

The Autumnal City: Symptoms of Schizophrenia in Samuel R. Delany's Dhalgren

Bellona, the inescapable city of shifting streets and unquenchable flame, leads Dhalgren's amnesiac anti-hero toward a multitude of possible identities. An unnamed disaster has cloaked the Midwestern metropolis with clouds of smoke and ash. Only artists, outcasts, and criminals populate the city—manipulating the boundaries of society with their obsessions and their boredom. Many forms of writing flit through Dhalgren's nearly circular narrative: newspaper articles with arbitrary dates, poetry created but never heard, journal entries written by familiar strangers, and metafictional commentary on the challenges of creating meaning from fragments of memory and experience. Samuel R. Delany uses schizophrenia, a disorienting and destructive disease, as a unifying structure in Dhalgren—a novel that subverts the signs of race, sexuality, and writing that point the way through the ambiguous city printed on its pages.

Schizophrenia is a debilitating brain disorder that alters the perceptions of those afflicted with it, isolating them from society. The illness is still a mystery to mental health professionals. E. Fuller Torrey, M.D., describes it as a “cruel disease.” He says, “the lives of those affected are often chronicles of constricted experiences, muted emotions, missed opportunities, [and] unfulfilled expectations” (xxi-xxii). It is a disease that “plays cruel tricks on the person affected” (55). The illness controls a person's mind, turning it against them, and people with schizophrenia are often shunned by even close friends and family (2-3). Because there is no way to measure schizophrenia, or to accurately identify or define it with a test, the disease is determined through its symptoms. Many of the symptoms are present in other mental illnesses (62). Since the disease is difficult to recognize, looking at its effects on a novel like Dhalgren is

challenging. Instead of diagnosing characters or the book itself, the symptoms associated with schizophrenia will be used to gain an understanding of Delany's intentions.

The alienation caused by schizophrenia is present in Dhalgren's main character, a man who claims to be twenty-seven, but looks ten years younger (18). When Kid enters Bellona, he's given a name, "Kid," "Kidd," or "The Kid" depending on who speaks it and his perception of himself when it's spoken. He tells the first character he meets, Tak, that he remembers staying in a mental institution after a nervous breakdown in college (38), but the reader realizes Kid is potentially unreliable in the opening pages, when he encounters a woman that turns into a tree after they make love (9).

Dhalgren's narrative relates Kid's experiences entering Bellona, living there, and then finally leaving. The city is almost empty, and the remaining inhabitants live in anarchy. They raid grocery stores for food that never seems to deplete, carouse in bars with free liquor and beer, and live in fear of a gang of hoodlums known as the Scorpions. The rest of the country is oblivious to their situation, though rumors of the city and the disaster that ravaged it have spread to poets, writers, army deserters, and others that dwell on the fringes of society. Kid describes his life in Bellona in journal entries and poems, but his experiences are questioned by his friends, even though they share glimpses of a reality that cannot possibly exist.

The hallucinations littered throughout the novel are difficult to pin down because the reader is never sure whether Kid's perceptions are true or false. When he relates his experience making love to the woman who becomes a tree to a psychologist, Madame Brown, she tells him she doesn't think it could be a dream because he achieves orgasm, which always wakes a sleeper. Despite his emotional distance for most of the novel, Kid

cries when he realizes he may be “crazy” (771-72). Bellona itself is a constant hallucination of a sort, with fires that burn continuously, apparently started in a riot during the disaster that no one seems to know anything about. The sun comes up in different directions each morning, and the streets “might suddenly swing to face another direction, parting at this corner, joining at that one, like a great maze—forever adjustable” (383).

The hallucinations are often combined with other schizophrenic symptoms, like an “altered sense of self,” which can result in peoples’ inability to “know where their bodies stop and where inanimate objects begin” (Torrey 37). Kid gets a job moving the Richards, a family desperately trying to live a normal life in the city, from one apartment to another because of some noisy neighbors. When Kid is mopping the floor in the new apartment, he begins to think he is inside of his own mouth:

The inside of his mouth held much more room than the room. As he mopped, he seemed to stagger, shin-deep in tongue, bumping his knees on teeth, and his head against wet, palatal rugae, grasping for an uvula to steady himself. (178)

