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"His cramped and claustrophobic brain": Confinement and Freedom in John Wray's *Lowboy*

Pascale Antolin

In a famous 2009 article entitled "The Rise of the Neuronovel," American critic Marco Roth writes that in contemporary Anglo-American fiction "the novel of consciousness or the psychological or confessional novel—the novel, at any rate, about the workings of a mind—has transformed itself into the neurological novel, wherein the mind becomes the brain." To illustrate his statement, he then quotes a long list of examples making it clear how widespread the phenomenon is:

Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (de Clérambault's syndrome, complete with an appended case history by a fictional "presiding psychiatrist" and a useful bibliography), Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (Tourette's syndrome), Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (autism), Richard Powers's *The Echomaker* (facial agnosia, Capgras syndrome), McEwan again with *Saturday* (Huntington's disease, as diagnosed by the neurosurgeon protagonist), *Atmospheric Disturbances* (Capgras syndrome again) by a medical school graduate, Rivka Galchen, and John Wray's *Lowboy* (paranoid schizophrenia). (Roth)

While Roth is said to have coined the word "neuronovel," he decries its development by way of comparison with the genre's predecessors, particularly the stream of consciousness writers of the Modernist period like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In an earlier essay, "Consciousness as Content: Neuronarratives and the Redemption of Fiction" (2008), Gary Johnson makes a somewhat similar, albeit less negative, statement:

While my focus in this essay will be on the works of Lodge and Powers, a growing list of narrative works [...] follows suit in foregrounding the emerging fields of neuroscience and neurobiology. These works, I propose, constitute an emerging subgenre of literature that can provide us with a glimpse of how authors are responding to scientific advances concerning the nature of human consciousness. (Johnson 170-171)

Whether they are called "neuronovels" (Roth), "neuronarratives" (Johnson), "cognitive fiction" (Tabbi), "neurological realism" (Harris) or "syndrome novels"¹ (Lustig and Peacock), the defining feature of these works is that "they place neuroscientific discourse center stage and use it as a means of expression consubstantial to the narrative rather than as an element of the storyworld" (Ortega and Vidal 328). For British scholar Jason Tougaw in his 2015 essay "Touching Brains," these works "revisit the representation of consciousness in response to developments in brain research" (Tougaw 339). While "neuronovels come in many forms," Tougaw adds,

[they] reflect and challenge cultural assumptions about neurological difference; experiment with literary conventions to foreground the bewildering complexity of relations between brain, body and world; and challenge the equation of consciousness and interiority, suggesting that conscious experience is dynamic and relational, emerging through interactions between an organism (or protagonist) and its environment [...]. (Tougaw 339-340)

In their 2013 article, "Brains in Literature/Literature in the Brain," Francisco Ortega and Fernando Vidal express a similar view and point out what they call the "ambivalence" of neuronovels: "The ambivalence resides in the fact that the apparent assertion of cerebral solipsism² coexists with a more contextual and phenomenological view about the essence of the human." In other words, they "challenge the accepted view that neuronovels inevitably convey cerebral solipsism" (Ortega and Vidal 332). For them, neuronovels "stage and [...] question cerebral solipsism" (Ortega and Vidal 343) as they focus on characters' interactions with their environment and social relations.

John Wray's third novel,³ *Lowboy* (2009) is a case in point. Wray gives a voice to a sixteen-year old paranoid schizophrenic protagonist with a fascination, even an obsession, with the New York subway, which is described in detail⁴ throughout the book, and every description seemingly emerges as a mirror image of the boy's mental condition. Not only is the ambivalence mentioned by Ortega and Vidal at the heart of the novel, but ambivalence in the broadest sense of the word is a major characteristic of the book. Will Heller, *alias* Lowboy, has just escaped from a psychiatric hospital and is pursued through subway tunnels and city streets both by a black detective, "Ali Lateef—born Rufus Lamarck White" (22), and by the boy's mother, Yda Heller, nicknamed Violet by her son after her favorite color (31). All three major protagonists are equally characterized by a seemingly uncertain, if not ambivalent, identity.⁵ Wray tried to use a first person singular narrative⁶—as he said in an interview, "I began the book in the first person and then realized that would make it a very difficult book to follow."⁷ Instead, he employed an omniscient third person narrator and internal focalization, resulting in a form of interior monologue that gives the reader access to Lowboy's train of thought. The boy's viewpoint, however, only prevails in thirteen out of the book's twenty-two sections.⁸ The other nine sections are focalized either by the police detective or by the adolescent's mother, alternately. The ambivalence perceptible in the characters' identities and the narrative structure of the book also characterizes its genre. While *Lowboy* borrows from conventions of the coming of age novel and the initiatory journey, it also revises them. Similarly, the book is "wrapped in conventions of detective fiction but revising these conventions in fundamental ways" (Tougaw 336).

