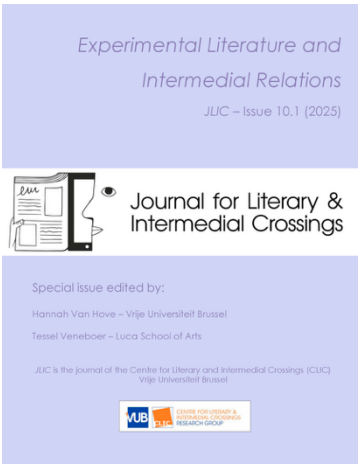

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"Cubistic Time" and Phenomenology in William Demby's *The Catacombs*

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This article explores the theory of "cubistic time" in William Demby's *The Catacombs* (1965), arguing that Demby uses Cubism and existential phenomenology to show how simultaneous perspectives are presented in the novel, and how these ostensibly disparate viewpoints are arranged in "collage" form as part of a coherent whole. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theories, it illustrates how this fusion of modern art theory and philosophy comes together and functions in Demby's novel. The use of metanarrative and apparently real newspaper reports in the novel creates a "jigsaw puzzle" effect in which the reader has to piece together the different fragments of information, which can be interpreted through theories found in phenomenology and Cubism itself. While none of the scarce criticism on Demby's novel to date explicitly mentions metanarrative or phenomenology, this article argues that there is clear evidence of both. Drawing on work by Mikhail Bakhtin and Peter Bürger, this article further shows how narratological and modern art theories, which are linked to ideas found in phenomenology, are present in Demby's work. In *The Catacombs*, clear parallels can be determined between what Demby describes as "Cubistic time," phenomenology, and metanarrative through his use of different perspectives and fractured, non-linear time. Overall, this article sheds light on the intricate and sophisticated narrative technique used in *The Catacombs* and fully explores what Demby means by "Cubistic time."

Keywords: cubism, phenomenology, time, simultaneity, metanarrative

Published in 1965, William Demby's second novel, *The Catacombs,* received some encouraging reviews, but it soon fell into obscurity and is still relatively unknown among African American literature scholars today. However, upon its publication, some critics also seemed "baffled by its non-conformity" (Jaskoski 181) while others gave it a "cool reception" (Berry 442), and some reviewers accused it of "[lacking] clarity and cohesion." (Marzioli 417) This is no doubt partly due to the narrative in *The Catacombs* being frequently interspersed with newspaper reports on minor and major happenings of the time. The timeframe of the narrative could be described as non-linear, for while it ostensibly takes the form of a journal, covering a span of two years, Demby clearly manipulates time to the extent that the actual present time in which the narrative takes place often seems uncertain. At first, *The Catacombs* appears to the reader as a novel of chaos and spontaneity; many chapters and passages begin with Demby simply stating what the date and time are, then going on to describe things like the weather or how busy Rome is at the time of writing. Elsewhere, he begins his narrative with one or more news headlines from that day's newspapers, sometimes followed by a short summary of

a news report.[1] Furthermore, these news reports also occasionally appear in the middle of a conversation, or at the end of a chapter, without any apparent reason for their inclusion.

The Catacombs is centred around the main character of Bill Demby, who is writing the novel that we are reading. The novel is mostly set in Rome, where Demby was living at the time of writing, with some minor parts taking place in New York City and Washington D.C. There are two other notable characters in the novel—an African American dancer named Doris, who is the daughter of a woman Demby knew in college, and a married Italian Count named Raffaele, who is having an affair with Doris. However, Demby, who is also married, is having an affair with Doris at the same time without the Count's knowledge. Later, Doris discovers she is pregnant but does not know who the father is. The other characters in the novel are never fully developed, with the clearly fictional characters connected to the fictional world of the Count and Doris, and the apparently *real* characters related to or acquainted with Demby. The novel ends mysteriously when Doris enters the Catacombs and disappears, leaving the Count alone. The majority of the novel is written in the form of a metanarrative, as Demby reflects upon the writing process while the novel unfolds. One example of Demby's use of metanarrative is when, in the middle of the third chapter of the novel, the narrator, Bill Demby, states that, "I tell P. that I am writing a novel and that we are discussing how it should end, and that this conversation about how the novel shall end is the central theme to the third chapter." (39) Demby does not say exactly who P. and Alice are, but they are most likely references to people whom William Demby, the author, is friends with in his everyday life outside that of the fictional world of the novel. Demby, namely, reads in *Il Giorno* that morning that "P., who has been accused of trying to hold up a gas station in Latina, has offered to take 'truth serum' and undergo questioning" by far-right journalists who have been mercilessly criticising him. (38) This encounter with P. and Alice appears to be taken from a factual occurrence which transpired in the author William Demby's life while he was writing the novel, and has now been included as part of the fictional narrative because the characters do not appear in the same storyline that features either the Count or Doris anywhere in the narrative. During the meeting with P. and Alice in the third chapter of the novel, Demby continues:

> At once P. is interested: I think he already has heard of the novel, because at the Writers' Congress in Florence I talked about it freely with anyone who was willing to listen. One novelist even began to criticize the novel as though it had already been written, which is perfectly in harmony with the theory of cubistic time I am so recklessly fooling around with. (39–40)

The suggestion that the conversation about how the novel "should end" is the "central theme" of the chapter we are reading, although we are only halfway through the chapter itself, implies uncertainty during the creative process of writing the novel and

[1] These appear to be taken from actual newspaper reports published on the dates given, with Italian news reports translated by Demby himself.

forces the reader to interpret the "plot" of the novel from different stages of its creation. Here we have a type of metafictional narrative, where the narrator draws the reader's attention to the fact that they are in the process of reading a work of fiction, and he does so by ironically highlighting the fictionality of the characters, including the narrator himself, who are an essential part of the plot of the novel while it is being read. Patricia Waugh notes that characters in metafictional novels not only play roles, but they also "'fictionalize' in terms of the *content* of the plot; they too are 'fictionalized,' created, through the *formal construction* of the plot." (53) However, in *The Catacombs,* the "plot" is centred around the news reports, and so what makes up the "plot" of the novel is yet undecided, as Demby himself claimed in an interview: "This is a spooky novel because you would think that I am the author of much of this, but no, much of what *The Catacombs* is, is reporting." (Micconi 136) Furthermore, Demby also informs us that a novelist criticises the novel even though it has not been written yet. This kind of meta-narrating, which Demby claims is in tune with his theory of "cubistic time," involves different perspectives from different time periods. The reader is being invited to not only consider the novel as a whole at different points in the storyline, but also view it from the perspectives of different characters—in this case, not just Demby's but also those of his two friends and the unnamed novelist. Melanie Masterton Sherazi et al., writing in 2022, argue that, "*The Catacombs* is indeed an original, unconventional, and at times confounding piece of writing—openly ambitious in its structure and certainly nonrealistic in terms of its provocative use of a nonlinear narrative and abrupt time shifts." (113)

So, what exactly does Demby mean by what he calls "cubistic time"? Having studied art history at the University of Rome before writing *The Catacombs* (Bone 128; Marzioli 417), it is unlikely that this comment by Demby was used casually. Edward Margolies, commenting on the idiosyncratic use of narratives in the novel, and the apparent spontaneity of their inclusion, tells us that, "This simultaneity of presentation is presumably what Demby means when he speaks somewhere of 'cubistic time.'" (183) Earlier in the same essay, Margolies rightly mentions the "collage effect" (182) of the novel—which was a style favoured by Cubist painters—but he fails to penetrate the full meaning of what Demby is alluding to, only partially recognising his metanarratological style (without explicitly naming it as such) and the time aspect of the theory without really dissecting the full meaning of Demby's theory of "cubistic time." Similarly, James C. Hall, when trying to tackle the meaning behind the theory, identifies the uncertainty of who is real and who is fictitious in the novel and at which moment in time they are speaking from:

> We are never sure whether or not Doris's relationship with the count takes place at a different level from that of the 'Bill Demby' addressing the reader. We do not know whether the Doris who is a character in Bill Demby's book is somehow different from the Doris who has a relationship with Bill Demby. Nor, for that matter, do we know how, as readers, to differentiate between William Demby (the name on our text which indicates authorship) and Bill Demby, who seems to exist as a character in a book who is trying to write a book. (105)

