events, which are viewed through a single point of view at any given moment, such as the narrator or character of the story. The story line does not, cannot, acknowledge the

objects on the same page and beside it. In a sense, *VAS* makes the conventional story present by showing all the objects that contribute to its meaning but not shown in a conventional novel. In this way, the conventional story enframes human experience, suppressing the objects that contribute to meaning.

In the story, Squares body becomes foregrounded to the reader because it becomes foregrounded to Square. Square's crisis induces a heightened awareness of the part of his body that will be modified by the vasectomy: "Square examined his scrotum—wrinkled—another kind of body shock—compared to what it had been when he was a teenager, the last time he looked this intently. The hair had been so light then that it was almost invisible. Now, trying to find the spot where the incisions would be made, wiry tufts got in the way" (TF 2002*,* 49). In a sense, Square's body has been concealed to him—it has been ready-to-hand, used but not scrutinized—but now, Square has penetrated his body's concealment; it has become present as a thing Square analyzes.

Square represents a humanist individual that is subject to the pressures of a posthuman world. As a reader of *VAS*, Squares body becomes present to Square like the objects outside the story line become present to the reader, because the objects outside the story line include pieces of appropriated material and technology from culture, these objects that bear on the story line represent how culture can exert pressure on the human body. While it is not mentioned whether Square has undergone any genetic modifications himself, his reluctance to modify his own body implies that his body is an anachronism in this posthuman future. He has a connection to his old body—"He himself couldn't explain this irrational attachment to his old body" (TF 2002, 178)—the old human body of the previous tens of thousands of years, and this is abnormal in the current

sociocultural context of Flatland, where people modify their body with ease. Square fears a vasectomy, which has been a familiar procedure throughout most of the twentieth century. He is straddling a humanist culture, where culture emerges from the body, and a posthuman culture, where the body emerges from a culture that shapes it.

With the very first pages, *VAS* eases the reader into the posthuman novel with the conventional story of Square. However, in the conventional story, the posthuman is foregrounded by the descriptions of characters; obviously character names are geometric shapes, but the descriptions of actions follow a different pattern. When Square speaks, the process of forming speech is described: "His own electrochemistry opened the circle of his mouth to make a soft 'No'" (13), or Circle does not just express disapproval, "the contraction of her corrugator muscles that furrowed her brow said what she was thinking" (14). *VAS* prepares the reader to consider the human beyond just appearances. The unseen physiological dimensions of expression are a new scale to consider how to describe a character's expressions. In his article "Visualization, Scale, and the Emergence of the Posthuman Narrative," Tomasula (2014b, 3) writes that "by adopting a non-human scale, we enable readers to see in another way, allowing stories to emerge, other considerations to be made."

Second Dimension: The Flat Page

The second spatial dimension consists of planar shapes, that is, length and width but no height. In the first half of *Flatland*, "Part One: This World", Abbot describes the appearance of the inhabitants and topography, as well as a historical and political account, of Flatland. The hierarchy in Flatland is according to configuration of shape,

specifically the more sides an inhabitant has the higher his social status (as part of the satire on Victorian society, women in Flatland are lines; they have no shape). In order from the lowest social status to highest, there are isosceles triangles, equilateral triangles, squares, pentagons, and so on until one generation of offspring achieves so many sides that they are classed as a circle. Through breeding sides are added; for example, Square's son is a pentagon. Since the shapes have no height, the geometric inhabitants of Flatland recognize one another through three methods: hearing, feeling, and sight.

Hearing allows personal friends to easily recognize one another, but because a lowly isosceles triangle could imitate the voice of a square, pentagon, or circle, hearing is the least trusted method of recognition. Generally, the lower classes primarily feel each other to decipher how one another is configured: "Long practice and training . . . enable us to discriminate at once by sense of touch, between the angle of an equal-sided Triangle, Square, and Pentagon" (Abbott 2010, 48). However, the well-educated Flatland aristocracy can distinguish configuration of shapes by "Sight Recognition" (56), whereby through many years of education and practical experience, one is trained to geometrically infer the configuration of a shape when approaching from a single direction. Through the senses—hearing, feeling, and seeing—Flatlanders interact with one another in two-dimensions.