Ambivalence turns out to affect all the major aspects of the book. In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, French psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis define ambivalence as "the simultaneous existence of contradictory tendencies, attitudes or

feelings in the relation to a single object—especially the coexistence of love and hate.” They also explain that “the term of ambivalence was borrowed by Freud from Bleuler, who introduced it” because he considered ambivalence “a major symptom of schizophrenia” (Laplanche and Pontalis 26). For Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist and Freud’s contemporary, the term “schizophrenia” (from the Greek *skhizein*, to split, and *phren*, mind) represented “what for him constituted the fundamental symptom of these psychoses:” *Spaltung* (dissociation, splitting)” (Laplanche and Pontalis 408). It is as if to reinforce the coherence of the book threatened by an increasingly delusional hero-focalizer—whose mother-focalizer turns out to be schizophrenic as well in section twenty-one (246)—Wray used a major characteristic of schizophrenia, ambivalence, as a fundamental symbolic pattern in the book. However, the choice of a psychoanalytic concept may seem to be debatable in a so-called neuronovel, privileging a neurological over a psychological approach. Thereby, the ambivalence that prevails throughout the “meticulously constructed novel” (Bock) may also be interpreted as a symbolic representation of “the split-hemisphere structure of the brain, and as the brain seeks complementary relationships between the opposed capabilities in each hemisphere,” the novel’s opposites “might be seen to seek a similar symbiotic relationship” (Burn 41)—hence a questioning of opposed pairings such as black and white, male and female, healthy and unhealthy, confinement and freedom. “A critique on established medical practices for treating mental illness,” according to Tougaw (342), *Lowboy* particularly challenges confinement to institutions and the medication that goes with it, that is, mostly tranquilizers—a certain number of which are named in the novel (28, 30, 42, 69, 174, 193), thus confirming its verisimilitude. Instead, Wray introduces escape and freedom by subverting the major diegetic references, space and time, manipulating the genre or rather genres of the book, and even narrative representation through Lowboy’s descriptions of his environment and the people around him. Wray thus turns the main characteristic of the protagonist’s mental illness, ambivalence, into a unifying, centripetal device in the fiction. In order to analyze the role of ambivalence in the novel, I shall focus, therefore, on time and space, genres, and eventually representation.

Time and space

At first sight, not only is the novel confined within a very short timespan—twenty-four hours in the life of William Heller—but this confinement is underlined by an anaphoric echo between the opening sentence of the novel (“On November 11 Lowboy ran to catch a train” [3]) and the concluding sentence (“On November 12 the world ended by fire” [258]). While the first sentence is merely descriptive, the narrator describing Lowboy’s action as he is entering the diegesis, the last sentence is far more ambiguous: it refers to Lowboy’s conviction that “the air is getting hotter every day” (47) and “the world’s going to die in ten hours” (17). But Lowboy seems to die in the previous, that is, penultimate sentence of the book—“He made a face and took a slow step backward” (258). The ultimate sentence, therefore, suggests a narrative metalepsis,¹⁰ that is, a paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told. Only a narrator suddenly turning as delusional as the eponymous hero can make the final statement.

The book is also meant to represent a special parenthesis in William's short life, a limited period of freedom when he is on the run after escaping from his institution, the ironically named "Bellavista Clinic" (27)—"the establishment whose name means Pretty View in Spanish" (172). This short timespan plays a key dramatic role: it creates a sense of suspense and emergency, or rather a double sense of emergency. First, the police detective is afraid Lowboy might hurt someone: "[...] time is very tight. His medication is at a negligible level, he's in a hazardous environment, and his psychoses tend to be violent" (77). Second, Lowboy believes the world is doomed to disappear if he does not save it.¹¹ Both, ironically, expect the same violent, destructive outcome.

Nevertheless, an occasional prolepsis or analepsis can cause time to expand forward or backward and, thereby, undermine diegetic time. In the first section, for instance, paragraph five stands apart: the narrative turns prophetic as suggested by the use of the conditional—"Everyone in the car would later agree that the boy seemed in very high spirits" (4). In other words, the internal focalization implemented in the opening paragraph of the section ("He was careful not to touch them" [3]) is interrupted—paragraph five refers to a future that Lowboy does not belong to. In the same section, an analepsis refers to Will's period of confinement in Bellavista—hence the use of the pluperfect—but the focalization is not affected: "He'd been a cosmonaut for eighteen months, a castaway, an amnesiac, the veteran of an arbitrary war. The world had gotten older while he'd been away. Away at school, regressing" (18). Analepses are generally more common in the sections focalized by the mother since she is the only one in the book who knows, and can talk about, Lowboy's past and the beginning of his illness—section four is a case in point. Section thirteen, however, is also a long analepsis—Lowboy's first person narrative of his experience in the Bellavista Clinic. As for section seventeen, it consists of a phone conversation between Will and his mother in the present of the diegesis. As far as time is concerned, therefore, Wray creates and underlines a very strict time frame for the sake of speed and suspense, but undermines it repeatedly.

