Disability and its affective affordances: deformity, decay, disruption, distortion

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CHAPTER 5

Distortion

1. Disability and the Affordances of Distortion

In the previous chapter, I argued how the concept of disruption can be understood not as a single rupture or break in the given account of a life, but rather that disruption can draw our attention to the continuous effort involved in living with disability. This chapter examines the affordances of a concept related to disruption but differentiates from it in important ways; that of distortion. According to the OED, distortion involves three different meanings: 1. The twisting awry or out of shape of an object; 2. The twisting or perversion of words and stories so as to give to them a different sense; 3. The change in the waveform of a signal emitted by an electronic device that impairs the quality of its reproduction.[1] What these three meanings have in common, and what distinguishes distortion from disruption, is that distortion implies the presence of some object (a word, a body, an electronic signal) that somehow becomes *twisted* from its original shape or sense. By contrast, disruption evokes the *break* or *rupture* of an object.

This chapter explores these denotations of distortion as an affordance of disability through a reading of Mariam Petrosyan's novel *The Gray House* (2017).[2] The novel's title refers to a house (capitalized and referred to as "the House" in the novel) that is a home for disabled children and adolescents, functioning as a boarding school. The House is divided into five dormitories numbered one to six, with the fifth inexplicably missing. All inhabitants of the House, including the counselors, are given a nickname by another inhabitant as soon as they enter it. The dorms also have nicknames, based on animals: the First are Pheasants, the Second Rats, the Third Birds, and the Sixth are the Hounds. The Fourth does not have its own nickname, and this only becomes partly elucidated late into the first book, as the members of the fourth broke off from a previous group. Positing different narratives from different timelines that are also told by different narrators, the novel defies a traditional linear plot in favor of this

1 https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/view/Entry/55713?redirectedFrom=distortion#eid

2 The novel was originally published in Russian as three separate novels that were collected into one volume. In the English translation, the three novels are referred to as "books," and retain the titles of the original novels: *Smoker, Eight Days in the Life of Jackal*, and *The Abandoned Nests*.

kaleidoscopic form. The reader is only partially made privy as to why certain events take place in the House, how they happen (and have happened), and whether the House may possess agency of its own. This novel deviates from previous chapters' case studies in that it does not feature one particular character with a disability surrounded by non-disabled characters, but instead the majority of its characters have various and different disabilities. Pivotal to the novel is how these various characters try to live together in the House, which conjoins a sense of camaraderie with that of rivalry and violence between the House's many inhabitants.

Through the frequent inexplicability of the events that take place in the House, the House's students desire to understand its history and why these events occur, as they try to live together through these events. Given the centrality the novel places on both indeterminacy and inexplicability, I will read the text through the literary mode of the fantastic, as delineated by literary scholar Rosemary Jackson in her study *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981). Jackson argues that the fantastic as literary mode borrows from both the conventions of what she calls the "marvellous" as well as the "mimetic" or realist mode of literature,[3] while never being fully reducible to either. Given that the novel's size and complexity subvert traditional linear plot-structures, I will not attempt to subjugate it to a reading of a predominantly chronological fashion, since that would forcefully go against the way the novel works. Instead, through reading select passages, I intersect and intertwine these readings with the argument concerning the affordances of distortion I make in this chapter.

Coming back to the denotations of distortion delineated above, the fantastic holds the power to distort and subsequently subvert normative orders attached to the modes mentioned. The fantastic therefore finds part of its constitution as literary mode in the activity of distortion. It needs to draw and subsequently twist conventions associated with these other modes. Although both exposing and resisting the normativity found in a dominant cultural order, the fantastic does not offer a "solution" through proposing a different order. Rather it (briefly) opens spaces of disorder and disturbance that through imbuing the cultural imaginary with fictive form evokes a different world. Jackson writes that: "Presenting that which cannot be, but is, fantasy exposes a culture's definitions of that which can be: it traces the limits of its epistemological

3 With the marvellous mode, Jackson refers to what she also calls the "fairy story," referring to the tales of authors such as the Grimm brothers, Tolkien, and Hans Christian Andersen. Central to the marvellous is that it offers a complete history and narrative told by an omniscient narrator. The mimetic or realist mode, meanwhile, refers to the realist novel that presupposes a claim of equivalence between the fictional world and the extratextual one.

and ontological frame" (23).[4] Jackson contends that "that which can be" is implicitly exposed by fantasy's transgressive distortion of the epistemological and ontological frames from which it draws. As such, fantasy needs to transgress the boundaries of those frames to present a different world.

Beyond the tracing of epistemological and ontological frameworks from which the fantastic draws and subsequently distorts to "present that which cannot be, but is" this chapter concerns itself with how we may affectively relate to being presented with "that which cannot be," with which Jackson's study is much less concerned. She states that "The presentation of impossibility is not by itself a radical activity: texts subvert only if the reader is *disturbed* by their dislocated narrative form" (23). Subversion by the fantastic succeeds if it disturbs the reader, but disturbance is a successful affective *effect* the reader may experience when presented with the impossible.

Literary scholar Tzvetan Todorov posited that the nature of how we relate to the fantastic lies in hesitation, arguing that the reader must hesitate between an interpretation of the story's events as being either natural or supernatural. This hesitation also takes place at the diegetic level by the story's characters who may also hesitate in the face of the story's inexplicable events (Todorov 33). The affective tension elicited by hesitation does not need to find an affective resolution in certainty or determinacy within tales of the fantastic. Instead, hesitancy is the disposition Todorov designates as being constituent of the fantastic mode of literature.

Adjacent to hesitation as an affective relation elicited by the presentation of the impossible, through my reading of *The Gray House* I posit and expound *anticipation* as hesitation's affective counterpart. While *The Gray House* defies "traditional" linear narrativity, over the course of its three books it builds up towards the inhabitants' graduation day; the day when the students will be released from the House and continue life outside of it. Furthermore, the novel explores anticipation through smaller scopes as well: the interest in new arrivals to the House; their expectations concerning future events; and the anticipation of the reactions to these events by other characters. Whereas hesitation causes one to doubt when being presented with the impossible, anticipation is concerned with (the uncertainty of) what is to come, while this concern itself (similar to hesitation) takes place in the present. In literary studies, anticipation has been mainly studied through narratological, cognitive, and

4 Jackson employs "fantasy" and "the fantastic" congruently. She draws from William Irwin's study *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (1976), who writes that "A fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility: it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into "fact" itself" (x).

structuralist approaches under the guise of *prolepsis* (the Greek term for anticipation), often referring to the analysis of usages of what is more commonly known as the flash forward in narratives. In contrast, my interest lies in anticipation as an affective tension, founded on a time that is felt and taken in the present that concerns a future event that is not yet actualized. I argue that anticipation involves a present concern with the manifestation of the improbable or impossible, though the confrontation with "what cannot be, but is" necessarily anticipates what else may be(come) the case. As such, being faced with "what cannot be, but is" does not stop with its apprehension but elicits *further* anticipation.

Whereas for Todorov hesitation is primarily a matter of interpretation concerning the events one is presented with, my reading will shift the emphasis from a predominant concern for epistemological doubt (what is either natural or supernatural) to one that examines hesitation as the affective consequence of living in and interpreting a paradoxical world. As mentioned above, the fantastic draws from the conventions of other literary modes and distorts them. *The Gray House* presents such a fantastic world that draws from conventions associated with other modes, but adjacent to and intertwined with a concern for the interpretation of events lies an emphasis on a hesitance of relationality: (how) can I be a part of this world? In line with Jackson's conceptualization of the fantastic, the novel does not explain many of the events that happen in The House; this is not the point. Instead, hesitation is expounded as the distortion of the relationship between the twisting of words and stories and the parallel twisting of the ability to sense and perceive the world one is a part of, effectuating affective indeterminacy.

While my reading of *The Gray House* proposes anticipation and hesitation as relevant affective relationalities of the fantastic, Jackson asserted that texts subvert only if they *disturb* the reader. Jackson goes on to state that the fantastic "lies inside closed systems, infiltrating, opening spaces where unity had been assumed. Its impossibilities propose latent 'other' meanings or realities behind the possible or the known. Breaking single, reductive 'truths', the fantastic traces a space within a society's cognitive frame. It introduces multiple, contradictory 'truths': it becomes polysemic" (23). Disturbance at the affective level of the reader becomes connected to the disturbance of the unity of a closed system that is opened. This latter disturbance is connected to polysemy, the ability of a text to hold multiple and contradictory meanings simultaneously. Distortion has much affinity with polysemy since distortion draws from words and stories to give them a different sense, thereby purporting a new sense that contrasts the one that it distorted. Jackson's words therefore suggest that the truth of the presupposed closed system which is subverted by the fantastic is not

(fully) eradicated but rather supplemented with a different, contradictory "truth" that comes to coexist with it. Building on Jackson's argument, my claim is that we should understand the proliferation of such contradictory "truths" as distortion's affordance through the literary mode of the fantastic.

In Jackson's argument, the unity of closed systems is connected with "single, reductive truths." To argue *for* contradiction and paradox as affordances of distortion, what is at stake is not to replace one reductive truth for another. This is why distortion necessarily draws from (and by extension, is dependent on) such closed systems. If it would succeed in eradicating one normative order another would come to replace it. Instead, by holding different and contradictory truths together, the distortion elicited by the fantastic allows us to further understand the normativity attached to those systems it draws from.[5]

Given that *The Gray House* is a tale of the fantastic that concerns a House filled with students with disabilities, this begs the question what reductive truths and normative attachments are related to disability. The field of disability studies has understandably given much attention to the concept of normativity in relation to disability, but less attention has been given to the kinds of normativity the field itself produces. In their overview article *Exploring Normativity in Disability Studies* (2015), disability studies scholars Simo Vehmas and Nick Watson trace the various uses of the concept of normativity within the field. They note that "Disability studies has always included a strong normative dimension, founded as it is on a belief that life for disabled people could be better coupled with a desire to identify and challenge what are seen as discriminatory practices and beliefs. All theoretical accounts in the field contain either implicit or explicit normative judgments about the ethical or political issues that affect disabled people's lives" (4). Vehmas' and Watson's intervention is that, while many theoretical accounts advanced by disability scholars have sought to develop critiques of ableism based on its normativity, they understand these theories as being themselves normative, albeit in different ways. According to Vehmas and Watson, the theoretical accounts they in turn critique thereby manifest their own normative propositions and implications.[6]

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5 For example, *The Gray House* is a narrative and therefore has aspects of linearity. It also diverges from this with passages which do not push the narrative further in any way, or even by employing different genres, like lyric poetry.