The physical flatness in *VAS* takes place on the page, where two-dimensional objects, such as images, writing, appropriated material, colors, and designed elements, interact in two dimensions. The multimodal interactions are similar to the three modes shapes interact with one another in *Flatland*. Narrative emerges from juxtaposition of these flat objects; for example, the conventional narrative is juxtaposed with an image

that is gestured at in the conventional narrative: “He had already written his name where it said:” and then, on the next page, Square’s signature is presented in the image of the patient name portion of a hospital form (TF 2002, 10–11). This is an example of the multimodal juxtaposition out of which a posthuman narrative emerges. Tomasula writes that “emergent narrative [is] a mode of narration that complements a post-human ground of being as well as the humanist novel fits the humanist conception of ‘mankind’ (Tomasula 2014b, 21). While the conventional, humanist narrative of Square’s crisis gestures at the posthuman, *VAS*’s inhuman modalities—such as those that do not have narration, point of view, plot, characters, setting, or actions—are situated on the same page as the conventional narrative and, in some cases, merged over, in between, or under its writing.

Throughout *VAS*, the DNA bases, ACGT, are on the cover and many pages in order to remind the reader how the genes we emerge from can be linguistically represented on the flat page. ACTG are found cascading along with writing and images, taking on multifarious types of typography. On one page, the DNA base pairs help to compose a word that is by itself but surrounded by other DNA bases: “ATTC**astrati**” (57). The castrati singers and actors were castrated at a prepubescent age so that they could take the place of women, who were not allowed to perform on stage. In this instance, the word is juxtaposed on the page with base pairs, the conventional narrative, other floating text, and the musical strings that appear vertically on the page, simultaneously gesture to the operatic theme of *VAS*, Square’s crisis over a vasectomy, reproductive DNA and the cessation of lineage, and the barbaric early methods of creating a culturally-engineered proto-posthuman. Through juxtaposition of modalities, the posthuman narrative emerges.

In a posthuman world, the genetic code has become manipulable to the tools modern culture has developed, resulting in human bodies being transformed into posthuman bodies. According to Tomasula (2014a, 3), "Our tools have pried destiny from biology, and allowed people to alter the shapes of their noses, teeth, thighs, breasts, butts into dimensions fashionable at our time; indeed our tools allow our very DNA to be edited, patented, and rearranged like any other data." Our technological thinking is collapsing the human into the single dimension of language, the very language the humanist era used to distinguish us from other animals, as well as everything else in the universe.

Third Dimension: The Book and the Body

The third spatial dimension consists of length, width, and height. *VAS* provokes the presence of height to the reading process by making the body of the reader and the book present. Tomasula was determined to respond to an early 2000s crisis in the book publishing world: the seemingly inevitable demotion of print books to ebooks. In an interview, Tomasula says, "It seemed like everything was going to go electronic. So I made an effort to write a novel that couldn't be read on a Kindle, that a person had to hold in their hands" (Salis 2021). Outside *VAS*'s conventional story line and flat pages are the three-dimensional body of the reader and the physical book, which is a rectangular cuboid. While one could easily imagine that *VAS* become digitized and read on a computer or ebook device, the reader would be missing a dimension of the book, a dimension that is height, as well as a dimension of the narrative.

Height is introduced to *VAS* through the embodied reader's interaction with the medium of the novel, that is, the physical book. Height becomes present to the narrative

when the reader foregrounds the physicality of the book by rotating it in order to read upside-down and askew text, or when the reader flips pages back and forth, an action done by the embodied reader that is juxtaposed with, for example, an illustration on page 21 of a book with a page being flipped and arrows pointing in opposite directions to indicate flipping back and forth, the action often performed by the reader when reading *VAS*. The body of the reader juxtaposed with the illustration demonstrates how the three-dimensional body and book are juxtaposed with the two-dimensional flat page. The presence of height is also introduced on the page by the thumb tabs. Because the reader has experience navigating dictionaries and encyclopedias, the thumb tabs put the readers thumb on the page or index finger on the page, searching for the reference on the page that corresponds to the abbreviation on the thumb tab. The physicality of the book and the body of the reader are a salient and significant part of the performance of the narrative, which would be lost when the reader reads *VAS* by means of electronic media.