Space is no less ambivalent than time in the novel, if only because it consists in two major sites: aboveground (the police station, the streets, the mother's flat) and underground (the tunnels where Lowboy spends much of the day, and much of the novel). Instead of confinement and exposition to dirt, darkness and noise, the tunnels by contrast represent a space of freedom—"I can make jokes again, Lowboy thought [...]. I never could have made jokes yesterday" (5)—and a safe heaven for the boy: "He was hidden again, as safe as he'd ever be, down in the lightless, airless bowels of the world. The hum all around was a sweet thing to hear, gathering as the wind gathered, and it seemed as though it had something to tell him" (75). No matter how unpleasant ("lightless, airless bowels of the world"), the tunnels are described as protective, organic, nearly womblike, by Lowboy—in other words, they suggest a living creature, hence the interpretation of the noise as a "hum" and a message. From this point of view, the first section is programmatic: no sooner does the novel begin than the hero appears to be confined within a subway car. Yet his confinement actually turns out to be a successful escape from "Skull and Bones, his state-appointed enemies" (3), actually members of the clinic staff who end up locked out of the car. The ambivalence of the tunnels is underlined by Lowboy himself very early in the book:

There was only one tunnel in the city but it was wound and snarled together like telephone wire, threaded back on itself so it seemed to have no beginning and no end. Ouroboros was the name of the dragon that ate its own tail and the tunnel was

Ouroboros also. He called it that. *It seemed self-contained, a closed system, but in fact it was the opposite of closed.* There were openings spaced out along its length like gills along the body of an eel, just big enough for a person to slip through. (11, my emphasis)

Lowboy's description of the subway tunnels as "wound and snarled together," both closed and open, referential space and mythical creature—also suggests a labyrinth,¹² which is ambivalent by definition. In his 2008 book, *Fundamental Trends in City Development*, Italian scholar Giovanni Maciocco writes that the labyrinth "must simultaneously allow access to the center by a sort of initiatory journey and forbid it for those not qualified" (Maciocco 50). American researcher Carl Teichrib suggests a more symbolic approach in his 2005 article "The Labyrinth Journey: Walking the Path to Fulfillment." He writes that

the maze also takes one to the center of one's self, to some hidden, inner shrine, occupied by the most mysterious portion of the human personality. This conjures up the *mens*, the temple of the Holy Spirit in the soul at a state of grace; or again, the depths of the unconscious. Both can only be reached by consciousness after making many detours or by intense concentration, when that ultimate intuition is attained and everything becomes plain through some kind of enlightenment. Here in this crypt the lost oneness of being, scattered in a multiplicity of desires, is rediscovered. (Teichrib)

Except that in the case of Lowboy, neither "consciousness" nor "oneness," let alone "enlightenment," can be reached at the end of the tunnel—or journey—because of paranoid schizophrenia. In the last lines of the book the young protagonist only meets his (supposed)¹³ death. As Wray never describes Will's symptoms as symptoms, the evocations of the subway seemingly turn into metaphoric representations of Will's mental condition. The descriptions of the maze-like tunnels, of the tunnels as both open and closed, may figure the adolescent's split personality and the solitary confinement of his mind. According to Tougaw, interiority in neuronovels "is recast with a range of narrative techniques for representing felt states produced through the dynamic *interaction of an organism (or character) and environment*" (my emphasis). In other words, it is through Lowboy's evocations of his environment that the reader is given access to his consciousness, the brain representing "one component in a dynamic and elusive system through which consciousness and selfhood emerge" (Tougaw 340).

While evocations of physical brains are pervasive in some neuronovels—Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), for instance—they are more scattered in *Lowboy*. The most significant passage is to be found in the first section: "Even *his cramped and claustrophobic brain* felt a measure of affection for the tunnel. It was his skull that held him captive, after all, not the tunnel or the passengers or the train" (5, my emphasis)—hence the title of this essay. Lowboy's perception of his brain or skull as alien, that is, possessing a will of its own, is evidence of his alienation—and it is confirmed throughout the novel by recurrent allusions to Will's unstable face and identity: "he gave him his bankteller's smile" (12); "he stopped and made his presidential face" (232), to quote a couple of examples taken from the incipit and the concluding pages. The boy's journey, therefore, cannot lead to self-knowledge but only to a dead-end. Wray may well borrow conventions from the initiatory journey and coming of age novel, but he also revises them. Wray revisits the mystery novel as well, so that even the genre of the book turns out to be ambivalent.