After such searching questions, Hall eventually gives up elaborating on the theory of cubistic time by merely concluding that, "The complicated structure of a novel being written within a novel allows for interesting kinds of reflexivity." (105)

The confusion surrounding the ambivalent time placement of the characters alluded to by Hall is discernible in the following passage by Demby, where he addresses the reader in the second person, speaking to his imagined, soon-to-be audience:

> Now I shall be truthful. But then you people will say that this is not Fiction, you PEOPLE will ask: 'Where are the REAL CHARACTERS?' Well, as a starter, what about me, the Author? I mean, 'Ain't I every bit as interesting as Doris or the Count?' Oh, but you are not a *fictional* character! (emphasis in original 96)

Hall justifiably questions the lack of clarity concerning who is speaking and from what unspecified time frame in the novel they are speaking from, and whether the characters Demby sometimes refers to (including himself, Bill/William Demby) are real or fictitious. Nevertheless, the novel clearly subverts linear time from the beginning of the entire narrative. The existential sensation of contemporaneity that Demby's narrative style imbues gives the reader the impression that they are part of the creative process of reading the novel while it is being written, and this is aided by the more grounded newspaper reports and seemingly real personal occurrences in Demby's life, which, in turn, create an effect of spatiotemporal uncertainty on the reader. This kind of narrative technique is what Mikhail Bakhtin sees as a type of "*chronotope* (literally 'time space')" which is used to describe the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature […] it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)." (84) Jay R. Berry goes a little further when attempting to expound upon Demby's cubistic time theory by arguing that:

> Clearly his knowledge and appreciation of the cubist theory of painting is illustrated throughout the novel. His concern for the non-representational depiction of reality (i.e., reality as viewed from a number of perspectives simultaneously, just as a cubist painting presents a multifaceted view of its subject) and for nonlinear time has its artistic roots in cubism. (441)

Here, Berry has hit upon a key aspect of Demby's theory of Cubistic time: perspective. Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten argue that the Cubist painters favoured the "notion of 'simultaneity,' wherein many different moments could be depicted in a single painting." (71) This sense of simultaneity, as mentioned by Margolies and Berry, is evident throughout the novel, especially so concerning the fragmented use of non-linear time; but this arguably stems from more than one perspective. These perspectives are also not, as Hall suggested, from one or more real or fictitious perspectives, because what we encounter throughout the novel are informative news reports, which are not from the perspective of any character, fictitious or otherwise, but are in fact based on true happenings or

reports.[2] This kind of polyphonous narrative might be described as a kind of "heteroglossia," as Bakhtin calls it, which is a "way of conceiving the world as made up of a rolling mass of languages, each of which has its own distinct formal markers." (Holquist 69) According to Bakhtin,

> The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [*raznorećie*] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [*raznorećie*] can enter the novel. (263)

This conglomeration of voices, perspectives, and timeframes in *The Catacombs* is in some respects undeniably redolent of the philosophical theory of phenomenology, although no scholars to date have explicitly linked Demby's theory of Cubistic time to this school of philosophy. Despite the two being separate movements in philosophy and art, Cubism and phenomenology are, indeed, not as disparate as they might at first seem. For, as Edward F. Fry surmised in 1966 in his monograph, *Cubism*: "The relation to Picasso's and Brasque's 1913–14 cubism to the experiential world very closely parallels the method of so-called eidetic reduction in the phenomenology of Husserl." (39) Phenomenology, like Cubism, is largely concerned with perspectives and time, and this is something that Nathan A. Scott Jr. recognised in *The Catacombs*:

> We are constantly being shuttled back and forth between the present and the past, between one place and another, between events involving major principals of the action and various public happenings. Everything is envisaged as dovetailing into everything else, the whole of reality being engulfed in the stream of interrelation. (xiv)

It must be pointed out, however, that phenomenology is not an easy philosophical concept to pin down. Merleau-Ponty describes it as "the study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception and the essence of consciousness," (*Phenomenology of Perception* xx), whereas John Macquarrie believes that:

> The point of phenomenology is that it offers a description of depth, so to speak, causing us to notice features that we ordinarily fail to notice, removing hindrances that stand in our way of our seeing, exhibiting the essential rather than the accidental, showing interrelations that may lead to a different view from the one that we get when a phenomenon is considered in isolation. (24)

However, this explanation of phenomenology by Macquarrie suggests that we suspend our general understanding of how we generally decipher the world around us, and this could be interpreted as a definition of what is termed "pure phenomenology," as Husserl envisioned it, which intended "to locate the absolutely bare, presuppositionless data on

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[2] It could be argued that there are many different voices in the news reports as they are written by news reporters or journalists, but we are never told who writes the articles, only the newspapers they appear in.

which to build the whole of knowledge." (Nakhnikian xv) However, this type of phenomenology is almost unattainable, and as David Cooper rightly tells us, "Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are unanimous that this programme of 'pure' phenomenology is impossible. One can neither doubt, nor seriously pretend to doubt, the reality of the world." (5) Therefore, in order to make sense of Demby's theory of cubistic time, the existential phenomenology propounded by Merleau-Ponty can be utilised as a more effective theoretical tool to understand more clearly what Demby is trying to convey, rather than Husserl's "pure phenomenology."

Throughout *The Catacombs*, the narrative undoubtedly creates a sense of disorder and spontaneity, which led to some early critics such as Peter Buitenhuis to remark that, "proportion, progression, rhythm […] must be ordered and adjusted so that the chaos we call life is given some new meaning." (qtd. in Berry 442) What Buitenhuis fails to understand here is that the reader's role in interpreting the novel, in whatever way they perceive it, is a crucial part of their exegesis of the novel, just like our own experiential viewing of a painting is integral to interpreting its meaning. In his essay, "Cézanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty informs us that,

> Cézanne did not think he had to choose between feeling and thought, between order and chaos. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes form, the birth of order through spontaneous organisation. (*Sense and Non-Sense* 13)

Cézanne, who had a huge influence on many Cubist painters, wanted people viewing his work to be part of the process of what was happening on the canvas; he wanted people to feel like they were taking part in something that transcended an ordinary two-dimensional image; or, as he himself once said: "Painting […] means perceiving harmony between numerous relationships and transposing them according to a new, original logic." (qtd. in Hoog 3) When applied to literature, this is very similar to what Demby manages to achieve in his novel; he wants the reader to feel like they are taking part in the writing process as it is being written, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "Like a painting, a novel expresses itself tacitly. Its subject, like that of a painting, can be related." (*Signs* 76) It is surely no coincidence that Merleau-Ponty, one of the most prominent existential phenomenologists of his time, decided to choose Cézanne's art as the focal point of his phenomenological investigations into the nature of art and philosophy.

Like Cézanne, Demby's intention to depict the "birth of order through spontaneous organisation" is evident in the various news reports and seemingly unrelated events narrated in the novel which resemble what Buitenhuis refers to as "the chaos we call life" (442); they are small pieces of a larger jigsaw which we must interpret in order to deduce a broader meaning of what the novel is trying to portray, which is a multitude of narrative voices intertwined with the metanarrative of Demby's voice to create a "collage" effect which can be understood heterogeneously. Furthermore, art historian Barbara Drudi has argued that, "Demby found a poetic antecedent of that concept of simultaneity of events in the chronicity that Braque and Picasso had investigated in

painting." (152) In his introduction to the 1991 edition of the novel, Nathan A. Scott Jr. also compares *The Catacombs* to the experience of viewing a Cubist painting:

> Demby's narrative procedure might be said to be an affair at once of cubism and of *pointillisme*. Picasso, in a great work of 1912, 'Violin,' simply presents this musical instrument on his canvas, but the edges of the planes making up this object are so rearranged as to make it appear that the planes are intersecting and are superimposed upon and interpenetrating one another, and thus this classic of cubist painting has the effect of making us feel that we are simultaneously viewing the violin from every possible angle. Now it is such an experience of *simultanéité* that *The Catacombs* is seeking to call forth. (xii–xiv)