6 Phil Smith (2004) sees disability's normativity in that it is founded in disease and filth metaphors, whereas Rosemarie Garland Thompson writes that disability functions as a synecdoche for all forms that culture deems non-normative (2002). Goodley et al., meanwhile, state that "disability demands non-normative and anti-establishment ways of living life" (2014: 348).

Vehmas' and Watson's primary concern lies with the normativity placed on disability that is produced through ethical judgement and political statements (4), but they largely disregard the normativity attached to the ways in which disability has been conceptualized through the different *models* of disability that have been proposed (the medical, social, and cultural). This distinction matters because the normativity connected to the way in which disability is conceptualized influences the kind of ethical and political normativity that may follow from this conceptualization. The texts discussed in previous chapters were primarily written in what Jackson refers to as the realist or mimetic mode of literature, where the predominant conceptualization of disability is a socio-medical one.[7] While I think it would be a "reductive truth," to use Jackson's terms, to try and place those representations of disability in any single one of disability studies' proposed models, the conceptualization of disability as a socio-medical concern and the normativity attached to it is precisely what the fantastic needs to draw from in order to distort and subsequently subvert its normativity.

A conceptual parallel between the fantastic and disability relevant to this chapter is that they both transgress pre-established norms while the treatments for this transgression markedly differ. Whereas the transgression of the fantastic is proposed through presenting "that which cannot be, but is," disrupting the normativity espoused by a dominant order, the medical model defines and reduces disability's transgression to a relationship between a bodily normate and its divergence in empirical-medical anomaly. The medical model of disability has, of course, seen responses in the social and cultural models of disability (as discussed in previous chapters). As Vehmas' and Watson's argument suggests, scholars in disability studies, while demonstrating their own normativity, do so largely in response to the normativity they see as being attached to disability. What these conceptualizations of disability lack, however, is what *The Gray House* affords through connecting disability with the distortion the fantastic elicits: to allow us to think of disability in relation to "that which cannot be, but is." In other words, to think of disability as a matter of the imagination.

The Gray House does not overthrow the socio-medical model conception of disability as found in other texts but draws from and distorts it. The novel does so by reiterating the figure of the *changeling*, common in Western folklore and fairytales. The changeling, as the name suggests, was in such stories swapped for other children

7 In *The Elephant Man*, John Merrick was studied and put on display as a medical anomaly; in *A Little Life*, Jude's medical condition and deterioration were a constant cause for concern; and in *Still Life with Monkey*, Duncan's adjustment to life as a quadriplegic took center stage.

and often had (hidden) disabilities that omitted description. Due to the changeling's resistance to denotation and its appeal to figurative connotations, the understanding of disability as denotative becomes distorted, where such a denotative conceptualization of disability would follow the normative logic of models through which disability is commonly conceived. Instead, I argue that the figure of the changeling affords what I call figurative conceivability, by which I mean the ambiguous, paradoxical, and polysemic connotations concerning disability that the changeling produces or that may be assigned to it, but never fully stabilized. By being itself a distortional figure, the changeling posits how disability affords what is conceivable and imaginable. This subsequently twists the socio-medical conceptualization that posits its understanding of disability which follows a normative representational logic of the model. In that conception, normativity is manifested because this logic dictates how instances of disability fit into the model's conceptualization.

Following this, the chapter closes with an elucidation of Jackson's notion that for the fantastic to be successful in its subversion, it needs to *disturb* the reader. Disturbance, as mentioned, is different from anticipation and hesitation in that it is an affective effect of the fantastic rather than one of the affective relationalities it elicits. I examine disturbance as involving simultaneous dissimulation of the subject with the assimilation of the text, taking my cue from Roland Barthes' literary aesthetics. For Barthes, the reader's subjectivity can be dissimilated through the process of reading, which simultaneously "generates" the text, which he likens to a weave, that I read as involving another form of twisting. Through a reading of select passages of the novel, I argue how *The Gray House* appropriates and twists this process of dissimilation-as-immersion delineated by Barthes. I suggest that the dissimilation of the subject as Barthes envisions it necessarily draws our attention to the ways in which bodily capacity becomes interpretative ability in the dissimilation he describes. In order to create a representational-allegorical relationship with a text, my reading of *The Gray House* argues that such interpretative ability necessarily rests on bodily capacity and complicates how capacity turns into ability.

2. Twisting Prolepsis: Anticipation and the "Expected Unexpected"

In *The Gray House*'s first book, entitled *Smoker* (named after one of the novel's characters), we follow the story of an armless boy named Grasshopper as he arrives at the House. Grasshopper is taken in by a counselor named Elk, who puts him under the guidance of an older boy named Blind. When Grasshopper arrives at the House, it is

relatively quiet as most of the other inhabitants are away on a summer trip. When summer ends, the inhabitants return. Grasshopper then rushes out to look at them:

> "Can you hear that?" Blind, sitting on the floor by the door, asked him. "Hear how much noise they're making?" Blind held the boy's shorts for him. The boy quickly thrust his legs through the openings, one, then the other. Blind did the zipper. "You don't like them?" the boy asked, watching his sneakers being laced. "Why should I?" Blind pushed the boy's foot off his knee and put the other one in its place. "Why should I like them?" The boy was barely able to wait for his blazer and refused the comb. His fair hair, grown out during the summer, remained disheveled. "Come on, I'm going!" he blurted out. Then he ran, his feet unsteady from anticipation. The corridor, then the stairs, then the first floor. The door was being kept ajar by a striped bag. He ran out into the yard and froze. He was surrounded by faces. The faces were unfamiliar, alien, they cut like knives. The voices—shrill, frightening. He was scared. These were not the people he'd rushed to meet. (41)

This passage starts with an orientation: Blind is affected by noise, but the noise is separated from Blind and Grasshopper, by something that is outside of the room they are in. Disability becomes intertwined with anticipation, as Blind and Grasshopper need to go through a set of actions before Grasshopper is able to run out, preventing him from seeing the newcomers straightaway: first he thrusts his legs into the shorts, then Blind does Grasshopper's zipper, then he ties his shoelaces. Anticipation finds its origins in the Latin *anticipare*, which is a combination of *ante* (before) and *capers* (to take). To anticipate involves taking (care of) something ahead of its actualization. To take something before it is actualized, the scene suggests, is to become unsteady with it, as Grasshopper can barely contain himself.

Sarah Ahmed, in her article *Affective Economies* (2004), proposes that affect works through aligning some bodies with other bodies (117). Ahmed writes that "the individual subject comes into being through its very alignment with the collective. *It is the very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surfaces of collective bodies*" (128). With this last argument, Ahmed means that, because affect traverses through and between bodies, affect cannot be *located* in a body in the sense of that body being a "container" of affect; it is continuously being affected by its surroundings. Thus, the way in which a body becomes aligned in a particular way

with its surroundings is dependent on the way that body is affected by it. The surfaces of collective bodies are then generated through the traversal of affect that aligns these bodies in a similar way.

In the scene above, Grasshopper's anticipation affectively aligns his unsteady body with the bodies that produce the noise but are not yet there. As Grasshopper runs through the House—the corridor, the stairs, the first floor—upon entering the yard, there is a difference between what he apparently anticipated (since the text does not disclose this), and what he finds in the yard. The alignment generated through anticipation becomes twisted: instead of being oriented toward the newcomers, Grasshopper now becomes *surrounded* by their faces. Here, the "surfaces of collective bodies" are described as follows:

> They too were browned by the sun, they laughed, they were dappled with patches of color, but they were all wrong. He lowered himself onto the step, keeping his catlike gaze on them. A shiver ran down his spine. So that's how they are, he thought bitterly. They are all assembled from little pieces. And I am one of them. I am just like them. Or will be soon. We are in a zoo. And the fence is for keeping us all in. There was one in a wheelchair, white like a marble statue, with snowy hair and a haggard look, and another one, nearly purple, bloated as a week-old corpse and almost as scary. This one also could not walk, and he was surrounded by girls pushing his wheelchair. The girls laughed and joked, and each had a flaw; they too were glued together from pieces. He looked at them and wanted to cry. (41)

Grasshopper assesses the newcomers as "all wrong," but how should we read this assessment? Earlier, I mentioned that distortion presupposes an original form that is twisted out of shape. What is out of shape here is the expected or anticipated shape itself, for the bodies that appear before Grasshopper are described (through free indirect speech) as being "assembled from little pieces," which is "how they are." Implicitly, then, the scene contrasts bodies assembled from pieces with an absent conception, such as the body as a unitary whole. This is then followed by metaphorical descriptions of the different "pieces" that make up these bodies, as what makes them stand out: "white like a marble statue;" "bloated as a week-old corpse." At the end of the passage, to be glued together from such pieces becomes connected to these bodies having a flaw. What is "wrong" and "flawed" becomes connected to unexpected disabled bodies; it connects the anticipation from the quote above with the

actualization of the ways in which these bodies appear to Grasshopper. Anticipation and actualization intertwine when Grasshopper (again through free indirect speech) thinks, "I am one of them. I am just like them. Or will be soon." Grasshopper both already is and will become like the others, assembled from pieces.