These intense, physical alterations in perception are obvious, but others are more subtle. Aside from the loss of his past, including his own name, Kid also forgets large blocks of time from his recent memory. One morning, he uses the restroom in the park where he and his girlfriend, Lanya, sleep. When he is finished, she is gone and a day passes, but when they meet again Lanya tells him he’s been missing for five days (368). Kid says, “I live in one city. Maybe you live in another. In mine, time . . . leaks; sloshes backwards and forwards, turns up and shows what’s on its . . . underside. Things shift” (414). The

closest thing to a calendar in Bellona is the date on its newspaper, the *Bellona Times*, but it changes drastically from day to day, and even the names of days are out of order, so the passage of time is skewed. In a study on this phenomenon, “more than half the people who had had schizophrenia recalled impairments in attention and in keeping track of time” (Torrey 8). Kid’s loss of time happens frequently enough during the narrative that it is obvious he’s not just careless.

Delusions are defined as “false ideas believed by the patient but not by other people in his/her culture and that cannot be corrected by reason. They are usually based on some kind of sensory experience that the person misinterprets” (Torrey 26). Kid’s paranoia about what controls his life and the lives of everyone in the city seems delusional:

Because that means it’s the city. That means it’s the landscape: the bricks, and the girders, and the faulty wiring and the shot elevator machinery, all conspiring together to *make* these myths true. And that’s crazy. (249)

As Kid questions Bellona’s logic, both physical and temporal, the city becomes more of a threat than the people inhabiting it. Since the culture in which he experiences his “delusions” is drastically different from typical American culture, it is difficult to determine what part of his experience is actually delusion, and what part is the fictional world created by the novel.

Delany uses the disconnect between fiction and Kid’s perception to keep the reader from becoming too comfortable with the assumption that the main character is mentally ill and his experiences are false. This allows the reader to feel a level of empathy for the main character that may be absent toward a person experiencing

schizophrenia. The reader experiences the conflicting perceptions associated with the disease alongside the character.

While walking in the city, Kid encounters a woman on a ladder changing street signs, which hints that there might be a logical explanation for his disorientation regarding the city's layout (319). But other characters recognize the fluidity of the city's structure as well. When Kid comments, "You go down new streets, you see houses you never saw before, pass places you didn't know were there. Everything changes," Pepper, a member of the Scorpions, the violent gang that stalks the streets, responds, "Sometimes it changes even if you go the same way" (318-19). One night, outside of the bar, two moons appear in the sky when the clouds part. Everyone sees both moons, and it is even reported in the newspaper the following day (95). Kid certainly has issues beyond the city's other inhabitants, but his problems are both magnified and hidden by the strange nature of the city, much like a person with schizophrenia's problems would be distorted by the disease. As readers attempt to differentiate between Kid's perceptions and Bellona's reality, they are forced to question Kid's experiences in the same way a person with schizophrenia would question their own experiences to determine their validity.

By mirroring symptoms of schizophrenia in the characters Kid meets and the city itself, Delany creates identification between the reader and the character. Readers develop their own misperceptions about Dhalgren's world based on contradictory information they are given about Kid and his surroundings, and it's difficult to distinguish their own interpretation of the narrative from Kid's.

. . . the delusions become more complex and integrated . . . such persons are constantly on the alert for confirmatory evidence to support their

beliefs; needless to say, they always find it from among the myriad visual and auditory stimuli perceived by all of us each day. (Torrey 27)

Readers recognize patterns in the stimuli presented in the novel that develop meaning through repetition, becoming symbols. The list of symbols or “signs” that show up repeatedly throughout Dhalgren is lengthy. Some characters, including Kid, wear “optic” chains made of prisms, lenses, and mirrors. Kid repeatedly sees other characters’ eyes turn completely red (380). The woman Kid has sex with at the beginning of the novel has a scratch on her calf, and it shows up over and over on other female characters (698). Even the scent of artichokes, the cargo of the truck that Kid hitches a ride with on his way to Bellona, is mentioned several times (654). The large number of seemingly important symbols draws the reader into a conspiracy without any apparent reasoning by giving them potential meaning. An example of this is when Madam Brown warns Kid that no one likes to discuss the chains’ origins, but their significance is never directly explained (115). A mystery is created for readers, so they seek clues to solve it. This effect mirrors the delusions experienced by some victims of schizophrenia, and puts the reader in Kid’s position, wondering if these symbols are intended to be meaningful.