As Scott points out, Demby invites us to perceive many different things not just simultaneously, but also *existentially*, or in an existentially phenomenological sense, and this is something that Cubist painters such as Picasso were trying to achieve in their art. The notion that Demby strives to create a narrative presenting us with different perspectives simultaneously in a literary work in a similar way to how this was achieved by the Cubist painters in their paintings is a view that is shared by Drudi, who tells us that,

> The great Cubist idea was that in a painting, the subject could be represented simultaneously from multiple points of view. Though more theoretical than real, such a notion so intrigued Demby that in writing *The Catacombs* he tried repeatedly to achieve the same effect of coincidence between space and time. (152)

Moreover, Edward F. Fry has commented that, "Objects in the paintings of Cézanne assume a 'distorted,' non-perspectival form as a result of multiple perceptions from discrete points of view, accumulated and then expressed in a single composite shape." (37) It is also unsurprising then, that Merleau-Ponty saw parallels with phenomenology and Cubism because they both investigate perspectival biases in order to extrapolate fuller meanings and envisage truer perspectives. Concerning perspective in art and literature, Merleau-Ponty tells us that,

> What is hazardous in literary communication, and ambiguous and irreducible to the theme in all the great works of art, is not a provisional weakness which we might hope to overcome. It is the price we must pay to have a literature, that is, a conquering language which introduces us to unfamiliar perspectives instead of confirming in us our own. (*Signs* 77)

Demby's narrative does indeed present us with multiple perspectives, both of which concern historical and philosophical time. One of the perspectives in *The Catacombs* is the reporting of what is happening in the US via several US and Italian news sources, which are then translated into English by Demby, fictional or otherwise, from (usually) his home in Rome. Another, quite bizarre, perspective is when Demby invites Doris and the Count round to his house to watch him appear on a television show:

> Today is May 12. Doris and the Count are here to watch the TV program *Il Signore delle 21: Harlem*, in which I appear as a kind of assistant master of ceremonies, together with Louis Armstrong, Sammy Davis, Hazel Scott, the Peters Sisters and many other stars of the Negro entertainment world. (49)

Here, Demby invites the reader to imagine the fictional Demby watching himself on television while he is sitting beside two fictional characters, who are also watching the show, while he is writing the novel we are reading. This passage, at first, seems to be paradoxical, even from a metanarratological perspective, because, although we know that the people he names on the show were definitely real people, he is narrating a scene where fictional characters are watching images from reality along with a version of Demby, who is also fictional, featuring the real William Demby on the screen. However, William Demby later confirmed that he *did* actually appear on the show, presumably on the date specified:

> Yes, I was there! They called me in at the last minute to be assistant Manager of Ceremonies. People didn't know who those Jazz musicians were; Jazz was known among the elite but not by the general TV audience, so the producers of the show begged me to come to introduce these Jazz musicians to the Italian public. (Micconi 134)

Here, Demby replaces his real self with his fictional self on the show, *and* his real self, who is watching the TV show in the novel, furthering the metafictional perspectives between time, fact, and fiction.

As far as perspectives go, Demby appears to make an explicit reference to the kind of differing perspectives found in Cubism when he relays a news report from an Italian newspaper with the headline, "'NEW LOOK FOR THE PIETÀ.' Vatican City, Oct. 22 (AP)," (90) regarding the new placement of Michelangelo's "Pietà" in Vatican City:

> Michelangelo's "Pietà," one of the outstanding art treasures of the Vatican, has been shifted to give viewers a better look. It's the sixth time the statue, placed in St. Peter's in 1499, has been moved. Vatican art experts say this time the position will be closer to the one Michelangelo himself had in mind […] Redig de Campos, a Catholic priest and art scholar, said in the Vatican newspaper *Observatore Romano* yesterday that the way the statue had been placed before was an "outrage" to Michelangelo's design. He said Michelangelo had wanted the figure of Mary leaning slightly to the left, whereas the old placing made the figure almost vertical. The "Pietà" had been moved off its old pedestal in the chapel and placed at about four feet lower, brought about three feet forward from the chapel wall and inclined slightly toward the viewer. (90–91)

