

Metalepses and Shoelaces: Advanced Narrative Resources in Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine**

Metalepsis y cordones de zapatos: Recursos narrativos avanzados en *The Mezzanine*, de Nicholson Baker

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Abstract: Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* (1988) bends narrative boundaries to the extreme. This article analyses the novel's postmodern metatextuality, its confrontation of high culture and mass culture, its exploration of recursive thought processes, its inclusion of constantly shifting time references, and the function of its autodiegetic narrator. Special attention is given to the use of the footnote as a narrative device as it allows Baker to develop Gérard Genette's concept of *narrative metalepsis*. Because of the unique way these advanced narrative resources are interwoven, the novel deserves wider academic attention as a milestone in contemporary literature in English.

Keywords: narratology; Nicholson Baker; *The Mezzanine*; footnotes; Gérard Genette.

Summary: Introduction. Narrative Structure. Psychological Development. Time References. High Culture and Mass Culture. Footnotes. Conclusions.

Resumen: Nicholson Baker tensa al máximo los límites de la narrativa en *The Mezzanine* (1988). Este artículo analiza elementos de la novela, tales como su posmodernidad metatextual, la confrontación de la alta cultura y la cultura de masas, la exploración de procesos mentales recursivos, la inclusión de referencias temporales en cambio constante, y la función del narrador autodiegético. Presta especial atención al uso de la nota a pie de página como recurso narrativo que permite desarrollar el concepto de *metalepsis narrativa* definido por Gérard Genette. Debido a este singular entrelazado de recursos narrativos, la novela constituye un hito en la literatura contemporánea en inglés que merece mayor atención académica.

Palabras clave: Narratología; Nicholson Baker; *The Mezzanine*; notas al pie; Gérard Genette.

Sumario: Introducción. Estructura narrativa. Desarrollo psicológico. Referencias temporales. Alta cultura y cultura de masas. Notas al pie. Conclusiones.

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INTRODUCTION

Nicholson Baker's first novel *The Mezzanine* (1988) is a unique, and often overlooked, instance of postmodern literature, its relevance lying on its author's extreme use of advanced narrative devices. An almost plotless effort, the novel thoroughly analyses social customs, technological processes, consumption products, and other obsessions that take place in the mind of Howie, its autodiegetic narrator.¹ A young clerk, Howie recalls an escalator trip to the office where he was working years before, located in the mezzanine of an office building in an unspecified town. Entering a second level of consciousness, the escalator ride triggers the recollection of the events experienced during the previous lunch hour, namely a visit to the men's bathroom before leaving the office and a trip to a CVS pharmacy store to buy a replacement pair of shoelaces. Diverse thoughts about his left shoelace having snapped that same morning cover a large part of the narration. "[A]n ordinary mind on an ordinary day," as Virginia Woolf would have it (160), Howie elaborates on such varied issues as escalators, fan blades, the wearing down of shoelaces, paper drinking straws as compared to plastic straws, how to pull on a sock, rubber stamps, earplugs, and counting sheep. According to Simmons, the book's focus on the micro level of analysis, its concern with "modes of social organization and economic production" (603), and its disregard for wider contexts of meaning support its classification as a postmodern text:

Rather than mourn, the kind of postmodern historical imagination at work in Baker's fiction attempts to rid itself of modernism's nostalgia for master historical narratives. In place of gestures toward traditional historical depth that it finds too irrelevant and futile even to be regressive, Baker's fiction celebrates the pleasures of the mass cultural surface. (604)

A combination of experimentalism and micro realism, *The Mezzanine*'s richness of diction and metaphor helps Baker penetrate the workings of the human mind, drawing an autobiographical map of thought processes that constantly leap backward and forward in time. The author's almost reverential attention to objects, customs, and procedures allows him to address mass culture with the respect and solemnity

¹ I will use the term *autodiegetic* as defined by Genette (*Narrative Discourse* 245).

usually granted to instances of high culture. To achieve these purposes, Baker crafts an extremely digressive narration whose most radical device is the extended use of footnotes that support the existence of different narrative and psychological layers. Due to the manner in which it addresses contemporary concerns about the possibilities of narrative, the novel deserves the detailed study that this paper provides.

1. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The novel's minimal plot has led Petterson (43) to consider it an instance of what McHale defined as *weak narrativity*: "telling stories 'poorly,' distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminacy, in such a way as to *evoke* narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it" (165). The question to address is whether *The Mezzanine* combats its lack of adherence to standard narrative notions with alternative mechanisms or if, in a certain way, it complies with traditional structures. The digressive nature of the text, its focus on psychological processes rather than on action, and its playfulness in regard to time references—issues which will be addressed later—point towards the first option. Nevertheless, if the events occurring from the moment Howie discovers his broken shoelace to the time the escalator ride finishes are treated as a story arc, parallels to classical narrative structures can be found.

In fact, *The Mezzanine* might be perceived as an adventure story with three differentiated phases. In its beginning, the established order is disrupted, as Howie, the hero, discovers the snapping of his left shoelace (2). The middle part of the novel finds the hero on his double quest to remedy the situation, on his way to buy a new pair of shoelaces at CVS, and in search of the truth. He is concerned with the fact that his right shoelace had snapped the day before, so he starts thinking whether he had administered the same level of wear to both shoelaces (15). Since the snapping shoelaces were the original ones, and the shoes were a gift from his father, for Howie the event becomes both sad—"the breakage was a sentimental milestone of sorts" (15)—and tragic—"[i]n the aftermath of the broken-shoelace disappointment . . ." (14). As if mirroring King Lear's repentance on the heath, the hero experiences guilt in regard to the origin of his trouble:

I had probably broken the shoelace by transferring the social energy that I had had to muster in order to deliver a chummy “Have a good one!” to [workmates going for lunch] from my awkward shoe-tier’s crouch into the force I had used in pulling on the shoelace. (14–15)

From this vantage point, Howie’s shoelaces are his Holy Grail: shoelaces are mentioned seventy-two times in the novel. His mental action mostly circumscribes to their snapping: events are recalled “[b]y the time my shoelaces broke” (19) and he must now find theoretical solutions to “the thread of shoelace theory” (70). Before leaving the office building, Howie asks secretary Tina where he can buy shoelaces. By suggesting him to try CVS pharmacy (34), she plays the part of the oracle who points the hero in the right direction. When he finally reaches the drugstore, a final test awaits him: finding the aisle where shoelaces are stored: “somewhere within this particular store . . . was a pair of shoelaces, held ready in inventory against the fateful day that mine wore down and snapped” (116). The hero eventually finds his Holy Grail (116–17), thus entering the third and last phase of the story: restoration of the established order.

However, the hero’s quest is not yet complete, since the mystery of shoelace wear is still to be solved. A voracious appetite for research allows Howie to find technical texts on textile abrasive stresses (131). When he finally discovers Z. Czaplicki’s article “Methods for evaluating the abrasion resistance and knot slippage strength of shoe laces,” his quest is complete: “I let out a small cry and slapped my hand down on the page. The joy I felt may be difficult for some to understand” (132). This parallel between an Arthurian quest and such an apparently trivial matter as replacing a pair of shoelaces represents a challenge to traditional narrative structures that situates *The Mezzanine* in the mock-heroic genre and narrows the gap between the concepts of high culture and mass culture.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Baker’s concern with processes of different natures has awakened attention in critical areas other than the strictly literary. His debut was commented on in the *MIT Technology Review* (Pontin 92–96), and subsequent novels have been reviewed by different doctors in Medicine in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* (Gabbard 2245; Satel 1749). This

should not come as a surprise, since *The Mezzanine*'s exploration of mental processes permeates the whole text, with constant digressions allowing the narrator to enter successive levels of consciousness. Howie draws a whole cartography of remembering. In fact, *The Mezzanine* might be conceived as a unique experience of stream of consciousness, its short escalator ride triggering countless thoughts and remembrances in top-down fashion.