Genres: *bildungsroman* and mystery novel

Many reviewers have cited *The Catcher in the Rye* as point of reference for John Wray's *Lowboy*. In his review of the book for *The Guardian*, James Purdon, for instance, begins with a quotation from J. D. Salinger's novel before adding: "At the start of John Wray's third novel, you could imagine yourself in the company of a 21st-century Holden. Will Heller, too, is a runaway" (Purdon). Will is also young and inexperienced. But he ran away from a medical institution, not a school—even though he keeps calling it a school, another instance of ambivalence and referential instability at the heart of the book. For another reviewer, Shigekuni,¹⁴ "the anger and directness of Salinger's protagonist, and his disdain for the 'phoneys' does have many parallels to Will's behavior [...]. But Will is like the light, open version of Caulfield. There is no hate, no real disdain in him, he's wondering, trying to cope, and understand" (Shigekuni). Not only is there no hate in Will, but he is convinced that he is on a mission to save the world: "He'd been given a calling: that was what it was called. It was a matter of consequence, a matter of urgency, a matter possibly of life and death" (11).

When reviewers draw a parallel between the two books, they suggest that both belong in the same generic category, that is, *bildungsroman* or coming of age novel. As British scholar Kenneth Millard writes in his 2007 *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*,

the word *bildungsroman* was coined in Germany in 1819, and it means a novel recounting the early emotional development and moral education of its protagonist (*bildung*: formation; *roman*: novel). [...] *Bildungsroman* has been widely adopted as a term in literary criticism to characterize the generic conventions of any novel of youthful development. (Millard 2)

As for the expression "coming of age," Millard explains, it is "used to mean 'to reach full legal adult status'" (Millard 4). Despite the semantic difficulties raised both by the word *bildungsroman* and the expression "coming of age," for the sake of simplicity, they will be used as mere synonyms in this essay so as to emphasize their common characteristic, that is, mobility. This type of narrative is often concerned with a young hero's journey leading to chance meetings with adults, who are supposed to teach him or her lessons about life. This basic pattern is present in famous American standards of the genre such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, for instance. In the end, the journey brings about a process of moral development leading the young protagonist from innocence to experience.

The theme of the journey is definitely present in *Lowboy*, even if it is mostly limited to the New York subway and a few streets aboveground. Will also has a couple of chance meetings but what is specific to the novel is that these hardly result in any personal development: communication mostly fails and misunderstanding prevails. The meeting with the old Sikh in section one is a good example. Initially the man cannot hear Lowboy's words: "'I can't hear you,' said the man [...] 'what did you say'" (8). And when the Sikh can hear, Lowboy does not answer his question: "'You aren't coming out of prison?' 'You're a Sikh,' Lowboy said" (8). The Sikh's question falls on deaf ears and the two characters appear at cross purposes during the whole section—with one notable exception: when the Sikh asks Lowboy about his reason for running away, Lowboy tells him the truth: "'I'll tell you why,' Lowboy said. 'Since you ask.' He leaned over. 'The world won't make it past the afternoon'" (16). The Sikh does not respond and "[t]he look on the Sikh's face [i]s impossible to make sense of" (17). When the Sikh eventually

answers two pages further down, his response significantly consists of two questions—"The world will end?" the Sikh said. 'Why is that?' (19)—that Lowboy does not answer. At the very end of the section, especially, Lowboy is mistaken about the Sikh's identity and calls him "Doctor" (21), thus confirming the communication gap between the two characters.

The second protagonist Lowboy meets on his so-called mission may suggest some progress¹⁵ since she is a female tramp, Heather Covington *alias* Rafa, living in the subway tunnels. They start talking together, but after a while misunderstanding prevails again: "The fact that he couldn't understand her didn't bother him at all" (47). When he starts talking about the world and the air "getting hotter everyday" (47), it is her turn not to understand, and she only answers: "stop it" (48) three times (one of them emphasized in italics). This exchange is longer: it starts in section three and continues in section five where they reach the woman's den. Once there, she seems eager to play her role and teach Lowboy: "Let's give him some of the knowledge of the world" (67). But immediately afterward, the roles are reversed. While Lowboy is sexually inexperienced, he takes command and gives her orders: "'You lie back.' [...] 'Get down on the quilt,' he told her" (67); "'No,' he said, pushing her hand away. 'Don't touch it'" (69). Ironically, it is not the older woman who refuses to have sex with the adolescent but the opposite. After a while they stop talking: "He rocked himself gently and watched Heather Covington fussing. She was mumbling to herself, hunched over the suitcase [...]. She seemed to have forgotten that he was waiting" (72). Lowboy eventually runs away when a policeman starts talking to the woman from the street above. Like the first meeting, therefore, the second is a failure; it does not lead to any increase in knowledge or experience for the young protagonist. Heather Covington, too, appears to be mentally unstable—as evidenced by the passage where they talk about medication (69) and Dr. Zizmor¹⁶ (74), the only moment ironically when some communication can develop between them.