Ahmed writes that "Emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence) … My economic model of emotions suggests that while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, they still work to bind subjects together. Indeed, to put it more strongly, the nonresidence of emotions is what makes them "binding." " (2004: 119). Adherence is effectuated because Grasshopper recognizes himself to be like the newcomers, but the stickiness that Ahmed refers to here sees the transition of initial excitement in anticipation to Grasshopper's bitterness and being overwhelmed that he is "just like them." The scene enacts the twisting of a relationship of anticipation and alignment to becoming *bound* through this relationship when it is actualized: Grasshopper states that he is "just like them. Or will be soon." This latter statement can also be read as one of anticipation, but it involves the anticipation of what *will* come rather than what *could* be. It suggests a disabled future is already predetermined.

Within literary studies the common term used for anticipation (and the Greek word for it) is *prolepsis*. Literary scholar Mark Currie notes that "prolepsis is normally assumed, at least in its narratological context, to name an excursion forwards in a sequence, this excursion seems to be a journey to somewhere which precedes the point of departure" (2007: 42). Adjacently, Currie posits a notion of what he calls performative prolepsis, which "produces the future in the act of envisaging it, so that the possible transforms itself into the actual. It does so in a range of modes and moods which can be placed somewhere on a scale between fear and hope" (44). Currie's understanding of performative prolepsis is based on the act of reading since it is through this act that the reader may herself anticipate what is about to happen within the narrative.[8] The actualization of the imaginary is assimilated within the act of envisaging since it imbues the possible with imaginative form. This is important because, coming back to the notion of distortion, it allows us to ask *how* the anticipated possible is transformed into the actual. Furthermore, prolepsis is connected to what we either fear or hope the outcome to be, which connects anticipation to its affective drive (either towards the thing anticipated or away from it).

8 Literary scholar Teresa Bridgeman has expounded this notion through a reading of Genette's use of the term *anonce*, as brief allusions as to what may happen later in the narrative, rather than actual flash forwards (125).

In relation to this notion of performative prolepsis, what is missing in the scene above is what Grasshopper *imagined* the newcomers to be like; such a description was omitted. Instead, we only learn about his assessment to the newcomers once he sees their disabilities as "all wrong" and "flawed." There was anticipation at the diegetic level, but within the narrative the actualization only took place when Grasshopper ran out to face the newcomers. The twisting of that affective relationality that I read into one of becoming *bound* ran parallel to the anticipation of a disabled future that *will* come rather than what could be.

This predetermination that the narrative suggests is itself a feature of fictional narrative: a novel is already a complete and finished narrative when we start to read it. In his later study, *The Unexpected* (2013), Currie writes of this tense (the future perfect or future anterior) of fiction: "If we accept the reading of a narrative as a model of temporal experience it seems to represent human action in its most passive mode in relation to a future that is not open, the arrival of which we simply await. The future, in a written narrative, is accessible to us, as readers, in a way that seems to render it ontologically distinct from the open future of life: a false future which is, in fact, the past, since it is already written" (66).

Currie proposes an ontological distinction between the temporal experience of life and that of written fictional narrative, where the first is experienced as being open and not predetermined to us in experience, and the second is predetermined in the tense of the future perfect, what Currie elsewhere refers to as "this will have happened." Currie's account of the difference between the future perfect tense of fictional narrative and the experience of the temporal "openness" of life also connects the predetermination of fiction with "action in its most passive mode," but more importantly, Currie connects fiction's predetermination with falsity. With the term "false future," Currie is not arguing that fiction is false in the sense that it is commonly charged with, i.e., that fiction would be untrue, telling events that have not actually happened. It is false in the sense that it is predetermined and would offer the reader a "false" sense of anticipation in the act of reading. Fiction thereby twists the experience of anticipation in life (where we anticipate in life's open-endedness) with that of anticipation in the future anterior, where we anticipate, through reading, in a preset world. Jacques Derrida has commented on the future anterior that it is "It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can therefore only announce itself, present itself, in the species of monstrosity" (2016: 5 [1974]). Connecting the future anterior to the concepts of normality and monstrosity, Derrida's comment highlights that, as a tense, the predetermined and closed future of a fictional narrative is seen as an aberration of the normality of the open-ended experience of life suggested by Currie.

While this connotation of falsity effectively pertains to all fictional narrative for Currie, the fantastic twists fiction's future anterior by intertwining the anticipation that takes place at both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels.[9] In other words, the anticipation in the act of reading by the reader is intertwined with the intradiegetic anticipation of the events and characters within the story. While this too can occur in any other kind of fiction, what is at stake in the mode of the fantastic is how it distorts the normativity of this relationship between extra- and intra-diegesis, where the reader's anticipation and the intradiegetic anticipation do not necessarily converge. Currie notes that "narrative in fiction is inherently disposed towards the relation of the unexpected, and makes use of habitual, repetitive and familiar events as a setting for the unexpected to such an extent that the everyday and the ordinary actually carry within them a foreshadowing of an unforeseeable future" (2013: 18). Since this predisposition follows familiar habits and repetitions (through genre conventions, for example), it is a kind of "expected unexpected," a foreshadowing that lies within normative expectation.[10]

If the normative horizon of expectation afforded by fiction is to be distorted in the mode of the fantastic, it consequently needs to work with narrative time as its material. The scene of *The Gray House* above takes place in a timeline that seemingly takes place before another timeline, that of the "present." This is in itself conventional enough and would suggest that the different linear narratives that are in place would eventually cross over into another. Yet simultaneously, the novel suggests that time in the House repeats itself. The how and why of the operation of time in the House is, however, never fully disclosed to the reader; it just occurs. In an exchange towards the end of the novel, two of the members of the fourth dormitory, Noble and Tabaqui, have an encounter concerning the nature of time in the House, when Tabaqui addresses Noble:

> "You are aware that your memory is a part of you? And not an insignificant part. Those who return could become somebody quite different from who they were before. And not experience some of the things

9 Gerald Prince defines extradiegetic as that which takes place outside of the diegesis, but in reference to different kinds of diegetic levels. (1987: 29). I use the terms *intra* and *extra* as that which is in- or outside the diegetic world (and thus involves the reader).

10 Hans Robert Jauss proposed the term *horizon of expectation* to refer to the way in which an audience may receive literature "as works of its present, in the unity of a common horizon of literary expectations, memories, and anticipations that establishes their significance" (1982: 38).

> they have experienced on the previous loop. Which would make the next loop itself different as well." "I know," Noble says. "You're wasting your time. I will not reconsider." "You are of the Forest," I say. "It's in your blood. You shall not find rest until you join with it." "I know," he says. "But she is not there." "Your love has consumed you. And the first thing it devours is reason, mind you. Speaking of love ... Are you sure that when you become a different you, you'll still love the same person that you love today? Absolutely sure?" "Of course." And he smiles. The smile of a maniac. Or of someone in love. (639)

Tabaqui suggests that time in the House is not just linear but consists of loops, i.e., repetitive cycles of time. He says that Noble should join the "Forest," a place adjacent to the House in which enigmatic events take place over the course of the novel. Tabaqui thereby suggests that by joining with the Forest, Noble could not only break out of the House's loops but, more importantly, "find rest" as it is in "his blood," evoking an eschatological return to an essence or wellspring from which Noble would stem. Noble, who is in love with another inhabitant of the House, wishes to stay to repeat the loop in the hopes of experiencing this love over and over. But Tabaqui's warning suggests that, while he could stay, the repetition of the loop does not mean he would experience the same events; his words imply that, even as the House would go through another loop, the Noble he is now, constructed out of his memories and experiences, might not return at all, twisted through the loop's repetition. Simultaneously, however, Noble assures Tabaqui that, even if *he* would change, his love would certainly be repeated over and over, suggesting that is what would remain consistent.

The anticipation of Noble's hope to relive his love through the repetition of the loop is not connected to the possibility of a future linear time, but rather that a given chronological time might repeat and distort itself over and over through remaining in the House, even at the cost of Noble not remaining himself. Parallel to this, Tabaqui's words suggest that the time of the Forest, where Noble would finally "find rest," contrasts the time of the loop as a time seemingly without action or event, as it is a time of rest.

By placing different timelines and events adjacent to one another, the novel distorts the common conception of anticipation as a device of prolepsis that preemptively accepts the givenness of the future anterior's determinism. Instead, anticipation is here more closely related to what literary scholar Gary Saul Morson dubbed sideshadowing: "Whereas foreshadowing works by revealing apparent alternatives to be mere illusions, sideshadowing conveys the sense that actual events might just as well not

have happened. In an open universe, the illusion is inevitability itself … *Something else* was possible, and sideshadowing is used to create a sense of that "something else" " (117–118). The usage of "sense" is relevant in relation to anticipation, precisely because it connects sense to the "openness" evoked by the unexpected. Simultaneously and paradoxically, however, the scene with Grasshopper displayed the future anterior's determinism in relation to disability, through Grasshopper's realization that he will be "just like them."

The sense of openness that the novel evokes through evoking *more* anticipation about the unexpected is at the same time conjoined with a closed future. By twisting the normativity associated with the horizon of expectation, it intensifies affective anticipation by continuously emphasizing the possibility of what *could* happen. In this way, the distortion of linear time effectuates more connotations of "what could happen"—without such options being actualized. Therefore, anticipation (and, as we will see, hesitation as well), as an affective relationality, is the manifestation of suggestive connotations that are never explicated or necessarily manifested. While never fully undermining the normativity of linear narrative time, the constant return to anticipation that the fantastic enacts subsequently leads us to a related affective relationality associated with anticipation, that of hesitation.