Nonetheless, what makes the novel so remarkable in the psychological area is its awareness of the thinking processes themselves, especially in regard to remembering and giving mental shape to lived experiences. Speaking from a narrative present, Howie remembers what he was remembering while riding the escalator, his recollections of recollections sometimes involving further recollections. This recursive thinking is illustrated in passages like the following, where the narrator recalls his inability to remember: “[W]hen I looked down at [a bag], I discovered that I was unable for a second to remember what was inside, my recollection snagged on the stapled receipt” (4). The young man's obsessive concern with the workings of the mind raises in him an alertness of psychological processes. When remembering how he once, after the escalator episode, saw a garbage truck against the blue sky, he comments:

I remembered that when I was little I used to be very interested in the fact that anything . . . looked good if you set it down on . . . any kind of clean background. The thought came to me with just that prefix: “when I was little.” (38)

The quote's intrinsic value as a token of psychological awareness is reinforced by Howie's further remarks:

But it was the garbage truck I saw at age thirty on display against the blue sky that had reminded me of my old backdrop discovery. Though simple, the trick was something that struck me as interesting and useful right now. Thus, the *when I was little* nostalgia was misleading: it turned something that I was taking seriously as an adult into something soupier, less precise, more falsely exotic, than it really was. (38–39; my emphasis)

The paragraph is of special relevance for present purposes, as it combines a conscious attention to memory and the development of psychological processes with the use of different time references, as will

be discussed in the following section. When elaborating further on the bag incident, Howie tries to explain his own flow of consciousness:

It would have been less cumbersome, in the account I am giving here of a specific lunch hour several years ago, to have pretended that the bag thought had come to me complete and “all at once” at the foot of the up escalator, but the truth was that it was only the latest in a fairly long sequence of partially forgotten, inarticulable experiences, finally now reaching a point that I paid attention to it for the first time. (9)

The way Howie addresses his own mental processes implies a degree of postmodern metatextuality, since as narrator he is aware of the resources he uses, as the preceding quote attests. In a pseudo-scientific effort, at the end of the novel Howie devises a list with “the *periodicity* of returning thoughts”:

If we could assign a periodicity number . . . to every recurrent thought a person had, . . . [w]e would know the relative frequency of his thoughts over time, something that might prove to be more revealing than any statement of beliefs he might offer. (126–27)

However, he soon notices that turning the continuous flow of the mind into discrete values is not an easy task:

But compiling the list . . . was not the enlightening process of abstraction I had expected it to be: thoughts were too fluid, too difficult to name, and once named to classify, for my estimate of their relative frequency to mean very much. (128)

Taking into account Howie’s continuous mental activity, the exchange with his manager in the corporate bathroom is worth commenting upon, as Saltzman has noted (*Understanding Nicholson Baker* 185). When asked “What do you think, Howie?,” the young man replies: “Abe, I don’t know what to think” (97). By raising awareness on the novel’s concern with psychological processes, this ironic joke allows Baker to highlight the narrative difficulty of representing the intricate workings of the human mind.

3. TIME REFERENCES

Time is of the essence in *The Mezzanine*. On his escalator trip, Howie remembers and elaborates widely on events ranging from his childhood to the previous hour; but even the escalator ride is told in retrospect, the time at which the narration takes place being that of his elder self. This fosters an ambiguous temporal perception, since, when recounting events prior to the escalator trip, Howie is not narrating from his escalator-riding self, but from his remembering-the-escalator-trip-a-few-years-later position, which frames his earlier self. Illustrating the complexity of thought processes in regard to their temporal dimension, Baker even combines multiple time references in the same sentence, as the following examples attest:

But there was a . . . reason I had specifically asked Donna for the bag [T1], a reason I hadn't quite isolated in that first moment of analysis on the sidewalk afterward [T2], but which I now [T4] perceived, walking toward the escalator to the mezzanine and looking at the stapled CVS bag I had just transferred [T3] from one hand to the other. (7)²