Section seven stages another, albeit different, kind of meeting: Lowboy goes to Crowley Academy to meet his old friend, Emily. The relationship between the two adolescents is extremely ambivalent: it seems somewhat hostile to begin with and only improves at the very end of section seven; it turns rather friendly in sections nine and twelve, but at the end of section fifteen, when Lowboy wants to have sex with Emily, she reacts brutally and runs away: "She sat up at once without saying a word and raked a copper key across his chest" (195)—hence another more painful failure. The meeting that changes Lowboy's life—and, to his mind, the fate of the world—only takes place in section eighteen: it is another chance meeting, with a prostitute nicknamed Secretary. While "the world [wa]s inside [him] and [he wa]s inside the world" (63), after his sex initiation, "the world was outside his body now, which meant he was alone. His body was on the outside of the world" (221). It is only then that the adolescent has accomplished his mission, and the novel could stop if it were merely concerned with the young protagonist's sexual initiation or psychological development. But it is not—Lowboy revisits some conventions of the coming of age novel but it also subverts them: the young protagonist suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, the meetings are mostly characterized by misunderstanding, and the so-called initiatory journey is actually a crazy mission coming from the deranged mind of a young mental patient. At the end of the novel he returns to the subway, that is, the starting point of his journey—and a series of repetitions from section one¹⁷ confirms the absence of any real progress and the boy's pathological confinement. However, the book cannot be confined to one

genre and one interpretation. While *Lowboy* has accomplished his mission and been initiated to sex, the novel continues and so does the pursuit, because the book also borrows from the mystery novel.

"*Lowboy* is a mystery novel, employing many tropes and tools of the genre, and it's an addictively readable mystery at that. From the first to the last page, the reader hurries through the book following the hints Wray has scattered throughout, exploring the dark landscapes below and above NY City," Shigekuni writes in his review of Wray's book. The reviewer is right: the sense of mystery mostly relies on the breathless pace of the novel—the hints may be important, too, but *Lowboy's* condition is disclosed in section two. Thus the race between pursuers and escapee turns into a race against time as soon as the time gap between them is revealed, and proves to be very short: "thirty eight minutes" (88). According to French scholar Yves Reuter in his book *Le Roman policier*, the sense of speed is a major characteristic of the mystery novel. Equally important are the danger facing a nice character and the use of dramatic irony—it is essential that the readers should know more than the characters (Reuter 75-76, 81). French filmmaker François Truffaut confirms this analysis: "the art of creating suspense is also the art of involving the audience, so that the viewer is actually a participant in the film [...]" (Truffaut, "Introduction" 16). Truffaut is concerned here with Hitchcock's cinema, hence the words "audience" and "viewer," but his analysis does apply to literature as well. In *Lowboy*, precisely, as the three major characters are used as focalizers alternately, the reader turns out to be both omniscient, like the omniscient narrator somehow, since he can know and see everything, and powerless: he cannot do anything. In his interview with Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock mentions what he calls another "essential ingredient of suspense," that is, "emotion" (Truffaut 73). Choosing a schizophrenic adolescent and his mother, a caregiver, as heroes and focalizers is crucial. However, suspense reaches an emotional climax in the passage dealing with Emily, as she is young and innocent, and *Lowboy* nearly killed her once.

But *Lowboy's* role is ambivalent, and this is where Wray revises the conventions of the genre to serve his own purposes. The adolescent is both a victim of the American system of institutionalization and medication for disabled people, and potentially the victimizer—he could hurt people especially since he has stopped taking his medication (26). This is what the detective is afraid of. As Charles Bock writes in his review of the book for *The New York Times*, "you are legitimately concerned for *Lowboy's* safety, and at the same time worried he might achieve his aims; rooting for the detective to stop him while, again, feeling protective of the boy" (Bock). Thereby, the reader cannot but experience mixed, even ambivalent, feelings.¹⁸ As for the detective, Shigekuni writes, instead of playing a key role, "Wray has sidelined [him] in his book, more than that: he has given him a bit part, made him second to the narrative and theoretical structure of the book." Elsewhere Shigekuni adds: "Wray tells his story through his protagonist and robs the detective of the power to read and explain the world. Things have to be explained to him although the whole story, ultimately, is beyond him, and beyond a simple explanation, actually" (Shigekuni).

As far as genre is concerned, therefore, Wray uses a double strategy: first, he combines conventions of the neuronovel with conventions of the mystery novel and the coming of age novel, as if to escape confinement to one specific genre. Hence, generically, too, the novel proves to be ambivalent since it brings together the old and the new—the new genre of the neuronovel and two more traditional literary genres. Next, his

neuronovel includes far less neuroscientific discourse and, therefore, proves less "neuro-," so to speak, than most. In addition, while he borrows from the coming of age novel and the mystery novel, he also revises and subverts some of their conventions. Thereby, Wray asserts the specificity of his book and his own freedom as a writer. However, both the specificity of the book and the freedom of the writer are also perceptible at another level: Lowboy's representation of the environment and the people about him.