Here, a famous sculpture by Michelangelo is shown to be problematic because there are disagreements on where it should be placed to achieve the "correct" perspective by the beholder. This to-ing and fro-ing of the placement of the statue is a reminder that Renaissance art cannot do what Cubism can, which is to present the beholder with various perspectives simultaneously. According to Antiff and Leighten, the Cubists rejected the "Renaissance perspective in favour of 'multiple views' expressive of the painter's cerebral response to 'tactile' and 'motor' space as well as 'visual' space." (74–75) At another point in the novel, Demby explains that he wrote an introduction for the exhibition of a young Roman artist, and he tells us that,

> Inanimate objects, be they tables or chairs, typewriters or pillows, Michelangelo's "Pietà," are formed of invisible universes of matter and energy: in this sense they are alive. Enclosed in a

> room, church or museum, house or castle, they influence one another – condition one another's existence (just as the "animate objects," the human members of a family, influence one another's existence, in a house or in a castle). (92)

Here, Demby might be speaking about the different objects found in a painting and how the qualities of each object influence each other to form a whole. This passage is reminiscent of the theory of phenomenology as propounded by Merleau-Ponty when he states that, "If a patient sees the devil, he also sees his odor, his flames, and his smoke, because the meaningful unity 'devil' is just this acrid, sulfurous, and burning essence. In the thing, there is a sensible quality to the others." (*Phenomenology of Perception* 333) Like this description of "the devil," the objects Demby speaks of, inanimate or animate, each have their own distinct features, which influence each other as seemingly discrete qualities when viewed individually in a different setting. However, these features actually appear to be inherently *connected* when viewed as a whole when they are enclosed in a certain setting, such as a room or a house. We do not automatically think of the devil when we think of "flames" and "smoke," but when experienced as part of a whole, in this case "the devil," we then experience these impressions as qualities that are related to a central theme or entity, each one contributing to the larger whole. The use of different perspectives and the role that different qualities play in the overall "whole" is something that influenced Modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein. Commenting on how she was influenced by Cézanne, she once said that he "'conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole, and that impressed me enormously.'" (qtd. in Antliff and Leighten 105) The apparently disparate parts of Demby's narrative all link together to form a "whole," similar to the effect Cézanne achieved in his paintings, as explained by Stein. But, like the tables and chairs, etc. that Demby speaks of, the different parts of his narrative can also be understood independently, while, at the same time, they also form a smaller part of the overall artistic impression that Demby is trying to achieve in his novel.

Arguably, *The Catacombs* resembles the form of a montage, which "presupposes the fragmentation of reality and describes the phase of the constitution of the work." (Bürger 73) Indeed, as Peter Bürger further postulates,

> The organic work of art is constructed according to the syntagmatic pattern; individual parts and the whole form a dialectical unity. An adequate reading is described by the hermeneutic circle: the parts can be understood only through the whole, the whole only through the parts. This means that an anticipating comprehension of the whole guides, and is simultaneously corrected by, the comprehension of the parts. (79–80)

Later in the novel, Bill Demby visits Doris at her new apartment after returning from a trip to the US, and throughout the conversation between the two of them, there are what at first seem to be random news headlines and parts of news reports interpolated into the text between paragraphs of dialogue. Doris tells Bill that, "You're not thinking about your novel, you're not thinking about me …" (186), and this is closely followed by,

> ("*Paese Sera*. Tuesday, January 21, 1964: FIERCE CRIME IN VIA LAZIO … VICINITY OF VIA VENETO … EGYPTIAN ASSASSINATED WITH FOUR PISTOL SHOTS – The victim is the *commerciante* Faruk Chourbagi (age 27) … He was probably killed Saturday evening, in the office of Tricotex: the assassin threw acid in his face and then fired four shots at him face to face ... The palazzo of the crime is only a few meters from the building where Christine Wanniger was slain …") (186)

Immediately following this, Demby reflects on the notion of rational will and the nature of evil, and then the narrative goes back to the conversation with Doris still speaking. The news report seems to confirm what Doris has said preceding it—that Demby is not thinking about her or the novel. However, later in the conversation another headline appears which is dated from three days later, and, after further dialogue from Doris, there is what looks like an entry from a dictionary or science book: "('*Vitriol*. late ME.L. *vitriolum*. f.L. *vitrum* glass. One or another of various native or artificial sulphates of metals used in the arts or medicinally, esp. sulphate of iron ...')" (191) At first glance, this seems to be completely unconnected to anything that has preceded it, until the following paragraph gives us another headline:

> (*Paese Sera*, Friday, January 24, 1964: "THE VITRIOL FOR THE LAW IS AN AGGRAVATING CIRCUMSTANCE – The vitriol has returned to public attention. Used, particularly, with the mentality typical of the vendetta, to symbolize, perhaps, the absolute contempt for the person to be punished [...] The vitriol has returned to public attention five days ago, when the ferocious – it has been noted that it is mainly women who use this extremely dangerous substance – murderer, after having repeatedly shot the Egyptian industrialist Faruk Chourbagi in the face, threw, as a gesture of supreme contempt, a jet of the corrosive acid at the face of the young man, to disfigure it ...") (191)

We now get a better idea of where Demby was going when he gave the description of vitriol, but it seems strange that he should insert headlines and news stories which are three days apart in the middle of Doris speaking about the child she is expecting and her conversation with the Count as to what to name the baby.

Or does it? The news story is a real story, taken from the January 24, 1964, publication of *Paesa Sera,* which involved the murder of a young man who was having an affair with another man's wife, and later they were both arrested on suspicion of murder in a court case that was sensationalised in the Italian press at the time. The murder is centred around some kind of love triangle, not too different from the one in the novel between Doris, the Count and Demby, except that theirs is now centred around the pregnancy of the woman involved (Doris) who is unsure who the father is and is worried about what colour the baby's skin will be when it is born (hence, the anxiety over unexpected appearances). Doris' constant worrying about what the baby will look like and the reaction of the Count when he sees the baby is linked to the deliberate disfigurement of the murder victim (compared to the reaction of his wife when seeing her lover's disfigured face), while the murder itself is re-enacted later in the novel when Demby dissolves Doris' character out of the novel when she re-enters the Catacombs with the Count and subsequently disappears. Doris also alludes to the murder when she tells Demby that, "Giving birth to whatever it was you mean by the 'third thing,' using the

manly weapon of dialogue, instead of the old womanly weapon of poison and the bargain-basement gun." (emphasis in original 190–91) Here, the writing process of the dialogue between Bill and Doris appears to be taking shape through the influence of the news reports, especially so considering the comment Demby makes shortly before the description of vitriol: "The world's maybe crazy. No one wants birth any more. Everybody's afraid of the Event." (190) Here we can begin to put together an abstract picture of what is driving the narrative and see how the ostensibly disconnectedness of the narrative fits together with the other parts to give further meaning to the text. This gives an insight into how the news reports are not only influencing the "plot," but are actually an integral part of the "plot" itself, and how Demby uses these reports as metafictional devices to shape the narrative of the novel as it is being written. Different subjective and apparently objective perspectives are presented to the reader through the dialogue between Bill and Doris, the news reports, and the description of the chemical used in the attack. Moreover, the gap between the dates of the news reports tells us that even though the conversation is supposed to be taking place one day at a certain moment in time, the narrative is actually fragmented because the writing process has stopped to allow for external matters occurring in the real world to influence its design.

The news reports in *The Catacombs* are not the only influence on the writing process of the novel, however, and certain factors from Demby's own artistic leanings and experiences from his day-to-day life play a part in making the novel flow. According to Merleau-Ponty, a successful novel does not consist,

> in a succession of ideas or theses but would have the same kind of existence as an object of the senses or a thing in motion, which must be perceived in its temporal progression by embracing its particular rhythm and which leaves in the memory not a set of ideas but rather the emblem and the monogram of those ideas. (*The World of Perception* 101)

Throughout the novel, Demby's "monogram" of ideas can be discerned by interpreting the parts as a whole with a sense of "temporal progression," which should not be adhered to in a linear sense, but instead with a keen awareness of the multiple perspectives presented to us and the undeniable influence of outside factors involved in the writing process. *The Catacombs* does indeed read like a "thing in motion," and in it, there can be detected an almost filmic aspect to its style as well as its artistic slant, which is unsurprising considering Demby worked with some of the most influential Italian filmmakers of the 1960s, including Federico Fellini and Roberto Rossellini.[3] Arguably, *The Catacombs* does function as a type of "documentary novel," given its cuts and jumps from acted-out scenes to reporting and Bill Demby's first-person narrative. The idea that