Although elided in the excerpt, there is a fifth time reference (T5) corresponding to speech time, that is, the moment at which the narrator is speaking: the narrative present. The previous reference (T4) corresponds to the moment he is recalling: the walk toward the escalator. T3, the bag transfer, occurs immediately before. Prior to T3, T2 focuses on the protagonist's psychological processes by illustrating the instant when he first thought about what happened in T1—his asking Donna, the CVS cashier, for a bag. Thus, the narrator is thinking (T5) about a moment when he was thinking (T4) about a previous moment when he was thinking (T2) about the actual events (T1 and, in foretelling fashion, T3). The order of events appears even more chaotic in the following ecstasy of analepses and prolepses:

Given all of these powerful, preexisting connections in my past life [T1] between escalators and shoelaces, you would expect that at the moment I boarded the escalator that afternoon [T4], I would have been forcefully reminded of the problem of shoelace wear which had occupied me an hour

² Time references are represented by an uppercase *T* and a numeral indicating their chronological order.

earlier [T2]. But the determinism of reminding often works obscurely; and in this case the subject had already occurred to me and been laid aside in the few minutes I spent in the men's room before lunch [T3]: following this recurrence, the subject didn't arise until very recently [T5], as I began to reconstitute the events of that noontime for this opusculum. (69)

In this case, speech time (T6, also elided) is close to T5, both of them being preceded in years by the time Howie boards the escalator (T4). About one hour prior to T4, he was troubled with the shoelace (T2); he then entered the men's room (T3). The "preexisting connections" (T1) are anterior to whatever occurred that day. As confusing as it seems, establishing a clear chronology in this excerpt is an easy task when compared to the following one, which occurs within footnote number 35:

Let me mention [T4] another fairly important development in the history of the straw. I recently noticed [T3], and remembered dimly half noticing for several years before then [T2], that the paper wrapper, which once [T1] had slipped so easily down the plastic straw . . . , now [T3, T4, or T5] does not slip at all. (94)

The earliest time reference regards the use of the straw paper wrapper (T1); the rest involve Howie's mental processes. Recently noticing something (T3) occurs before speech time, but remembering noticing something "for several years before then" occurs earlier (T2). Ambiguity permeates the first and last time references, as "[I]et me mention" (T4) may refer either to speech time—the moment in which the character utters the sentence—or to the moment where the reader receives the information, and which may be considered as posterior to or simultaneous with speech time. To complicate the analysis further, "now" may match T4 (the instant from where Howie is narrating), may follow T4 (as a short time lapse has passed from the time the narrator pronounced "[I]et me mention" to his uttering "now"), or may even match T3 (as the fact that straws do not slip "now" is told in regard to the very moment when he "recently noticed" this revelation, thus establishing a relation of simultaneity between both times). It is not surprising that, from all fifty footnotes in the novel, twenty-four start in the present tense and twenty-five in the past tense. The remaining one (footnote 9) holds tense ambiguity: "Not liking when you end up with only one of the two bunny's ears that make up a normal bow" (25). Is

Howie referring to speech time or to the previous event time occurring in the main text?

Baker indulges his narrative playfulness with sentences as chronologically imprecise as “[w]hen I was younger than I should have been” (113). Although the novel is mostly confined to Howie’s thoughts onboard the escalator, speech time is explicitly referred to in footnote 30: “Right now, half an hour before I have to leave for work, day before yesterday’s mug is on the windowsill still” (78). On this occasion speech time is surrounded by an earlier time reference, the day before yesterday, and a posterior one, half an hour later. As Saltzman has remarked on the matter,

our reading grows schizophrenic, for the form of the novel compels us to shuttle back and forth in time to the whims of a narrator whose interests are so promiscuous, so distractible, that no narrative line will suffice to hold all of the enthusiasms he traffics in. (“To See a World” 427)