Representation

As early as the first section, where Lowboy is the focal character, the reader's attention is drawn to some strange, if not enigmatic, remarks made by the adolescent—as many hints, and symptoms, of his illness. But these remarks only make full sense in the following section, when his paranoid schizophrenia is revealed: "people were in his way but he was careful not to touch them"; "signs and tells were all around him" (3); "I'm a prisoner of my own brainpan, he thought. Hostage of my limbic system. There's no way out for me but through my nose" (5), to quote only a few. Later in the book, other passages prove to be similarly perplexing for the reader—section five, for example, ends on: "He laid his head against the tunnel wall and listened" (75), and section seven begins with: "[...] his head was alive with what the wall had told him" (90). Lowboy's interior monologue, therefore, creates and conveys a strong sense of strangeness, defamiliarizing even derealizing the environment, the character and language itself. This defamiliarization is enhanced by the presence of numerous incongruous images in the sections where Lowboy is the focal character—to describe trains and tunnels, for example: "The train fit into the tunnel perfectly. It slipped into the tunnel like a hand into a pocket and closed over Lowboy's body and held him still" (4, 233). Not only is the passage repeated twice in the novel, but what is striking is the ambivalence of the images—first a comparison then a couple of metaphors: they suggest both adequateness, possibly protection ("like a hand into a pocket"), and deadly imprisonment ("closed over [...] and held him still"); especially, they connect Lowboy directly with the train tunnels. In section three, while the adolescent is sitting on a bench in a subway station, he describes the neon lights using a challenging comparison: "The argon lights were stuttering like pigeons. There was some kind of intelligence behind them" (38). Not only is "stuttering" completely unexpected to refer to birds—it is usually used to describe human speech that is not fluent and involuntarily disrupted—but "intelligence," by contrast, suggests a capacity for learning or understanding that birds do not possess. In the second passage, therefore, ambivalence prevails as well, even if a special connection seems to be established between things, animals and humans. According to French psychiatrist Jean Oury in his 1989 book, *Création et schizophrénie*, "there is a sort of homeomorphy between what is created and the personality of the creator" (18, my translation)—hence the ambivalence of Lowboy's images, a sign of his split personality.

Incongruous images, however, are not only used for trains and tunnels, they are recurrent throughout the book—whenever Lowboy is used as focal character, hence a notable contrast with the sections focalized either by his mother or by the policeman. In section five, for instance, after meeting Heather Covington, Lowboy describes her suitcase: "The suitcase jangled as she set it down, as though it were filled with

champagne flutes or Christmas lights, or possibly empty bottles of perfume" (44). Not only are the comparisons very improbable, the woman being a tramp, but the ternary rhythm and the sound effects suggest that Lowboy is not so much concerned about meaning as about music or rhythm, that is, the signifier more than the signified.

This process of defamiliarization through representation and language gets increasingly noticeable as Lowboy's condition deteriorates, and he starts hearing voices, and experiencing hallucinations. A significant passage describing his hallucinations is to be found in section seven, for instance:

[...] but today he was *seeing* the world with different eyes. The walls of the car, for example, which had always seemed so solid, were actually as hollow as an egg. A hole had been cut into the bottom of his seat and behind it was a dusky fibrous vacuum. The pencaps and candywrappers stuffed into the opening only made the hole seem emptier [...]. *Unreality* broke over him again, stronger and more emphatic than before, but this time he was able to endure it. It's a wave, that's all, he told himself. [...]. In the furrows between crests of the wave he *saw* things very sharply, the way the air comes clear after a rain. (93-94 my emphasis)

The passage is all the more remarkable since it is followed by a drawing, or visual representation, of a traditional train car on the page (94), probably the referent for Lowboy's delirious description, which emphasizes the boy's distorted perception. Gradually, therefore, Wray bursts the confines of conventional representation to introduce "unreality," the distortion and strangeness of madness into the narrative, thus freeing his descriptions from any concern about verisimilitude. No less significant is the presence of a synesthesia not far from the passage: "The little whitehaired woman next to him was wearing a mink pillbox hat" (93)—"mink pillbox hat" combines touch and sight and color and taste, thus further illustrating the adolescent's mental confusion. As for voices, they are mentioned in section three (42, 46) but only become increasingly obsessive from section twelve onward:

But he was not alone. The train was full of light and heat and noise. And behind the noise and under it were the *voices*.