Delany is interested in semiotics, the study of signs and the process in which words and images are understood and gain meaning. He uses Kid’s lack of reliability as a narrator and his mental instability to show the reader how a symbol gains meaning and how quickly that meaning can be altered or erased. The name of the novel itself is a symbol. The reader first encounters it on a list of names, as “William Dhalgren” (63). Since Kid doesn’t remember his name, “William Dhalgren” seems likely because of the connection to the novel’s title, but he doesn’t recognize it. The list of names pops up

several times during the novel, but it's not until the final chapter where the title is given more weight. Kid thinks, "Grendal grendalgrendalgrendalgrendalgren . . ." (679). And later, the only name Kid can remember from the list of names after he loses it is "William Dhalgren" (776). At the end of the book, Kid suddenly remembers part of his forgotten name, "Michael Henry." He meets Bill, a man that helps Roger Calkins, the owner of the *Bellona Times*. Kid says, "William . . . I know who you are! . . . I know," so it would seem that Bill is William Dhalgren, but the knowledge feels anti-climatic after the reader has assumed "Dhalgren" is Kid's true name (783). It seems unlikely that Delany intended "Michael Henry," a name that lacks meaning to the reader as Kid's given name. Instead, the author illustrates that "William Dhalgren," a symbol given significance by its repetition and the title of the novel, is more important than Kid's epiphany regarding "Michael Henry." Even more significant to the reader as a name is "Kid," which has developed associations with the character from the beginning of the novel.

Some of the symbols seem to have a specific logic, but as soon as the reader decides on a possible meaning and begins to look for a pattern, others are suggested. The red eyes appear frequently: a sick girl in bed at a Scorpion nest, a Black gang member in the middle of a run on a department store, a strange trio composed of a blind-mute, a "blond Mexican", and a "brick-haired" woman (189, 275, 647). When the reader sifts through the occurrences, looking for parallels and trying to assign meaning to the repetition, there is nothing concrete to find, just more associations. Delany avoids frustrating readers by continually revealing the symbols in new ways, giving them hope that an answer will be found.

When that hope begins to dwindle, the author suggests that many of Bellona's mysteries are manufactured purely as deception. Tak, Kid's friend, takes him to a warehouse stocked with all of the mysterious signs the reader has learned to recognize: spools of optic chain, cartons of the holographic light-shields the Scorpions wear, boxes of "RED EYE-CAPS." That all of these mysterious signs exist in abundance makes the reader feel like the rug has been pulled out from under them and Delany is somewhere laughing at the joke. Even the capitalization of "RED EYE-CAPS" seems to mock the reader for assigning any sort of significance to a stage prop. Kid feels the same way as the reader: "He did not frown. All the muscles of his face urged him toward the expression. But something else was paralyzed" (555). The warehouse scene doesn't explain why any of the characters would wear "eye-caps," or why the optic chains are a sensitive topic to anyone who owns them, even though the chains seem to be readily available. Delany comments on these symbols as optical illusions:

. . . the book contains not two or three of these optical illusions, but dozens. Indeed, to trace out all their interconnections is to realize the novel is constructed of practically nothing else . . . All we may trust are our own readings of the paradoxes of the world, until we encounter evidence that things are not as we have thought, and then our reading drops into the background and a new reading springs to the fore. (Steiner, "Some Remarks" 79)

The warehouse is a point in the novel where the illusion "drops into the background," and readers realize that the symbols they previously thought were important may be false. The significance the symbols have gathered through repetition is shattered; the intention

is for readers to realize how fragilely created these symbols are, and the possibility that other, more deeply ingrained signs may also be false.

Optic chains and red eye-caps are foreground symbols, but Delany explores other signs as well, such as race and sexuality, that lie in the background. The foreground symbols draw the reader into the narrative, but Delany is more interested in exploring elements more difficult to reach. Race and sexuality are complicated sets of signs, with a vast range of meaning tied to them by society, religion, and government. By using Kid's perception, and the schizophrenic nature of Bellona and its inhabitants, Delany is able to unsettle the reader and create a world where preconceptions about the most basic concepts of identity, time, and place are skewed. Whatever entrenched notions readers may have about race and sexuality are misplaced in Bellona, a setting where the normal rules do not apply. New rules, in opposition to the old, can be created.