3. Speculative Hesitation: Sensing in an Irresolute World

In moving from anticipation to hesitation, the relationship between these two affective relationalities might seem apparent enough. As Currie mentioned, anticipation is played on a scale of hope and fear, what we wish or do not wish to happen. Hesitation might then involve the moment of inaction in being faced with the moment we anticipated—hence Grasshopper's moment of freezing when he rushed out to meet the House's other inhabitants. Whereas anticipation etymologically involves taking something ahead of its time, hesitation stems from the Latin *haesitare*; to stick fast or remain fixed, but also has the connotations of being irresolute or undecided. While they appear connected, anticipation and hesitation are at odds in terms of their connoted agency, of the way they conceive the relationship between action and inaction. Furthermore, hesitation's Latin roots seem contradictory: how can something be fixed while simultaneously irresolute?

Adjacent to what Todorov designates as the extradiegetic hesitance experienced by the reader concerning whether the events in the story are natural or supernatural, and that the intradiegetic characters can experience the same, he adds that the reader's

attitude toward the text must reject allegorical interpretations (33). Todorov notes that the characters' hesitance involves their "estimation of events in the narrative; we might call these units "reactions", as opposed to "actions" which habitually constitute the argument of the narrative" (33). This appears to be a matter of interpretation, but Todorov adds that it is also "concerned with a represented theme, that of perception and its notation" (33–34). Todorov thereby connects the interpretation of events by the characters with the way in which perception is represented via the text. Todorov's suggestion to resist allegorical readings is echoed by Jackson, who argues that through attempts to allegorize the fantastic, it "loses its proper non-signifying nature. Part of its subversive power lies in its resistance to allegory and metaphor" (41). The non-signifying nature of the fantastic is elucidated by Jackson as "A reluctance, or an inability, to present definitive versions of 'truth' or 'reality' makes of the modern fantastic a literature which draws attention to its own practice as a linguistic system. Structured upon contradiction and ambivalence, the fantastic traces in that which cannot be said, that which evades articulation or that which is represented as 'untrue' and 'unreal' " (37).

By stressing the connection between reluctance and interpretation, both Todorov and Jackson suggest an understanding of hesitation as an epistemological matter. Similar to anticipation, I want to propose hesitation as concerning an affective relationality, where I seek to expound hesitation from the question posed earlier: how can hesitation connote being "fixed" while being simultaneously irresolute? The seemingly paradoxical nature of this question is explored in *The Gray House* through the ambiguity of the many practices that occur in the House. In the novel's first book, *Smoker*, we follow the eponymous character, who is a new arrival to the House (and also acts as a narrator). Confronted with the bizarre and absurd events that take place in the House, Smoker reflects on how he should interpret these and the actions of his co-inhabitants when he has a realization:

> Once I managed to *say the word*, I suddenly was free to realize that this "game" would have to include much more than just appearance. It was the right word, and, having caught it, I understood that I had been looking for it for a long time. For the word that would contain the key to everything happening in the House. All it took was the recognition of the fact that the Game encompassed *everything* around me. (84)

Smoker's realization concerning what he experiences in the House offers him an interpretative framework: that what is happening in the House is a "game," an overarching

scheme of which the rules remain obscure to him. This realization does not juxtapose appearance with reality, but rather appearance with design, as Smoker subsequently realizes that "someone somewhere must have designed this at some point" (84). Even if the realization that he has become part of a game does not automatically offer him all the answers as to what the game's rules are, the term acts as a heuristic device that allows Smoker to relate to the world around him since it presupposes that every element is part of a larger plan. By envisioning the House's world as a game, the frame of Smoker's perspective on that world is fixed, even if the rules of the game remain unclear. What *is* clear from this frame, however, is that the rules are something that can be discovered: "I wanted to laugh out loud and scream that I was onto all of them now. All of their bats, throwing knives, coups, face powders, and scorpions in oil" (86). By laughing and wanting to scream that he is "onto them," Smoker asserts the certainty of his position, and the particularities of the things that remain irresolute are subsequently trivialized. Regardless of what the exact explanations for all of these things might be, Smoker's realization that this world is a game offers him the fixity that answers *can* be given in the first place.

In the final chapter of the novel's first book Smoker's interpretative framework is put to the test. A confrontation ensues between the characters of Pompey, who is the leader of the Sixth, and Blind, who leads the Fourth. As the students circle around Pompey, who is seemingly ready for a confrontation, Blind steps into the circle and kills Pompey by stabbing a knife in his throat. The text never explicates what the conflict concerned, although the text suggests Pompey wanted to take over leadership of the Fourth. With Pompey dead before his eyes, Smoker rushes off in his wheelchair. Tabaqui, also in a wheelchair, goes after him:

> "Smoker. Calm down. You've got to calm down," he kept repeating. I told him I was absolutely calm. He produced a flashlight from his backpack and we proceeded along. Very slowly. Tabaqui was trembling and mumbling, "Not with me, barred from me, find yourself another skin, walk up the river, join with the moon, but never with me, not now and not soon …" I laughed. "Please stop with the crazy," he said, "or we'll have to slap your cheeks and pour water on you. And I don't think anyone wants to do that at the moment." "What is it you want to do at the moment?" I said. "Lots of demands on your time?" … I laughed again. I laughed and laughed, and then I literally choked on the laughter as it turned into a spasm. I vomited. Right on my legs. I didn't have time to lean over or turn to the side. (214–215)

Smoker's hysterical laughing fit is juxtaposed with him asserting to Tabaqui that he is "absolutely calm." Provocatively, Tabaqui asks Smoker to "stop with the crazy," which indirectly undermines the situation's own absurdity that they were witness to a (seemingly random) killing that just took place. The "crazy" is Tabaqui mumblingly rehearsing a riddle that ostensibly refers to the event that took place earlier. It suggests that whoever is addressed should not join with the speaker ("not with me, barred from me"), but is evocative of the transitive nature of the House, its inhabitants, and its surroundings. "Find yourself another skin" seemingly echoes Tabaqui's earlier explanation to Noble concerning the loops of time the House is caught in and that inhabitants can return in another loop, whereas to "join with the moon, but never with me," resembles that passage's suggestion of the inhabitants joining with the House's Forest, i.e., the world outside the House. Like that passage however, it is never fully disclosed to what the riddle ultimately refers.

My reading of the passage above is deliberately speculative and hesitant in that it does not allow for any decisive interpretation, even as the text *does* invite the reader to start interpreting Tabaqui's riddle. The ambiguous motivation behind Pompey's killing as well as Tabaqui's riddle match what Todorov's designates of the fantastic as propounding an "ambiguous vision." Todorov proposes that the ambiguity arises through the coincidence of the character who perceives the world and who simultaneously narrates the events, creating a scene, or vision, that becomes ambiguous and open to different readings (38). Thus, Smoker's focalization tells us he is "absolutely calm," while he simultaneously has a laughing fit. While the first sentence could be read ironically (since the remarks to Tabaqui also suggest irony), a reading wherein Smoker believes himself to remain calm is also possible. Focalized through Smoker's account of the House's events, the reader thereby becomes implicated in the mysteries the novel presents, and following Todorov's emphasis on reaction over action in the fantastic, we primarily follow Smoker's *reactions* to the events that he witnesses. This emphasis on reaction over action is relevant because, as my reading of the passages above shows, while Smoker's interpretative framework aims to construct an explanation of what is going on around him (the "game"), this framework does not influence or control his surroundings in any significant way. The dual movement of simultaneously inviting interpretation through ambiguity *and* asserting interpretation's limitations is not an epistemological problematic but rather the fantastic's assertion and affordance as literary mode.

In Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic-phenomenological study *Freedom and Nature* (2007 [1966]), he argues that hesitation relates to choice in that hesitation simultaneously falls short of choice and also marks the attempt of a choosing (Ricoeur 137). He states

that "the choice to which it refers is always conceived as absent, impossible, desired, delayed, or feared" (137). Ricoeur elucidation helps us better understand what is "fixed" in the question "how can hesitation be fixed while remaining irresolute?"; hesitation occurs precisely in what Ricoeur calls im-possibility rather than indecision.[11] Ricoeur points out that the fixity of perpetual indecision manifests absence, desire, fear; what these have in common is their not-yet-thereness, being temporally present through their absence.

A similar relationship concerning the presence of absence is characteristic of the literary fantastic for Jackson: "A gap between signifier and signified works both ways in the modern fantastic. On the one side there's a presentation of 'nameless things' … the 'something', which can have no adequate articulation except through suggestion and implication" (38–39) and that "the endeavor to visualize and verbalize the unseen and unsayable is one which inevitably falls short, except by drawing attention to exactly this difficulty of utterance" (39). On the other side, meanwhile, "lie 'thingless names', also recurring in the fantastic as words which are apprehended as empty signs, without meaning … They are inverted and invented 'nonsense' (non-sense) words, indicating nothing but their proper density and excess." (40). These quotes display Jackson's preoccupation with the semiotic operations of the fantastic, where there is either a signified without a proper signifier or vice versa. Jackson's analysis, however, can be pushed beyond semiotics. As she points out, the gap between signifier and signified draws attention to "exactly this difficulty of utterance," which in my own reading involves more than just their semiotics.

Similarly, when Jackson speaks of the "proper" density and excess of thingless names (and their non-sense, i.e. a difficulty or impossibility of sensing), this is evocative of the fantastic's affective power. These gestures toward "difficulty of utterance" and affect necessarily implicate the body within the hesitation problematic, which brings us back to Ricoeur, who notes the following on the way in which the body is implicated in hesitation:

> Genuine possibility is one which I open in myself as I decide, that is, in opening possibilities in the world by an actual project. The mark of such possibility projected ahead of myself is the feeling of capacity or power which includes alerting the body, with all its abilities poised on the verge of actual action, awakened or encountered by the project

11 Im-possibility, for Ricoeur, emphasizes the presence of possibility in hesitation: "The root possibility is not an indecision which destroys choice, but the power which initiates choice itself" (138).