They began as a rustling but soon he heard three of them clearly. The hum of the turbines was in them and the draw of his breathing and the clatter of the undulating train. His name was not spoken. Each time was different of course, like turning on a radio, but there was no trace of the old familiarity. Instead there was sadness and also a kind of impatience. The end of the world was not discussed, never once made mention of. And yet the voices had no other subject. (167, my emphasis)

The passage gathers a number of recurrent characteristics of Lowboy's interior monologues such as sound effects and ternary rhythms, for instance, that are emphasized here by the use of polysyndetons ("the train was full of light and heat and noise;" "the hum [...] and the draw [...] and the clatter [...]). Throughout the novel, polysyndetons are increasingly recurrent in the sections focalized by Lowboy, possibly because, as Oury explains: "One of the essential characteristics of schizophrenic creativity is that schizophrenics cannot cope with a void. All the more so since voids are open after all" (Oury 35, my translation)—hence the repetition of the coordinating conjunction "and" that creates a cumulative effect and fills the void commas might have left. Eventually, Oury writes, "for schizophrenics, there is no logic of the same and the other. Often, when they talk about someone else they mean themselves. [...] there is not other, there is no one else. And, if there is no one else, everything is closed" (Oury 34, my translation). This is exemplified in the passage by the sentence: "The hum of the turbines was in them and the draw of his breathing and the clatter of the undulating

train." The ternary rhythm here emphasizes Lowboy's suggestion that he is the voices—hence their physical presence "behind and under the noise"—and the noise and the train as well, so that "indistinctness" (Oury 19, my translation) prevails.¹⁹ In other words, the descriptions of the subway trains and tunnels throughout the book do not offer a mirror image of the adolescent's deteriorating condition, as initially suggested; they turn out to represent the adolescent himself, or rather his perception of himself. Eventually, another striking characteristic of the passage is the concluding paradox: conventional logic, too, has disappeared. And yet meaning never disappears, it is preserved and prevails throughout because the protagonist's mental condition justifies his most bewildering statements—his baffling images, for instance.

While in *History of Madness*,²⁰ Michel Foucault claimed that madness was, primarily, a lack of language, the silence of a stifled, repressed language (Felman 14), Wray both gives a voice and a central role to a paranoid schizophrenic adolescent—traditionally a marginal figure in fiction—and takes advantage of the major characteristics of his mental condition to introduce highly innovative formal experimentation into the novel. From this point of view, *Lowboy* can be compared to Jonatham Lethem's 1999 *Motherless Brooklyn* with its Tourettic narrator. Far from hampering or limiting Wray's creative process, therefore, the mental condition of the main protagonist turns out to be a means of liberation from traditional patterns of representation and a powerful source of stylistic innovation.

According to Tougaw, *Lowboy* is a neuronovel "link[ing] mysteries of plot to mysteries about brains [...] dramatiz[ing an] impossible quest for interiority" (336)—and his analysis is certainly true considering the main protagonist's mental condition. The book can also be considered a highly subversive novel: it distorts the referential framework by manipulating the major diegetic references, that is, time and space; it also distorts generic frameworks by coupling the neuronovel with two major traditional genres (*bildungsroman* and mystery novel) and manipulating their conventions. Thus, despite the mental confinement experienced by the main protagonist, *Lowboy* cannot be confined to a single generic framework either. Eventually, the novel is an "experiment in narrative representation" (Tougaw 342) and, contrary to what Roth contends, it does justice to its modernist predecessors—did not William Faulkner give a voice to Benjy, a mentally handicapped character, in *The Sound and The Fury*? All of Wray's strategies, therefore, suggest an effort not to merely reproduce literary traditions but to transcend them and, thereby, free fiction from traditional patterns, and expand the novel's—and the neuronovel's—purview.²¹

However, one aspect seems to have been neglected by most reviewers, maybe because they were reluctant to turn to psychoanalysis in order to analyze a so-called neuronovel. Indeed, Freud can shed some valuable light on *Lowboy*. In "The Case of Schreber," he writes: "*The delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction*" (Freud 71, italics in original). In other words, and to quote Oury now, the schizophrenics' "delirium is their means of survival" (Oury 19, my translation). In Wray's novel, the more delusional and delirious the young protagonist, the more intense his efforts to recover and reconstruct himself. Under such conditions, the novel would be definitely tragic if it were not for the concluding metalepsis. By crossing the diegetic line and pretending to be delusional, too, the omniscient narrator closes the gap between himself or herself and the schizophrenic hero, and powerfully asserts the power of fiction. He also invites the

readers to free themselves from the confinement of logic, reason and reality, in order to enter a world of fiction where freedom and possibility reign supreme.