Kid's father is a "blue-eyed Georgia Methodist" (38). Tak describes Kid as a "small, dark-complected brother." Near the end of the novel, Kid's fellow Scorpions get into an argument about his skin color, saying, "He's white? I didn't know that. He's darker than I am!" and "the Kid is an Indian." The racial background of many of the characters is ambiguous. Tak is described as having a "Germanic face" with an "oddly Negroid nose" (38). On his shoulder a swastika was tattooed, but "not very efficiently, removed" (42). Madame Brown, a woman Kid meets at the bar, is introduced as "big-boned" and a "redhead," but there is no mention of her race (112). Her ethnicity isn't brought up until the very end of the novel, when Kid asks her, "Do they even know you're black?" referring to the Richards, the family Kid works for (768). The question is

intentionally placed to point out this detail to readers since it hasn't been mentioned before.

A shift in the identified race of Dhalgren's characters occurs as the novel progresses. Most of the characters are white, or left unspecified, at the beginning. Even Kid seems to be mistaken as white by Faust, the old man who distributes the newspapers everyday, until he specifically asks Kid if he's "colored," to which Kid replies, "I'm American Indian" (73). Bellona, however, is not some sort of colorblind utopia. The reader eventually discovers that the riots surrounding the disaster in the city start when a white man shoots a black man from the top of a building, and Faust repeatedly uses racial epithets, even as he delivers a paper to Reverend Amy, who like Madame Brown, isn't identified as black until later in the novel. Faust claims he "don't mean nothing by it . . . I want all the best for them" (73). The shift from white to black happens as Kid spends more time on Jackson Street, the neighborhood where the majority of the black population lives, but Delany emphasizes this change by withholding information from readers, and then revealing it after they have already developed assumptions about the characters. Kid doesn't actively describe other character's ethnicities until he is surrounded by people of color. The reader incorporates the new information into their understanding of the characters. Since race hasn't been a defining characteristic of Madame Brown or Reverend Amy until that point, the reader must consider why the new detail would change his or her perception of each character (72).

Though Kid becomes quite well-known in Bellona, an even bigger celebrity is George, a black man that is famous for raping June Richards during the riots, though the reader knows that the desire was mutual. After the incident the newspaper interviews him

and his rise to fame is complete. The whole city is fascinated by George because he doesn't have any doubts about his actions at all, even claiming he'd do the same to his own daughter (211). Reverend Amy hands out posters of George posing nude for free at the church in the park, and someone has plastered them all over the city. These reactions would be strange in any other city, but the unique circumstances in Bellona allow Delany to manipulate the reader's expectations.

Kid overhears a conversation between Lanya and George. He tells her that the newspaper got it all wrong, that he knew "what she wanted and [he] knew how she wanted it," and June did want George (209). She actively searches for him throughout the novel, hoping to continue their relationship. George explains his actions regarding the public sex carefully and without shame, and though the circumstances are shocking, the sexual act is consensual. The character seems to represent a dated racial stereotype, but he has a reasoned explanation for his actions that invalidate the assumptions made in the stereotype. What the city sees as unabashed brutality, and admires for its total disregard of societal norms, is actually two people's mutual desire.

June and George's relationship confronts issues regarding sexuality, but Delany challenges traditional beliefs about this set of signs in other situations as well. Kid is bisexual, and develops a touching relationship "triangle" with a woman, Lanya, and an underage Scorpion, Denny. The sex in the book is detailed, ranging from threesomes to group sex, and the relationships are open. Lanya, fascinated by the exchange of sex for money, even asks Denny to find a stranger so she can experience it. The man Denny finds isn't attracted to Lanya, he just wants to have sex with a girl that hangs out with the Scorpions (717). The diversity of the sexual relationships is handled so directly that the

reader must acknowledge the relationships. Beliefs about sexuality and the moral validity of a range of unorthodox relationships must be reconsidered, or the book set aside.

The novel does contain love, and not just descriptions of sex. Kid describes his feelings for Lanya as they lay in bed:

Now for me, you're the irreplaceable one: I've never seen you up so close before, and I do not understand you at all. You say sometimes I act like I don't see you? I don't even know where to look! Living with you around is like living with a permanent dazzle. The fact that you even like me, or look at me, or brush by me, or hug me, or hold me, is so surprising that after it's over I have to go back through it a dozen times in my head to savor it and try and figure out what it was like because I was too busy being astounded while it was happening. (682)

What makes this love interesting, however, is the fact that it takes place within a complex web of relationships existing in the Scorpion's nest, a communal home. There are no artificially imposed moral limitations that hold it together, just a pure desire to be with each other. By introducing love into a situation that some would assume loveless, or simply lust, Delany attempts more than just shock with the sexual situations he describes. The inhabitants of Bellona are free from any judgment of their actions by government, society, or religion, so the rules imposed by those organizations can be discarded. Once the rules are discarded, however, the moral framework society provides is gone as well, for better or worse. Kid's identity crisis is reflected in all of the characters as they seek their own understanding of race and sexuality in a place that eschews discrimination, except for the background that each person brings with them from the outside.