[3] Although Demby translated, co-wrote and acted in various films in Italy during his time in Rome, his most notable role is when he served as Assistant Director to Roberto Rossellini in the film, *Europa '51* (1952), which starred Ingrid Bergman. Furthermore, Melanie Masterton Sherazi informs us that, "with *The Catacombs,* Demby trailblazes a late modernist aesthetic that was indelibly informed by his interactions and collaborations in Rome with *avant-garde* Italian artists and leftist filmmakers" (69; for a more detailed analysis of the influence of Italian filmmakers on Demby's writing in *The Catacombs,* see also Berry 440–41).

the novel has documentary-style elements in it is something that Barbara Foley also supports:

> In *The Catacombs* the documentary mode becomes so convoluted that the artist's status as 'maker' comes supremely to the fore; the question of historicity or fraudulence becomes virtually irrelevant, since the object of imitation is clearly a potential text rather than a potential sequence of events in the world, and the endless mirrors of narrative reflexivity are more central to the author's design than are any persons or occurrences that might be reflected in those mirrors. (399)

Here, Foley insists that the various perspectives in the novel are merely reflections of Demby's own consciousness and are imitations of different narratological viewpoints which Demby has created in order to achieve his artistic "design." Although there may be some truth to this statement, it is nevertheless also true that Demby fuses what appear to be objective "truths" taken from the various news reports with subjective perspectives from the various characters in the novel in order to derive some form of overall meaning. What Foley fails to consider, though, is that Demby also positions himself phenomenologically from the perspectives of one of his fictional characters. "Phenomenology's most important accomplishment is, it would seem," Merleau-Ponty tells us,

> to have joined an extreme subjectivism with an extreme objectivism though its concept of the world […] The phenomenological world is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which establish their unity through the taking up [*la reprise*] of my past experiences into my present experiences, or of the other person's experience into my own. (*Phenomenology of Perception*, xxxiv)

Demby's theory of Cubistic time, therefore, must be understood in phenomenological as well as Cubistic terms. However, for a more accurate understanding of the novel's narrative technique overall, metafictional theory also provides additional insights into the meanings that Demby is trying to convey through his style of writing. Although alluded to indirectly by critics, metafiction or metanarrative, like phenomenology, is never explicitly referred to in critical analyses of *The Catacombs.* Waugh describes metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality," and that metafictional writing "explore[s] the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text." (2) As previously noted, Demby certainly blurs the lines between fictional and factual, although it appears that only the factual influences the fictional and not vice-versa. "Cubistic time," then, according to Demby, is not simply Cubism and time fused into one, but rather it involves sophisticated themes concerning existential phenomenology and the narratological style of metanarrative, which can then be utilised in order to elucidate his artistic vision through his convoluted use of perspective and fragmented time.

It is clear, then, that in *The Catacombs*, Demby uses complex systems of thought; the novel explores the use of time and perspectives in a fragmented manner that should

be viewed as a larger whole to be understood properly. By combining aesthetic ideas taken from Cubism and fusing them with a phenomenological narrative technique, Demby effectively produces a unique novel which efficaciously mirrors his own artistic vision. Although Demby's fusing of fact and fiction might sometimes blur the lines between the real and imagined, this is a literary technique which is designed to make the reader part of the creative process. It is evident that Demby was doing more than just "fooling around" (40) with his theory of cubistic time, and that, instead, he was using an original narrative technique that combined artistic, philosophical, and literary theories to produce a work of literature that finally appears to be attracting scholarly attention after years of relative obscurity.[4]

[4] *The Catacombs,* along with Demby's first novel, *Beetlecreek,* which was originally published in 1950, is due to be reissued by Vintage Books in early 2026. This will be only the third publication of *The Catacombs* to date, with the last publication being the Northeastern University Press paperback publication in 1991.

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