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NOTES

1. "Syndrome novels" refer to "narrative fictions built around a central character with an estranging cognitive condition" (Burn 167).
2. Ortega and Vidal explain that they do not give the expression "*cerebral* or *neurological* solipsism" any technical meaning but "use it, instead, as shorthand for the idea that underlies the notion of humans as cerebral subjects: each human, as it were, only needs his or her brain to be the person he or she is. Thus, according to this view, the cultures in which we live are ultimately brain products, and interpersonal communication and relations ultimately happen inside individual brains. *Solus ipse*: the brain by itself" (Ortega and Vidal 332).
3. His first two novels were *The Right Hand of Sleep* (2001) and *Canaan's Tongue* (2005). In 2016, he published *The Lost Time Accidents*, and in 2018, *Godsend*.
4. In a Youtube interview "John Wray about *Lowboy*," the novelist explains that he wrote the book almost entirely on subway trains. Web. July 28, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZduje44nXg>
5. Will's identity is all the more ambiguous since "Lowboy" can have different meanings: spelt "low boy," it refers to the size of a boy but "a lowboy" is also a piece of furniture (175). Secondary characters are similarly afflicted: "Skull and Bones" (3) are nicknames referring to staff from the Bellavista Clinic. Heather Covington carries a passport issued to a ten-year old white girl (44-45), and is also called Rafa (64); as for the prostitute, she is nicknamed "Secretary" on "account of [her] glasses" (218) but her real name is "Maria Villallegas," she says (219).
6. "Initially, Wray tried writing the book in the first person. But while that could have made for a fascinating novel, 'it would have precluded the element of the thriller and the chase and the kind of velocity I wanted,'" he said (Thomson).
7. The quotation comes from the Youtube interview "John Wray about *Lowboy*." Web. July 28, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZduje44nXg>
8. I prefer "section" to "chapter" because some are very short. Among these thirteen sections, three stand apart: section ten is made up of Lowboy's letter to his mother in italics; in section thirteen, Lowboy tells Emily "what [...] happened at the school" (171), actually a mental institution; and section seventeen consists of Lowboy's phone conversation with his mother. But in all three cases, Lowboy speaks in the first person singular.

9. "These psychoses" refers to the three varieties of *dementia precox* identified by Kraepelin and named schizophrenia by Bleuler in 1911: "the hebephrenic, the catatonic and the paranoid types" (Laplanche and Pontalis 408).
10. A metalepsis is defined by Genette as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse [...]" (Genette 244, my translation).
11. In "The Case of Schreber," Freud explains that "a world-catastrophe [...] is not infrequent during the agitated stage in other cases of paranoia. [...] The patient has withdrawn from the people in his environment and from the external world generally the libidinal cathexis which he has hitherto directed onto them. Thus everything has become indifferent and irrelevant to him [...]. The end of the world is the projection of this internal catastrophe" (Freud 69-70).
12. The word originally referred to the maze constructed by Daedalus for Minos, King of Crete, to house the Minotaur.
13. Lowboy's death is suggested but not clearly stated.
14. To find out about Shigekuni's identity, see: <https://shigekuni.wordpress.com/about/> (Web. September 5, 2018).
15. What Lowboy basically needs to complete his mission is to have his first sexual experience.
16. Dr Jonathan Zizmor is an American dermatologist (born in 1945) in New York City. He is famous for his subway advertisements that started appearing in 1991.
17. "The train fit into the tunnel perfectly. It slipped into the tunnel *like a hand into a pocket* and closed over Lowboy's body and held him still" (4, my emphasis): this passage and the unexpected comparison it involves is to be found again at the very end of the book (233). Similarly the problem of "touching" people on the subway platform is mentioned in the opening lines ("he was careful not to touch them" [3]) and returns in the last section: "Once he would have been careful not to touch anyone but now it couldn't be helped [...]" (254). In this case, it is not simply a repetition but a form of regression since Lowboy has turned literally powerless.
18. Roth's assertion that neuronovels give form to a "neurological privacy without individuality" and preclude the reader's identification with the characters is, therefore, proved wrong in *Lowboy*.
19. This is somehow confirmed by the repetition of the Ouroboros image: in section one it refers to the subway tunnel (11), and in section nine, to Lowboy's green belt (137).
20. Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961). (*Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard, New York: Vintage Books, 1973).
21. Roth, by contrast, concluded his essay on these words: "So the genre of the neuronovel, which looks on the face of it to expand the writ of literature, appears as another sign of the novel's diminishing purview."

ABSTRACTS

This article shows that ambivalence is a major symbolic pattern in John Wray's 2009 neuronovel *Lowboy*, and it affects the major aspects of the novel, including the characters' identities and the narrative structure of the book. Ambivalence may refer either to the split personality of the schizophrenic hero (psychoanalytic approach) or to the structure of the brain (neurologic

approach). Especially, ambivalence allows subversion to prevail and transform the main protagonist's mental confinement into textual freedom. This is shown, first, by an analysis of the referential framework and its major references, space and time. Then the major genres *Lowboy* borrows from are analyzed: on the one hand, the neuronovel suggests a *bildungsroman*, on the other, a mystery novel. While Wray borrows conventions from both, he also revisits and revises them, thus asserting the specificity of his novel and his freedom from generic conventions. Eventually, the manipulation of representation will be examined through an analysis of the language of description, particularly the use of incongruous images in the sections where Lowboy is the focal character.

INDEX

Keywords: bildungsroman, genre, mystery novel, neuronovel, paranoid schizophrenia, representation

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