> in the reality of the body. Hesitation illustrates these truths in principle by a *reductio ad absurdum*: in the chaos of my intentions lurks the conviction of my powerlessness. I experience not my possibility, but my im-possibility: "I am not up to it," "I am not of my depth," "I am lost, swamped"—I feel powerless. (138)

Ricoeur refers to a process of "opening" that is connected to the double movement of failing to choose between options while simultaneously conceiving of the options or possibilities themselves. Importantly, Ricoeur connects this to the body's capacity to be affected by the opening to these possibilities through choice. In hesitation's opening, Ricoeur finds that the possibility of choice in combination to the body "with all its abilities" affects the body to be on "the verge of actual action." Ricoeur's analysis therefore connects being presented with choice in a perceived conjuncture as affecting the body. It also points out that, for the body to be affected, it needs to hold a certain capacity to be affected by the presence of choice and im-possibility. Thus, when Ricoeur proposes that hesitation emphasizes impossibility in a *reductio ad absurdum*, this is founded on the argument that the conviction of powerlessness is itself constituted by the body's principal capacity to be affected by hesitation's opening.

This relationship between capacity and ability is explored in the novel after Smoker's and Tabaqui's exchange, when Alexander, another member of the Fourth, gets behind Smoker's wheelchair and drives him to the bathroom, where he and another member (Humpback) undress him:

> Once we reached the bathroom, Alexander unloaded me on the floor and undressed me down to my briefs. I was sitting on the wet floor, trembling. He took away my clothes and returned to wash the wheelchair, and still I was sitting there, naked. Then he and Humpback shoved me into the shower stall, turned on the water, and closed the door. I stretched out in the little tiled alcove, under the jets of water cascading down my back, and listened to their voices, muted by the frosted glass, mingling with the sound of the shower. Listened to them talk while they were washing my wheelchair. (215)

This scene, in contrast to the ones described previously, strips away any marvellous elements in the text and describes how Smoker's disabled body is handled by his fellow students. Smoker's earlier laughing fit is displaced with trembling as they carry him to the bathroom. The scene does not divulge *why* his body is trembling—is

it because he is sitting undressed on a wet floor? Because of the killing he witnessed? Both?—this only further enhances the fantastic's evocation of speculation. Trembling denotes an uncontrolled shaking or quivering of the body, yet connotes so much more: fear, anxiety, excitement, and so on, inviting the reader to read "into" the text through the question it inevitably raises. Smoker's body is not acting but is being acted upon as he is placed naked in the shower stall, and his wheelchair is taken from him. The nakedness of Smoker's body emphasizes how that body becomes increasingly receptive to his surroundings as the shower's water falls on him. Lying stretched on the ground and unable to move, Smoker's body becomes a listening body, but it is a distorted listening, with voices heard mutedly through glass as the voices blend with the falling water, making it impossible for Smoker to make out what the voices are saying.

While Smoker's epistemological framework of understanding the world he was in was a game was reactionary in nature (a reaction *to* being confronted with that world), the scene above is equally reactionary but reconfigures the relationality between the capacity of the body to be affected by that world and its ability to act upon it. It is Smoker's bodily capacities that become twisted—not a willing orientation toward something, but a being affected by something, like witnessing a killing, that subsequently twists the body that is affected. Distortion manipulates a body into being receptive to its hesitant relationality, which opens that body to choice and possibility. It foregrounds the body's (receptive) sensing of the world and also shows how sensing itself can be distorted. The absence of any marvellous aspect in this scene and the foregrounding of its literary realism through emphasizing Smoker's disability via his wheelchair also resists allegorization of the body, i.e., the body as allegory for the text itself being distorted, and instead stresses the "reality of the body" (to use Ricoeur's terms) and its capacities.

Ricoeur ultimately conceives of the relationship between affect and hermeneutics as follows: "Affectivity is essentially disordered. Confronted with an affective impression, I can endlessly ask, what is it? All meaning, summed up in these words, must be determined, defined, that is, understood by starting with a false infinite, with an indefinite, the affect" (144). While he acknowledges that affect exceeds the interpretative act, this excess, in his analysis, is "problematic as long as the self does not take an attitude towards it" (144). For Ricoeur, the activity of interpretation necessarily starts from the given that affect is never exhaustive, a point of departure from which hermeneutic engagement with the "what is it?" question commences.

The fantastic is not apathetic to hermeneutics but instead appropriates its interpretative moves as representational enactment. It proliferates affective speculation

through hesitant openings, employing hermeneutical gestures as its medium at both the intra- and extradiegetic levels (as both the story's characters and the reader are faced with the same inexplicability, causing them to interpret). As Jackson posited, the fantastic propagates both nonsense (as in nonsense words), as well as *non-sense*, a difficulty, and twisting, of sensing the world.[12] Distortion as I have expounded it here refers to the manipulation of the relation between these two uses of sense to manifest different affective relationalities (continuous anticipation and hesitation) in the relationship between the intradiegetic (how the characters sense and interpret their world) and the extradiegetic (the way in which the text seeks to manipulate the reader's interpretative and affective relations to itself).

4. Distortion as Engagement: The Changeling and Figurative Conceivability

Given that the distortion operational in the fantastic involves the twisting of words and stories so as to give to them a different sense, distortion involves taking original material that is twisted out of its recognizable shape. Literary scholar Irène Bessière writes that the fantastic "is produced by a relativizing process which grows out of the play upon ambivalences. Because it is a narrative structured upon contraries, fantasy tells of limits, and it is particularly revealing in pointing to the edges of the 'real'" (62).[13] Bessière's assertion that the fantastic involves a form of play is important in that this play itself involves the playful twisting of material that then transgresses the real, but can only do so because it still presumes the real as a point of reference. The ambivalence mentioned by Bessière is related to the way in which the fantastic produces contraries through this play. Rather than producing a relationship of thesis and antithesis, however, the contraries produced through the fantastic are asymmetrical in nature. The original is never fully negated by what the fantastic produces through distorting it, thereby espousing ambivalence, and pervades the boundaries between the real and the imaginary.

Because of this asymmetrical transgression, Joanna Russ posits fantasy as being a kind of violation: "Fantasy is fantasy because it contravenes the real and violates it. The actual world is constantly present in fantasy, by negation … fantasy is what

12 This distinction between the two uses of sense resembles Jacques Rancière's delineation of what he calls *dissensus*: "Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'" (2010: 139).

13 Trans. Rosemary Jackson.

could not have happened; i.e. what *cannot* happen, what *cannot* exist" (52). What "cannot exist" is not simply the negative mirror image of what *does* exist. The affirmation of negation that Russ stresses violates the real because it still includes it as a point of reference rather than negating it. This is why distortion is best understood as producing polysemy: the coexistence of multiple and contradictory meanings and truths that, due to their coexistence, never *fully* make sense. What cannot exist comes to paradoxically co-exist with what already exists.

As shown in the previous paragraphs, *The Gray House* does not deny a socio-medical conceptualization of disability. Blind helped Grasshopper put his trousers on because he did not have any arms, and Smoker, who uses a wheelchair, was put in the shower by his fellow students. This emphasis on "realist" aspects of disability the novel contrasts with ones that are drawn from the marvellous. The novel does, however, also draw from different conceptions of disability, thereby allowing these asymmetrical conceptions to co-exist within the diegetic world.

One marvellous conception that the novel draws from is the figure of the changeling. In brief, the changeling is a figure in European folklore that describes the exchange of one child for another by fairies (Briggs 134). While detailed descriptions of changelings were often omitted in folkloric tales, research suggests that the birth of disabled children gave rise to this belief of exchange. In her article *Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids, and the Solitary Fairy* (1988), Susan Schoon Elbery writes that: "Changelings often do not walk, run, or dance unless they think they will not be observed. Most are very small; they may have unusual eyes, ears and/or hands. They are described in many cases as wizened, with dark wrinkled skin. They frequently cry at all hours of the day or night; in some tales, the sound of the cry itself is unusual" (63). Schoon Elbery also notes that detailed descriptions of changelings are often omitted, thereby making it unclear what they may look like. Changelings, then, are the product of an exchange, whereby the new child is a twisted version of the original. But rather than these distortions pertaining only to the changeling's body, they also pertain to its abilities—how it walks, cries, or dances.

In *The Gray House*, the changeling appears in the middle of the novel as a figure who stalks the forests and swamps that surround the House, and it remains unclear what the changeling is a changeling for, but we later learn that the character is simultaneously Blind, the leader of the Fourth. When the reader is introduced to changeling as it's stalking the swamps, it becomes seduced by the singing of Saära, a creature that lives in a swamp near the Forest: "When he sings, the song distorts the whole of his face and his eyes go almost blind. His fingers tease and tear the grass, he trembles, shaken by his own voice, and he waits. The song always brings him visitors" (427–

428). Saära, though not himself described as a changeling or disabled, distorts his own body through the sonorous use of his voice, rendering him nearly blind; a temporary disability. The changeling hears Saära's singing that "keeps getting more sweet, loud, and seductive" (428), until he is won over and is caught in Saära's trap:

> "Why," he says, "do you walk into the trap like some common prey?" "Curious," the changeling explains. "And beautiful. Sing another one." Saära fumes silently. Singing for nothing? Not luring, not yearning? Shame, shame for evermore! "All right," he says finally. "But only if you come down with me. And give me something valuable in return." "Deal." (431)

Saära's singing is one of yearning and a luring; the voice is used to draw a prey into his trap, to catch and ensnare it. Yet, as the first sentence of the passage suggests, the changeling willingly lets himself be caught, seduced by the subterfuge of Saära's song. Singing to lure and seduce prey ultimately leads to an exchange of some kind, echoing the transactional nature of the changeling's folkloric origins. The changeling desires more singing and must offer Saära something in return. The changeling then offers Saära its blood, for which Saära then sings more of his songs. As Saära sleeps in his burrow after the exchange, the changeling retreats into the Forest:

> Once inside he starts remembering the songs he bought with his blood. He needs to repeat them before he forgets. His back is caked in drying mud. He sits up and puts his arms around his knees. The long white stems of his fingers intertwine. He recalls all the songs, from the first words to the very last ones, and falls asleep, satisfied. The Forest waves its dark branches over him. (432)

The changeling's body becomes a container for Saära's songs as he sits in a folded position by covering his arms around his knees, his fingers intertwined, enveloping himself before he himself is enveloped by the Forest, concluding this frame story. *Frame* here does not only denote a story within a story but also a story *about* framing. Saära's singing seduces his prey, but the prey itself deliberately walked into it. Furthermore, the text never divulges what exactly the changeling is a changeling *for*, but it does involve an exchange. As Saära sings his songs that distort his face and render him almost blind, the changeling gives up its blood to Saära in order to hear more songs which its body contains, which is then enveloped by the Forest.