Due to thought evocation and extended description, Baker creates a climate of discontinuity, slowness, and temporal flexibility. Prelunch and lunch hour events—the discovery of the broken shoelace, the chat with Tina, the visit to the bathroom, and the trip to CVS—occupy more than two thirds of the novel. This apparent narratorial laxity finds its counterpoint in Howie’s trip back from the pharmacy, which is told in less than fourteen lines starting with the paradoxical sentence: “On the way back, my office seemed farther from the CVS than it had on the way there” (119). From that moment on, the narrator eats a hot dog: “walking fast in order to save as much of the twenty minutes of my lunch hour I had left for reading” (119), buys a chocolate chip cookie, then half a pint of milk, and finally sits down on a bench. Compared to the previous thirteen chapters, the pace of the narration in this paragraph is so fast that it effectively transmits a rushing sensation. Baker’s deep concern with time highlights the relativity of it, but its articulation in *The Mezzanine* organically intermingles with the digressive nature of the narration and, especially, with the unpredictable paths of mental processes as discussed in the previous section.

4. HIGH CULTURE AND MASS CULTURE

In her influential essay “Modern Fiction” (1921), Virginia Woolf famously commented that “[t]he proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction” (164). This remark becomes a tenet in Nicholson Baker’s *oeuvre*. Objects, processes, trademarks, and everyday customs delimit the universe of *The Mezzanine*, its enhanced portrayal of quotidian routine connecting the novel with mass culture: “The near simultaneity [with which both shoelaces had snapped] was very exciting—it made the variables of private life seem suddenly graspable and law-abiding” (15). As he finds shelter in his introspective microanalytical world, Howie fits Strinati’s description of the individual in a mass society, who “left more and more to his or her own devices, has fewer and fewer communities or institutions in which to find identity or values by which to live” (5–6). Nevertheless, Simmons observes that the novel “stage[s] a confrontation between the phenomena of mass culture and an essentially aristocratic sensibility, between low culture and high,” since “[t]he narrator of *The Mezzanine* displays an educated literary sensibility, a wit and erudition that sometimes rises to Nabokovian heights” (606). An analysis of Howie’s educated remarks shows that his high culture references are mostly challenged to the point of mockery: once he discovers the joy of cleaning his room, he comments: “from then on when I read things Samuel Johnson said about the deadliness of leisure and the uplifting effects of industry, I always nodded and thought of brooms” (21); when he learns how to apply antiperspirant without undressing, by unfastening a single button from his shirt, he thinks of “Ingres’s portrait of Napoleon” (51); the design of urinals is compared with Gerard Manley Hopkins’s description of waves in the sea coast (72); John Milton is not worshipped for his literary work, but for the fact that he uses shoelaces (121); when comparing a complex shoe-tying technique with a pyramid scheme, he recalls a couplet by Alexander Pope: “Man, like the gen’rous vine, supported lives; / The strength he gains is from th’embrace he gives” (17). He even finds amusement in discrediting revered philosophers because of personal issues:

Spinoza . . . liked to entertain himself by dropping flies into spiders’ webs, enjoying the resultant battle so much that he occasionally burst out laughing . . . Hobbes . . . liked . . . to get up early in the morning and trap jackdaws with sticky string, using cheese as bait . . . As our knowledge of

these philosophers is brought within this domestic and anecdotal embrace, we can't help having our estimation of them somewhat diminished by these cruel, small pursuits. And Wittgenstein, as well, I read in some biography, loved to watch cowboy movies . . . Can you take seriously a person's theory of language when you know that he was delighted by the woodenness and tedium of cowboy movies? (121)

As if diminishing Strinati's assertion that "[m]ass culture . . . lacks intellectual challenge and stimulation, providing instead the undemanding ease of fantasy and escapism" (13), in the battle between high culture and mass culture Howie subtly declares the latter victor. When commenting on scholars of the Classical era, "Arrian, Tacitus, Cicero, and Procopius" (123), it is not their writings he is discussing but, metonymically, the Penguin Classics edition of their works:

I liked to see them lined up on my windowsill, just above the shelf that held my records; . . . in part because, having come to history first through the backs of record albums, I associated the Classics' blackness and gloss with record vinyl. (123)

It is not the classics, but the (Penguin) Classics, that he appreciates. Traditionally venerated sources of knowledge and wisdom are not only turned into cultural products, but into consumption objects. Howie's considerations on Aurelius' *Meditations* reflect his ambivalent take on culture, since a sentence from the book constitutes the motto of his constant reflections: "[m]anifestly, no condition of life could be so well adapted for the practice of philosophy as this in which chance finds you today!" (124). However, he immediately switches to the opposite position:

As often happens, I liked that first deciding sentence better than anything I came across in later consecutive reading . . . ; and by now, disenchanting, . . . I was nearly ready to abandon it entirely, tired of Aurelius's unrelenting and morbid self-denial. (124)

In metaliterary fashion, Howie extends his line of thought to literature in general: "That was the problem with reading: you always had to pick up again at the very thing that had made you stop reading the day before" (121). The climax of Howie's reflections on the mass culture/high culture opposition occurs while browsing at CVS:

Was there really any need to study the historical past of Chandragupta or Pataliputra, or Harsha of Kanauj, the rise of the Chola kings of Tanjore and the fall of the Pallava kings of Kanchi, who once built the Seven Pagodas of Mahabalipuram, . . . when we had dynastic shifts, turbulence, and plenty of lather in the last twenty years of that great Hindu inheritance, shampoo? Yes, there was. Yet emotional analogies were not hard to find between the history of civilization on the one hand and the history within the CVS pharmacy on the other, when you caught sight of a once great shampoo like Alberto VO5 or Prell now in sorry vassalage on the bottom shelf of aisle 1B, overrun by later waves of Mongols, Muslims, and Chalukyas. (114)

By introducing a character that subordinates his encyclopaedic knowledge to the delight of acknowledging whole dynasties of commercial brands, Baker reverses the conventions of traditional literature, painting at the same time an accurate portrait of America's 1980s consumerist society.³

5. FOOTNOTES

A marginal device whose usage is generally restricted to academic purposes, footnotes are uncommon in fiction. Usually short and fulfilling their main function of providing further explanation for the action in the text, their subordinate role allows readers to ignore them in most cases. However, a small number of authors have relied on the footnote as a metatextual resource: "Footnotes in a literary work highlight the interplay between author and subject, text and reader, that is always at work in fiction, giving us occasion to speculate on self-reflective narration as an aspect of textual authority" (Benstock 205). In a thorough attempt at classifying notes in fiction, Genette (*Paratexts* 323) makes the distinction between what he considers authorial notes (as in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*), fictive authorial notes (those signed "Laurence Templeton" in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*), fictive allographic notes⁴ (the extended commentary in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*), and fictive actorial notes (uttered by characters, as in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or in

³ For a detailed analysis of *The Mezzanine* as a postmodern text in its dealing with mass culture, see Simmons.

⁴ Genette understands *allographic* as "attributed to an author who is not the author of the work" (*Paratexts* 151).