One of the criticism of Abbot's *Flatland* is that the two-dimensional shapes can see height. A critic wrote that a one-dimensional or two-dimensional plane is invisible, because visually lines and planes have no height or depth, no thinness or thickness. However, Abbot responded to the critic that sight is, in fact, possible among creatures of Flatland:

> A moment's reflection will make this obvious. Dimension implies measurement. Now, our lines are so thin that they cannot be measured. Measurement implies degrees, the more and the less; but all our lines are equally and infinitesimally thin, or thick, whichever you please to call it; so that we in Flatland can neither measure their thinness, nor even take cognizance of it. Where you speak of a line as being long and thick (or thin), we speak of it as being long and *bright*. (Abbot 2010, 236) (emphasis original)

Despite being shown Spaceland, and acknowledging a third dimension, once back in Flatland, Square cannot explain or conceive of the concept of height. Height is a direction not even possible for a Flatlander "to take cognizance of it," similar to the king of Lineland not being able to conceive of "to the side."

When Tomasula uses all three-dimensions of narrative, the modes of narrative reading become present to the reader. Brightness is like presence. Presence allows us to relate to a mode of narrative we are not conscious of, like the dimension of height and direction "upward" that Square cannot conceive. According to Heidegger, a hammer becomes present when it breaks. We stare at the broken hammer; the presence is difficult to account for, for what is a hammer if no longer useful as a hammer? It is a broken thing, becoming pieces of something that makes a presence. In a way, *VAS* breaks with convention by providing elements of the narrative outside the conventional novel, the conventional story line. A conventional novel is framed through a POV; however, *VAS* brings another dimension to the page of a novel, where the juxtaposition of elements, such as illustrations and quotations, add to the overall narrative. Conventional novels only have the one dimension. When *VAS* makes each dimension of the three separate narratives present, the reader then notices the other dimensions of the narrative, forming a narrative network. The presence is used to cohere the three types of narrative reading together, having the reader make the connections between the narrative dimsensions and producing the overall emergent narrative of *VAS*.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: A SINGLE MATTER OF CONCERN

Bruno Latour (2004) writes, "Give me one matter of concern and I will show you the whole earth and heavens that have to be gathered to hold it firmly in place" (246). I would argue that *VAS* has done just that: shown the whole earth and heavens, as well as the dimensions of human experience. Even though Square's story is but one dimension to the narrative of *VAS*, the narrative dimensions are built around Square's concern over the vasectomy. *VAS* shows us the conventional narrative, the posthuman narrative, and the narrative of the body of the reader. The posthuman narrative on the page surrounds the story line with objects that carry meaning related to Square's crisis, objects such as images of human dissections, genetic sequences, and genealogies. Ultimately, *VAS* plays with the scale of being beyond the human, showing the reader how narrative looks using discourse outside the convention narrative.

As Square's concern causes his body to become present, the reader's concern with reading *VAS* makes the reader's body present. Each narrative becomes present to the reader, demonstrating how the conventional narrative, the posthuman narrative, and the body as essential to the narrative represent how human experience is the result of stratified enframing. *VAS* holds up to the reader how modern technology, such as big data, the ubiquity of online experiences, the unending effort to grab our attention, shapes our bodies and the way we think.

Because of an increasingly likely posthuman future, such as where Square is concerned about how technology will alter his body, *VAS* makes the reader concerned about how technology can shape their body and how technological thinking will result in

a posthuman future. Although *VAS* does not take an explicit stance on a posthuman future shaped by technology, the novel does read like a warning, especially by foregrounding how recently established members of the intelligentsia voiced eugenic ideas. And now, we live in an era of increasing technological sophistication, when eugenic ideas can be deployed using advanced technology. Squares anxiety becomes the reader's anxiety about the technology and the body.

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