The effects of schizophrenia are present the characters, the setting, and even the disorientation that occurs when a reader's beliefs are challenged, but they are also apparent in the language of the novel itself. While moving the Richards family, Kid offers June one of the pornographic posters of George when he finds out she's still interested in him, but her younger brother Bobby threatens to tell their parents what she's hiding. While they're moving a carpet from one apartment to the next, June nudges Bobby down an elevator shaft, killing him, and Kid has to retrieve the body. Two impairments associated with schizophrenia affect the style of this section's writing.

The first is the malfunction of the brain's "screening mechanism," which releases "a veritable flood of sensory stimuli into the brain simultaneously" (Torrey 7). The people who live in the apartment below June's family help to lower Kid into the elevator shaft for the body. The pace of the writing slows and Kid perceives every detail. He hears Mrs. Richards wailing sixteen floors above, the sound echoing in the shaft. Bobby's chest is "all soft against him" and his thigh is "wet, warm, to the knee." The details are graphic: "one eye, open, had burst. The face, as though it had been made of clay, was flattened across one quarter" (232). The explicit imagery is overwhelming to both reader and character.

Kid also has a "peak experience," a pleasant elevation of the senses, when he briefly experiences sexual arousal while holding the Bobby's mangled body (232). Inappropriate and exaggerated emotions are often associated with peak experiences, so Kid's reaction is indicative of that symptom of schizophrenia (Torrey 40-42). The entire event, from Bobby's fall to Kid leaving the body in his family's old apartment, is agonizingly described over ten pages of sensory detail (228-37). Since the novel usually

relies on a constant layer of interiority, moments that push thought aside and focus directly on Kid's senses are effective in drawing the reader closer to his experience.

The framework of schizophrenia also influences the structure of the novel. The opening line is a fragment, "to wound the autumnal city" and the closing line completes it: "Waiting here, away from the terrifying weaponry, out of the halls of vapor and light, beyond holland and into the hills, I have come to . . ." The repetition of "to" disrupts a connection between the opening and closing, but the circumstances of the beginning and ending don't meet precisely either. Kid enters the city at the beginning and leaves the city at the end. The novel's structure is more complex, however, than a simple, uneven circle.

Several structural abnormalities in the novel can be explained by looking at them through the lens of schizophrenia. Most of the novel is told in third person, but the perspective often cuts to a paragraph of first person narrative that is completely interior with only metaphoric connections to the present: "It is not that I have no past. Rather, it continually fragments on the terrible and vivid ephemera of now" (10). The side thoughts appear to be excerpts from the journal Kid carries that contains the text of the novel itself.

Kid wonders if he may have written the entries, but he can't remember, and even the poems he writes and rewrites in the margins don't seem like original creations in retrospect (465). To confuse the matter further, a famous poet visiting Bellona tells Kid he has "at least four completely distinct handwritings" (349). Because of the doubt regarding the origin of the first person narrations, the interjected paragraphs function similarly to "thought insertions," an abnormality that occurs in people with schizophrenia, where another person's thoughts are placed in their minds (Torrey 10).

To further complicate a logical reading of the text, when Kid enters the city he finds a journal that contains the opening of the novel (32), the ending of the novel (261), and other passages and phrases that he reads first and then experiences, or the other way around. Though there is a metafictional paradox at work here, it is possible to read the journal as an “unusual perceptual experience” or a “bizarre fantasy,” which is characteristic of the Schizotypal Personality Disorder related to schizophrenia (68). Delany explains the paradox by comparing the novel to a Necker cube, a two dimensional shape that can be viewed from two angles based on the viewer’s perception:

. . . everything in the book is furnished with at least two possible resolutions, one of which is in the foreground and one of which is in the background, the two always ready to change places at an eye’s blink, depending on which way we choose to read Delany’s complex Necker cube. (Steiner, “Some Remarks” 79)

Kid’s mental state allows readers to examine the paradox created by the journal entries without throwing the book aside in frustration. They know something mysterious is going on, but even at the conclusion of the novel the mystery remains unresolved. The fragmentary nature of the final portion of the novel even discourages the notion that any questions will be answered.