Singing is connected to that which is sonorous and visceral, as that which twists the singer's body, and songs are what is stored within the body, which is itself stored in the Forest. Rather than an allegorical tale of symbolic exchange and folding, the text twists the changeling's folkloric connotations by distorting the nature of the exchange taking place. Instead of one child being exchanged for another, the text stresses the materiality of the bodies involved, who both gain and lose (dis)abilities through the character's transactions.

This is expounded further when the changeling, who is now somehow turned (back) into the character of Blind, comes to his senses:

> He treads slowly. His face is untroubled, like that of someone sleeping peacefully. His fingers run ahead and then return when he remembers the way. Now is the time of the crack between the worlds. Between the House and the Forest. He prefers to cross it in his sleep. When he's inside it his memory stumbles over familiar obstacles, and the body stumbles with it. When he's inside it he doesn't have command over his hearing. He doesn't hear things that are there, or hears the ones that aren't. (439)

Blind's body, instead of being willfully determined by him, readjusts to the crack between the worlds of the House and the Forest in an apparently liminal time of reverie, as his face appears to be sleeping peacefully. But then the text states that he actually prefers to cross this crack in his sleep, evoking a somnambulistic figure that moves and acts in a trance-like state. His fingers "run ahead" but return when they remember; his body stumbles along with his memory; and finally he hears what is not there and does not hear what is there. The text thus points to a conception of the body as one of external determination, where bodily abilities (to listen and perceive) are twistable, in a state of flux. In the scene discussed in the previous paragraph, Smoker sought to *make sense* out of the world he perceived which ultimately twisted his body into becoming a receptive, listening body, that was a distorted listening as it was overwhelmed by that world. Here, external determination is proposed as a process of *attunement* between the sleepwalking, blind body and the liminality of the worlds it moves in between.

Blind's lack of command over his hearing does not allow him to distinguish what is or is not there. His senses, too, become distorted. This is not a luring as with Saära's songs, or the heuristic device of the "game" Smoker employed to explain the world around him. Distortion concerns the twisting of the relationship between the epis-

temological "making sense" of the world, discerning what is or is not true, and the parallel twisting of the aesthetic abilities through which we sense and act in that world. Where Smoker's body was eventually twisted by the world he aimed to make sense of (and thereby tried subjugating it to his understanding), it is not that Blind *knows* what the Forest wants of him (and neither does the reader), only that there is a demand. When he is interrogated by one of the counselors concerning his whereabouts during the Longest Night, Blind says: "The night woke me up and made me hear ... Why? I don't know. No one knows" (440). The text continues: "Blind listens patiently. It's the only thing that's left. Listen when you can't explain. Thorns are springing up on the road to the Forest. The internal clock had chimed morning long ago. But the night doesn't end" (440). Smoker sought to understand the game he believed to be a part of, which eventually rendered him unable to process that world and twisted his body from an interpreting one into a receptive, listening body. Blind's senses too are distorted, but he is listening without needing an explanation *why or what for* he is listening: "Listen when you *can't* explain." Through the transformation of the changeling into Blind (and vice versa), the text opens up distortion's polysemy. As mentioned above, the changeling in folklore denoted a child that was exchanged for another child, but that often evaded close description. *The Gray House* assimilates this reading of the changeling by taking some connotations (that of the changeling being a figure of exchange, and lacking detailed description), while omitting others (that of the exchange of children).

Wolfgang Iser has delineated how fictional texts assimilate new combinations of connotations through the workings of *selection* and *combination*. Iser states that selection involves the event (rather than the intentional act) through which a text (dis)assembles from different referential fields (social, historical, cultural). This process for Iser is non-intentional in the sense that selection in a literary text constitutes the possibility to inquire how this selection relates to these referential fields, rather than these fields involving a pre-established repertoire of choices: "If an act of selection were governed by a set of rules given prior to the act, then the act itself would not transgress existing boundaries but would simply be one form of actualizing a possibility within the framework of a prevailing convention" (5). Combination, meanwhile, refers to new relationships a text makes conceivable through the transgressions manifested via selection: "Combination as a fictionalizing act endows the imaginary with a specific form according to the relations to be established. This form of the imaginary eludes verbalization. At the same time, however, it can never dispense with language, for language points to what is to be concretized. It also enables the concretization to be shaped and thus fed back into existing realities" (11). For Iser, fiction

is what gives form to the imaginary,[14] as what concretizes the imaginary in language. Yet, as the quote shows, imbuing the imaginary with form "eludes verbalization," Iser offers the following explanation as to why this is:

> Owing to its figurations, figurative language makes its references conceivable. Such language dwindles to an analogue that merely contains the conditions that will allow a reference to be conceived, but it cannot be identical to that reference. We may therefore discern a strange ambiguity in the function of this figurative language: as an analogue it permits and conditions conceivability, and as a sign it denotes the linguistic untranslatability of what it refers to. (11)

While figurative language imbues the imaginary with form because it is analogous in nature (and thereby establishes a relationship between two signs, rendering it analogically conceivable), it evades full "translation," by which Iser means that it cannot establish a "stronger" denotative relationship to its reference. Iser's theory thereby suggests that by imbuing the imaginary with figurative form, it makes the imaginary conceivable but simultaneously not denotatively referential. This lack of denotative referentiality opens up the text's polysemy: the coexistence of contradictory or non-complimentary connotations without a definitive denotation.

The figure of the changeling, as my reading argues, foregrounds the analogous nature of the figurative. Rather than being carefully described in the text, as Blind twists into the changeling and back, the text emphasizes the figure's connotations in favor of its denotation, intertwining the economic functions of exchange (the blood that was traded for more songs), with that of making itself a figure through which (dis)abilities can come and go. Through this distortional transition of the changeling, the text simultaneously refers to the figure's folkloric origins (as an exchanged disabled child that was able to conceal its disabilities), while transgressing and subverting other (socio-medical) conceptualizations of disability that rest on the analogical conception of the *model*.

As Iser posited, new relations of figurative language that imbue the imaginary with form also feed back into reality, which is how fiction may afford what is con-

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14 In Iser's theory, the fictionalizing act mediates between the real and the imaginary. He defines the act of fictionalizing as giving the imaginary an "articulated gestalt" that differs from daydreams and reveries (3), while simultaneously "outstripping the determinacy of the real" (3), offering its affordances of transgression.

ceivable. In the case of the conceptualization of disability, the changeling subverts the logic of the model as disability's principle of conceivability. At the start of this chapter, I noted that while there has been research done on the normativity that disability studies itself produces, this did not involve the normative conceptualizations of disability, specifically its conceptualization through different models.

The term model stems from *modulus*, a measure or standard, which according to the OED involves "A representation of structure, and related senses. A set of designs (plans, elevations, sections, etc.) for a projected building or other structure; a similar set of drawings made to scale and representing the proportions and arrangement of an existing building."[15] While criticism of the different models of disability exists,[16] this criticism deals with what these models propose, rather than critiquing the conceptualization of disability *qua* model. Models automatically establish a relationship of analogy with external reality which itself creates a situation of particular instances not adhering to the model. For example, Palmer and Harley (2012) have argued that the social model of disability excludes lived experiences with impairment. As its etymological roots suggest, model conceptualizations of disability *conceive* a specific kind of normativity that is founded on this relationship of analogy, regardless of its aims.

Both the logic of distortion and that of the model work via analogy and resemblance. Distortion cannot take place without twisting the normative analogic relations from which it draws, producing asymmetrical contraries through the polysemy manifested. The logic of models proposes a relationship between the model and particular instances or examples, which effectuates normativity by virtue of the analogous character between the model and the example, where bad examples, still recognized *as* examples, may become "abnormal," "aberrations," and so on. Consequently, where they diverge is in their operation. Distortion seeks to twist and subvert, whereas the logic of models seeks to converge and conform.

In their study N*ormality: A Critical Genealogy* (2017) Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens state that the normal "often suggests something more than simply conformity to a standard or type: it also implies what is correct or good, something so perfect in its exemplarity that it constitutes an ideal" (1). This goes for models themselves as well: by proposing models as the ideal relationship of analogy with which to conceptualize disability, the model itself is implicitly taken to be an ideal (and normative)

15 https://www-oed.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/view/Entry/120577?rskey=fp9tS1&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid

16 Haegele and Hodge (2016), *Disability Discourse: Overview and Critiques of the Medical and Social Models*. And Terzi (2004), *The Social Model of Disability: A Philosophical Critique*.

conceptualization for it. Georges Canguilhem writes that "A norm, or rule, is what can be used to right, to square, to straighten. To set a norm (*normer*), to normalize, is to impose a requirement on an existence, a given whose variety, disparity, with regard to the requirement, present themselves as a hostile, even more than an unknown, indeterminant" (239). To "impose a requirement on an existence" is for Canguilhem the pre-conception (e.g., of the good or ideal) that a norm necessarily enforces to right and straighten, which is the opposite of twisting. Any order suggested by the use of a norm automatically invokes the possibility of its inversion, but this does not have to be of the same kind. Canguilhem continues: "the inversion of a logical norm does not yield a logical, but perhaps an aesthetic norm, as the inversion of an ethical norm does not yield an ethical, but perhaps a political one. In short, norms, whether in some implicit or explicit form, refer the real to values, express discriminations of qualities in conformity with the polar opposition of a positive and a negative" (240). Norms, Canguilhem argues, espouse normativity through polarity, but the opposite term can be of a different kind.