chapter ten of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*). *The Mezzanine* conforms to the latter category, but its treatment of the device departs dramatically from its predecessors. *Finnegans Wake*'s footnotes are experimental in nature and little developed in content, overly departing from the main narrative flow; as for *Tristram Shandy*'s, although bearing a closer thematic relation to the leading text, they function as textual asides where the narrator contributes details on the matter at hand and acknowledges the literary nature of the novel by contradicting the author, as in the paradigmatic example in Book II, chapter 19. Baker's first work is unique in its note management because of their elevated number and narrative relation to the main text. There are fifty notes in a 135-page novel (paperback edition), where the length of footnote 24 covers four pages, includes five different paragraphs, and treats four distinct issues (*The Mezzanine* 65–68). Regarding the latter concern, Genette had already evaluated the possibilities of the resource a few months before the release of *The Mezzanine*: "One could imagine a more emancipated regime in which the note would no longer come under the heading of this documentary type of discourse but would be narrative in type" (*Paratexts* 335). Addressing the French scholar's concern, footnotes in *The Mezzanine* elaborate on the ideas in the main text, rejoicing in scattered memories, halting narrative time as certain issues are addressed, and providing a deeper level of consciousness on the narrator's side. Howie lets the wanderings of his mind flow freely in the notes, which draw as much attention from the reader as the main text does. Benstock explains that footnotes in academic texts imply "an extrareferentiality that does not exist in fiction (where all is fiction, even the notes), so that the notes can only extend the authority of the text by seeming to enlarge the context in which the fiction takes place" (220). Similarly, in *The Mezzanine*, conscious thought becomes abstracted in the notes, which are usually triggered by minor actions. Howie's hand resting on a doorknob is sufficient motive for the existence of a footnote on whether the shape of that particular one makes it worthy of being considered a doorknob, which leads him to considering the aspect of doorknobs in general, remembering those at his parents' house and abruptly but relationally changing the subject, as the memory of his father hanging his ties on doorknobs turns the discussion to the design of ties. Howie having bought a tie that matched the design of his father's returns the reading to the main text, where what was being primarily discussed was not doorknobs, but shoelaces (27–28).

As the narration progresses, the use of the device becomes more complex. The first five note references in the main text appear at the end of sentences; from footnote 6 onwards (13), their position in the middle of a sentence becomes common. On two occasions there are two note references in the same sentence: “then I pulled out the shirt cardboard¹ and tossed it on the pile of cardboards I had already saved.²” (50) and “[i]ncidentally, if you open a Band-Aid box, it will exhale a smell (as I found out recently, needing a Band-Aid for a surprisingly gruesome little cut¹) that will shoot you directly back to when you were four²” (108). The latter example involves further complications, since the first note reference appears within a parenthetical aside and the matters addressed in both footnotes are unrelated. Because footnotes in the novel “tak[e] hold of (telling) by changing level” and “play on the double temporality of the story and the narrating,” they adapt to what Genette described as *narrative metalepsis* (*Narrative Discourse* 235). Time contracts in the footnotes as Howie’s thoughts run parallel to the escalator trip he is recollecting, thus crossing the “shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells” (*Narrative Discourse* 236). As Genette explains, the metaleptic effect cannot be produced if the note is uttered by an extradiegetic author-narrator; the telling must be exerted by the same intradiegetic narrator in both the note and the main text, as it occurs in *The Mezzanine* (*Paratexts* 335).

Although narrative in function, notes in the novel are digressive in design. However, footnote 22 intermingles with the main text in an unexpected way. Right before the note reference appears in the principal narration, Howie describes “a woman in a blue business suit [that] stood paging through a stiff new manila folder.” Four lines later, he mentions “the woman with the résumé” (61). The *résumé* is never alluded to in the main text; it is in the footnote that Howie mentions it, but only as a guess of what the woman’s envelope contains. This footnote warns readers of the necessity to read all notes in the novel and leave the main text at the position where the superscript numeral is inserted. Albeit not wholly satisfying his desire, it advances toward what Paul Valéry expected as early as 1937 from future narratives:

Perhaps it would be interesting, *just once*, to write a work which at each juncture would show the diversity of solutions that can present themselves

to the mind and from which it *chooses* the unique sequel to be found in the text. (104)

However, the most radical note treatment comes in footnote 47, a footnote on footnotes which deserves a detailed analysis. The note reference in the main text appears when Howie comments that what led him to buy Aurelius' *Meditations* was its having been mentioned in "William Edward Hartpole Lecky's *History of European Morals* (which I had been attracted to, browsing in the library one Saturday, by the ambitious title and the luxuriant incidentalism of the footnotes¹)" (121). Within the note, Howie stands up for the use of the device:

Boswell, like Lecky (to get back to the point of this footnote), and Gibbon before him, loved footnotes. They knew that the outer surface of truth is not smooth, welling and gathering from paragraph to shapely paragraph, but is encrusted with a rough protective bark of citations, quotation marks, italics, and foreign languages, a whole variorum crust of "ibid.'s" and "compare's" and "see's" that are the shield for the pure flow of argument as it lives for a moment in one mind. (121–22)

His comment about getting to the point seems hilarious in so digressive a context. The narrator continues his defence of footnotes in a persuasive tone:

The muscles of the eye . . . want vertical itineraries; the rectus externus and internus grow dazed wagging back and forth in the Zs taught in grade school: the footnote functions as a switch, offering the model-railroader's satisfaction of catching the march of thought with a superscripted "1" and routing it, sometimes at length, through abandoned stations and submerged, leaching tunnels. Digression—a movement away from the *gradus*, or upward escalation, of the argument—is sometimes the only way to be thorough, and footnotes are the only form of graphic digression sanctioned by centuries of typesetters. (122)

Howie restricts his praise for footnotes to authorial notes, since they "are reassurances that the pursuit of truth doesn't have clear outer boundaries" (123). In this smart metatextual move, the autodiegetic narrator praises himself as fictive author. Nevertheless, he starkly criticises editorial notes, like that in the opening sentence of the Penguin American Library edition of Henry James's *The American* (123). In

quoting this footnote in full, Baker pushes his narrative insolence one step forward: he has his narrator citing a footnote within a footnote about footnotes referenced in a parenthetical aside on footnotes in the middle of a sentence. It may come as no surprise that the main mystery in the novel, how to estimate the wear of shoelaces, is solved in its last footnote (131–33).

Although footnotes are particular to *The Mezzanine*, Baker's adherence to digression has been a permanent element throughout his *oeuvre*. In an often quoted paragraph from *U and I*, his nonfiction work on John Updike, he expresses his fondness for such a narrative approach: "I wanted my first novel to be a veritable infarct of narrative cloggers; the trick being to feel your way through each clog by blowing it up until its obstructiveness finally revealed not blank mass but unlooked-for seepage-points of passage" (119). These seepage-points of passage constitute the healing tissue that makes a text as digressive as *The Mezzanine* a coherent reading experience. However, the reason why Baker decided to give footnotes such prominence may be more trivial than one could suspect:

Baker says he wrote *The Mezzanine* on an early portable computer called the Kaypro, "a really lovely machine" with "two floppy drives" that "looked like a small . . . piece of medical equipment." He had always loved footnotes; the Kaypro's word processing program made it easy to insert and format them. A typewriter would have placed natural limits on the length of a footnote. (Pontin 92)

It seems appropriate that the development of a text so deeply concerned with mass culture and production processes was influenced by the state of technological progress at the time of its inception. Whichever the cause, footnotes in *The Mezzanine* entail a unique approach to narrative that paved the way for future literary exploration, as attested by the rising number of novels and short stories that embraced the device a few years later: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and "The Depressed Person" (1999), Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Chuck Klosterman's *Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs* (2003), Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), and Jeffrey Jacob Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013), among others (Clark).

CONCLUSIONS

Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* is not only an original literary effort, but one that takes several steps forward in its borderline use of narrative resources. Its original use of numerous dense footnotes transforms a usually digressive mechanism into a central narrative weapon through which Gérard Genette's concept of *narrative metalepsis* is developed. The novel's uniqueness does not only rely on this resource, but also on the way it weaves together several other narrative, stylistic, and content elements of a postmodern nature, like the trivial choice of subject matter, the appraisal of high culture from a mass culture point of view, the concealment of a classical narrative structure in an apparently plotless story, the recursive, multi-layered use of the stream of consciousness technique, and the extreme combination of time references leaping back and forth throughout the novel's description of its protagonist's mental processes. Because of the innovative way the novel successfully addresses profound narrative possibilities, the present analysis leads to conclude that *The Mezzanine* is an underrated work that may constitute a turning point in the study of contemporary literature.

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