In the case of disability, the normativity of the model is that it forces a conception of analogous convergence (of thinking in terms of the model and its examples), regardless of the model's particular contents. Distortion can only contrast this by appropriating the model's logic, since the straightening that norms manifest can only be twisted by taking it as its material. *The Gray House* thereby does not simply posit one norm concerning disability in favor of, or against, another. To distort the straightening imposition on existence that normativity necessarily executes, the novel equally necessarily encapsulates the dominating normative conceptualization of disability as a "model" within its world while simultaneously placing radically different ones besides them through its usage of the figuratively conceivable. If the normativity of models seeks to converge to an ideal (even if this is model thinking itself), the distortion manifested in *The Gray House* espouses pluralist aesthetic divergence—diversity in the relationalities and abilities concerning making sense and sensing the world.

5. Fantastic Disturbances: Assimilative Reading and Disabled Dissimilation

My reading of *The Gray House* posits a notion of distortion that does not rest on intentionality but instead on how the twisting of the interpretative act affords different affective relationalities. Roland Barthes, in his etymological reading of the word *text*, suggests that the classic conceptualization of textual interpretation takes text to act as

a veil, behind which truth and meaning are hidden (1975: 64). Barthes then contrasts this conception with the text as *weave*: "we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (1975: 64).

Barthes' quote describes a parallel twisting of the textual weave that entails the assimilation of the text with the parallel dissimilation of subjectivity—thus the spider dissolves while the web is constructed. This culminates in the argument that during reading as a weave, "it is not my 'subjectivity' I encounter but my 'individuality', the given which makes my body separate from other bodies and appropriates its suffering or its pleasure: it is my body of bliss I encounter" (62). For Barthes, the twisting that the dissimilation of subjectivity entails is principally ecstatic in nature, favoring the body-of-bliss over the subject that distantiates herself from the text through the readerly attitude that favors contemplative interpretation and consequently would reinstantiate subjectivity.

While the fantastic shares with Barthes the emphasis on reading as a practice of dissimilation, these are two different kinds of dissimilation. Barthes' argument pushes toward an understanding of dissimilation that employs the figure of the weave as the dissolution of the reader-as-subject in favor of the body-of-bliss, i.e., reading as dissimilation of the subject that might move beyond representation. This is not the case in the literary mode of the fantastic. As I argued in the previous paragraphs, the fantastic never seeks to dismiss normative representational logic (like that of the model), but instead appropriates and distorts it. Contrasting Barthes' ecstatic body-of-bliss that would be manifested through the unmaking of the subject as the consequence of literary dissimilation, my reading of *The Gray House* posits an uncertain receptive and interpreting body, a body with (dis)abilities. This problematizes not the unmaking of subjectivity but rather the assimilation of the relationship between the interpretive ability and the body's capacities.

Earlier, I presented Rosemary Jackson's argument that the fantastic succeeds in its subversion only if it *disturbs* the reader (23). Toward the end of the novel, as the students approach their graduation day, the House is thrown into such disturbance, for what will come after graduation? The students come together for Fairy Tale Night; an evening in which the House's inhabitants share stories about themselves. The novel alternates between Smoker narrating and reviewing the tales told and short chapters that are some (but not all) of the actual tales themselves, with each tale being from a different student. One of the short frame-story chapters included is Noble's tale. It opens with Noble finding himself in the middle of a road as he comes

across a place called the Roach Motel. Taking up odd jobs around the motel, Noble is alerted that there will be trouble. As he tries to get away, his legs hurt (due to an undisclosed impairment), and a motel resident warns him of the Forest. Lost again and wandering, the tale ends with Noble being found by Blind near the Forest, who welcomes him home (674). As the novel switches back to Smoker recounting Fairy Tale night, he dissects to what extent the tales he hears, including Noble's, are actually fairytales:

> It too was not a fairytale. Noble was telling us about living in some small town, what he did there and how he was trying to make some money. It was clear that he'd invented this out of whole cloth, but at the same time I had this gnawing feeling that he was in fact relating something that really happened. It was only the ending that did turn magical, and that suddenly and way over the top, as if Noble got tired of straining his imagination deciding how he was going to get his character out of the bind he'd put him into. There even was an appearance by Blind there, contrived and inappropriate, in my opinion. (681)

Smoker dissects Noble's tale along the lines of the genre conventions of the fairytale. He asserts that Noble's tale was "invented out of whole cloth," implying full mimetic invention, but simultaneously has a "gnawing feeling" that it is somehow based in reality. He evaluates Noble's story as being "way over the top," while his own reading practice is itself situated in a fantastic world where inexplicable events occur.

In effect, Smoker's reading of Noble's frame story, which itself is a tale of the fantastic, imitates the reader's own reading practice of the novel by trying to determine how this story fits in with certain genre expectations and how to evaluate and interpret them, attempting to order the world. The fantastic thereby accompanies the frame story with *frame reading*: we, as readers, are reading someone else's reading practice that imitates our own. This doubles the representational relationship that fiction creates in that, while we as readers can ponder in what way Noble's frame story relates to *The Gray House*'s narrative and world, the questioning of the relationship of the ludic feint (to immerse oneself in the story by questioning the permeability of fiction and reality) itself becomes woven into the text.

While Barthes posited a conceptualization of the textual weave wherein subjectivity is dissimilated in tandem with the assimilation of the text, Smoker's reading practice weaves his own reading practice with that of the reader, enacting the way in which a reading can be used in an attempt to establish order out of disorder, through

its affordance of what fits and does not fit in with a genre's conventions (what is or is not typical of a fairytale). *The Gray House* thereby twists Barthes' weave inside out: through reading a frame reading, the reading subject is not dissimilated through the text's perpetual interweaving, as Barthes suggests, but is instead invited to double down on interpretation. Rather than encountering the body-of-bliss that Barthes' literary aesthetics propose, the novel distorts this affective relationality in relation to the text-as-weave. For Smoker, in his reading, mentions a gnawing feeling that the tale is somehow based in reality. But the reality referred to is paradoxically a fantastic world. Rosemary Jackson notes that "By foregrounding its own signifying practice, the fantastic begins to betray its version of the 'real' as a relative one, which can only deform and transform experience, so the 'real' is exposed as a category, as something articulated by and constructed through the literary or artistic text" (84). In the fantastic, conceptions of the real are made susceptible to distortion, effectuating a specific affective relationality. For the hesitation that the phrase "gnawing feeling" evokes—because uncertain about said feeling but somehow provoked—is constituted in the fantastic's inexplicable world, rendering the attempted order that may be gained through interpretation futile. Smoker's reading of the ending of Noble's tale connects the fantastic with supposed tiredness. Mimetic invention is not understood as creative but explained through an as-if affective relation ("as if Noble got tired of straining his imagination"), i.e., the use of the imagination in storytelling as a disturbance which is deemed "contrite and inappropriate"—a meta-aesthetic commentary on the fantastic within the fantastic that paradoxically mocks its own non-signification.

Whereas both Todorov and Jackson maintained that the fantastic should not be subjugated to allegory and metaphor and that part of its power lies in its resistance to allegorization, *The Gray House* distorts the act of allegorization through appropriating and enacting assimilation and dissimilation within its own text. What is therefore at stake is the disjunction between the ethical imperative (not) to allegorize and consequently subjugate the fantastic text and the supposed power of the text to resist allegorization. As Smoker listens to and evaluates more stories other students tell, he suddenly slips from the bed he was sitting on:

> Then someone stepped on me. I figured I'd better get up on the nearest bed before they trampled me, but there was no space on the nearest bed. It was occupied by Shuffle, his guitar, Owl (I think), and someone hiding behind a backpack. That someone said, "Hey, what are you doing? It's packed here." So I crawled on. In the next three minutes I got stepped on about two dozen times, so by the time the break ended

> I was hurting all over. Thankfully, when Tabaqui declared the end of the break and everyone took their seats, someone lit the Chinese lantern. Just one, but that was enough to save me. I saw a place for me. (684–685)

The scene, similar to the scene where Smoker was placed in the shower by his fellow students, displaces the dominance of interpreting the world and stories that one is surrounded by with that of the material reality of the socio-medical conception of the disabled body, that is, a body in peril of being trampled. As with the scene where Smoker was dragged into the shower presented earlier, the scene breaks with Smoker being involved with interpretation to shift attention to the realism of his disabled body that is unable to walk. Smoker describes himself as saved by the lighting of a lantern through which he can *see* a place for himself. Seeing a place can be read as a physical space Smoker *perceives* through sight, but this sentence can also be subjected to a reading in which seeing is understood figuratively, i.e., "seeing" a space for oneself in the world at large.

Jackson writes on the relationship between the body and interpretation in the fantastic that: "The subject's relation to the phenomenal world is made problematical and the text foregrounds the impossibility of definitive interpretation or vision: everything becomes equivocal, blurred, 'double', out of focus" (49). Jackson's words here implicate a distortion of sight that consequently manifests a disabled condition. Jackson conflates "definitive interpretation" with "vision" because what is at stake in her argument is the confusion of self and other that tales of the fantastic afford (50).[17] This culminates in Jackson stating that "All these thematic clusters revolve around difficulties of perception and knowledge: the question of vision and the control of the 'eye'/'I' of the subject" (51). Jackson espouses a particular conception of the eye/I conflation, wherein knowledge and perception are clustered together in order to make the argument that the fantastic problematizes interpretation. But this dismisses the sensibility of the distorted sight to which she herself alludes.

The passage above (and the passages discussed previously), offer a different relationship to the eye/I conflation. For whereas perception indeed evokes the necessity of the body to interpret the world it is perceiving, perception is itself susceptible to metaphoricity. Furthermore, in my reading, interpretation has been cast as an ability that affects the body that interprets, thereby continuously putting into question

17 This is, of course, explored in *The Gray House* as well, with the use of the changeling as a figure that is supposed to be a child which it is not.

what *capacity* is needed for the ability to interpret—interpretation through blurred and distorted vision cannot but draw our attention to the capacity of the interpreting body itself. *The Gray House* thereby affords a different conception of the relationship between perception and knowledge, one that goes against the eye/I conflation in the way that Jackson posits it, because it constantly draws attention to the distortion of the bodily capacity needed to interpret.

Through separating the conditions of interpretation from interpretation itself, a differentiation can subsequently be made between *the power of allegory* and *the ability to allegorize*. For Jackson the fantastic's resistance to allegory is founded on its non-signification, i.e., the inability to establish a definitive allegorical or metaphorical relationship between the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic, but this argument in itself necessarily rests on the capacities of the body that interprets the world around it. Jackson notes that "It could be suggested that the movement of fantastic narrative is one of metonymical rather than of metaphorical process: one object does not stand for another, but literally becomes that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability" (41–42).

Whereas for Barthes the "unmaking of the subject" in the activity of reading involves the encounter with one's body-of-bliss, suggesting the desirability of the dissimulation of readerly subject, the emphasis on material metamorphoses that is predominant in *The Gray House*'s fantastic narrative foregrounds how the activity of reading makes us question how capacities may become abilities. This involves the relationship *between* two relationships: the representational relationship of signs *and* the affective capacities of the body that interprets these signs. Consequently, distortion as affordance allows for a reading between the way in which the twisting of the representational relationship relates to the twisting of the capacities of the interpreting body.

6. Conclusion

The Gray House, perhaps fittingly, does not offer a clear ending after the students' graduation. Apart from the students that actually graduated from the House and live in the Outsides, the novel also mentions the Sleepers, Jumpers, Striders and students who have simply vanished without any trace. Sleepers are described by Smoker as "Neither dead nor alive … There just wasn't a word for what they were" (694). They are still physically present in the world after graduation, but no one visits them.

Jumpers and Striders meanwhile, seemingly have access to a different world, as one student explains to Grasshopper early in the novel that they are "Those who visit the Underside of the House. Except that Jumpers are kind of thrown there, while Striders can get there by themselves" (141). Then finally, there are those who have inexplicably vanished (and the text never discloses whether they might have been Jumpers, Striders or something else still).

This taxonomy displays the novel's paradoxicality towards the notion that novels must come to an end. For it encapsulates all conceivable positions with regard to plot endings: those whose lives continue outside The House, as in a realist tradition, where life moves on in linear fashion; those who disappear mysteriously, and without it being disclosed *how* they disappeared exactly, encompassing marvellous and fairytale elements; and then finally the Sleepers, who are part of the world and life of those students who graduated and went into the Outsides, but, as the quote above shows, are neither alive nor dead but apparently infirm, evoking a liminal, in-between state, an indefinite ending.

One of the novel's final chapters is *Voices From the Outsides*, a series of vignettes in which different characters offer some reflections on life many years (at least twenty) after graduation. Some of these vignettes reflect on the Sleepers, and how different characters have different attitudes towards them. Smoker collects newspaper clippings, but then abandons it because "it was too painful, thinking about them, imagining them. Easier to deal with the living or with the truly dead." The character of Horse, meanwhile, says "No, none of us went to visit them. What's the point?" (705). Black reflects that "Honestly, I don't care about the Sleepers. I'm not even going to pretend that I'm grieving for them" (706). Then the text offers a vignette by Red, who says "I do visit them from time to time. No flowers, of course. Why shouldn't I? … There's nothing scary about them. They don't wither, they don't waste away, they don't look like corpses at all" (706). There are various dispositions shown here toward the Sleepers, from the pain of imagining them (Smoker), to indifference (Horse and Black), to an apparent jovial and uninhibited outlook (Red). The disjunction in these responses is contrasted with the fact that the Sleepers themselves are physically present but unable to communicate. The novel thereby connects the in-between, liminal position with the sensibility of disability at its most inexplicable manifestation, in a seemingly comatose condition ("There just wasn't a word for what they were"). This connection subsequently affords the ways in which a story's ending can be distorted. For some characters the story does end (as they have vanished, closing the story), and for some the story does go on (beyond the novel's narrative, as an open ending and apparent continuation). The anthropomorphic Sleepers do not negate

these options, but add a third, one that entails neither continuation nor ending.[18] For as their name suggests, they could, at some point, wake up. But it is their liminality (in between ending and continuity, in between life and death), which the novel affirms without negating the dualism of open and closed endings.

While they *are* named, Smoker paradoxically also asserts that "there just wasn't a word for what they were"—a signifying non-signifiying sentence. The Sleepers simultaneously elicit a response in the novel's characters that connects the interpretative act with different affective dispositions as described above. Importantly, the Sleepers themselves have no abilities at all and exist in a homeostatic condition ("They don't wither, they don't waste away"). Their non-signifying nature becomes connected to a state of bodily permanence, of bodily capacity without any ability. The inability to fully make sense of the nature of the Sleepers thus becomes connected with how other characters are affected by them. The twisting that occurs, then, is that by coupling non-signification with a state of bodily permanence the Sleepers effectively foreclose the closure of definitive interpretation.

In my reading of distortion in relation to disability, the relationship between making sense and how one senses or is affected by the world is central to what is subject to become twisted. This implies that what the fantastic, as literary mode, affords in relation to disability is precisely that it calls into question how the twisting of capacity into ability is connected to the twisting sensibility. My reading of *The Gray House* further undermines the idea that we can think of these separately. Smoker's and Blind's relationalities to the House are fundamentally distinct in that Smoker sought to subjugate the world through explaining it through the heuristic device of "the game" that he believed he did not know the rules of yet. When faced with the gruesome and inexplicable nature of that world he became overwhelmed *by* that world. The metamorphic character of Blind/the changeling, meanwhile, predominantly tried to attune to the House's world through his available senses, but as one of his focalized thoughts suggests ("listen when you can't explain"), he too is bound to interpret the world he is a part of. While both characters interpret *and* sense the world they inhabit, distortion thus affords different relationalities between sensing and making sense. This reading, in keeping with the previous chapters, extends the argument that literary and aesthetic analysis allow us to read for the way in which bodily capacities become (dis)abilities in cultural texts.

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18 I am using the term *anthropomorphic* as delineated by Paul de Man, who proposes it to not function as a trope, but rather "a proper name," which freezes tropological propositions into "one single assertion or essence" (241).

Concerning the ways in which readers may hold themselves accountable for how they interpret literary texts, literary scholar Irmtraud Huber recasts the difficulty of the fantastic as relating to a pro-active attitude in adopting "readerly responsibility." She writes of the fantastic:

> As the choice of an appropriate stance of reception is made deliberately problematic, fantastic texts may serve to foreground the mechanisms and ground-rules governing the dynamic processes of the fictive, not only in its constitution but also in its effect. As readers are forced to become aware of and question their approach to a textual representation, reception may become a conscious act of taking readerly responsibility. (72)

Huber goes on to argue that "ultimately readers are confronted with interpretative choices that involve agency and responsibility. This is a fantastic beyond subversion, a fantastic that is no longer driven solely by the need to deconstruct but by a desire for reconstruction" (73). Huber places the term "reconstruction" adjacent to readerly responsibility because "'reconstruction' answers both to the pervasive attempt to establish meaningful connections by renewing the (impossible) possibility of communication and to the revaluation of the fictive that attends this process" (48).

I agree with Huber insofar that the fantastic complicates the way in which the reader responds to and interprets the fantastic text and thereby implicates the reader, which Huber understands as "agency and responsibility." Her argument, however, subsequently displaces subversion in favor of reconstruction, where the fantastic's inexplicability is recast as a "pervasive attempt to establish meaningful connections". What is at stake in differentiating Huber's approach to the fantastic from my own is the way in which her chosen terminology (which emphasizes reconstruction, responsibility, communication) suggests a relationship to representation that becomes political precisely because it verges toward allegorization of the fantastic. Such a reading subjugates the fantastic to the project of reconstruction as a desirable readerly response, denying its transgressive nature.

My reading of distortion through *The Gray House*, by contrast, emphasizes that while concepts like "agency" and "responsibility" are indeed called into question through the fantastic text, they simultaneously necessarily involve the question concerning how these concepts relate to the way in which the fantastic twists the capacity of the interpreting body, and twists how to give an account of them, both intra- and extra-diegetically. Consequently, Huber's argument is twisted inside out. Similar to

Ricoeur's line of argumentation that hesitation is grounded in powerlessness, and affect in disorder, transgression is here not understood as the "pervasive attempt to establish meaningful connections." Instead, it proposes that interpretation necessarily rest on the pervasive contingency of the capacity of the body that may translate into (dis)abilities, and how the body's capacities are necessarily implicated in the way we construe meaning.

Transgression is thereby posited as more than an intentional act. Through my reading of distortion, I argue that transgression implies that agency and responsibility (as responses of and to events and sites of reading) are susceptible to become twisted, constituting them in the contingency of bodily capacity. Rather than "restoring" the fantastic as a signifying literary mode, distortion as a concept of affordance delineates the way in which the text simultaneously assimilates and dissimilates the relationship between capacity and representation through this relationship becoming twisted. In the conclusion of this study, I will argue how the approach centered on reading for affordances differs from such approaches that advocate for recuperation, repair, and reconstruction.