An explanation of the contradictory nature of the circular narrative requires an understanding of the Necker cube:

. . . the opening of the novel avails us two possible modes of interpretation—reality or hallucination—just as the closing journal entry avails us of two possible modes—reality or invention . . . These two

readings are *not* to be chosen between. They are to be experienced as shifts back and forth between foreground and background of the vertical planes in the Necker cube. (Steiner, “Some Remarks” 75)

Once the possibility of two sets of meaning that exist side by side is understood, many of Dhalgren's mysteries can be reexamined. Bellona, with its ever-changing streets and burning buildings, becomes a foreground symbol of Kid's fractured and mutable consciousness. The set of symbols that exist in the foreground, like the optic chains and red eyes, can be shifted behind the background symbols, like race, sexuality, and writing.

The process of writing is another set of signs that Delany seeks to take apart and reconstruct. Kid writes poems on the margins and blank pages of the journal, but the actual poems are never shown within the novel. Instead, his process of revision and creation is examined. How Kid translates his experiences into poetry, and the response the poetry receives is more important than the poems themselves. He starts to write after his first encounter with the Scorpions. They beat him up outside of a walled estate owned by Roger Calkins, the newspaper editor, and the inhabitants refuse to bring him inside (82).

Kid writes a description in his journal that the reader first experienced a few pages earlier in the book, “Charcoal, like the bodies of beetles, heaped below the glittering wall on the far corner.” He writes, and then revises, writing the entire passage over again. Each time he cuts out words and makes the language more compact. “Charcoal . . . like the bodies of burnt beetles, heaped below the glittering black wall of the house on the far corner,” becomes “Charcoal, like the bodies of beetles, heaped below the glittering wall” and finally, “Charcoal, like beetles heaped under the glittering wall” (84). After Bobby

Richards falls into the elevator shaft, Kid attempts to capture the experience in words, “*Both legs were broken. His pulped skull and jellied hip . . .*He paused; He rewrote: *Both legs broken, pulp-eyed, jelly-hipped . . .* Only somewhere in there his tongue balked on unwanted stress. He frowned for a way to remove a syllable that would give the line back its violence” (242). The passage continues, explaining the grammatical rearranging that must be done to invigorate the line.

Since the lines Kid turns into poetry are taken from the text of the novel, and the circular nature of the narrative allows Kid to read about things that haven’t happened to him yet, the reader gets the sense that Kid is revising his own experience. This metafictional element continues throughout, and in the last chapter, “The Anathemata: a plague journal,” the journal becomes the text of the novel. Aside from poetry, Kid has also been writing down his day to day experiences. His revision marks are included: “Dragon Lady threw herself ~~at him~~, cutting for his face and kicking. (~~I kept thinking~~ Thinking: There’s an art to these weapons I don’t begin to understand.)”. Kid doubts his ability to truthfully record his experience, and questions his memory:

Sometimes I cannot tell who wrote what. That is upsetting. With some sections, I can remember the place and time I wrote them, but have no memory of the incidents described. Similarly, other sections refer to things I recall happening to me, but ~~kne/o/w~~ just as well I never wrote out. Then there are pages that, today, I interpret one way with the clear recollection of having interpreted them another at the last re-reading. (686)

Kid becomes a reader of the novel as he examines the words in the journal, changing the relationship between character and reader. Instead of the reader experiencing Kid’s

schizophrenic symptoms alongside him, the character joins the reader as an outside observer of the novel's events, trying to piece together his memories.

The reader also gets editorial notes from an unknown "we." "*Generous enough with alternate words, marks of omission and correction, the transcriber still leaves his accuracy in question*" (651). The marginal entries from the journal are also included as bold insets in a different font, and the reader is told they occur chronologically after the body text. By the novel's conclusion, the authority of the text itself is unclear, since not only Kid had some hand in editing the experience, but also the transcriber of the journal. The creation of the text is muddled even further by additional editorial notes: "*For all we know, however, we have here a copy of a transcript made from a manuscript copy. Both mistakes or correction-marks might have come in (or fallen out) at any generation.*" (663). Even Kid doesn't know how much of the journal he's been able to save, "Some of these [pages] I've caught before they ripped completely free, folded some of them up and put them inside the front cover. Carrying the book around, though, I must have let them slip out" (686).

The unstable nature of not only the plot, but also the authority of the words themselves, relates to the "altered sense of self" associated with schizophrenia mentioned earlier. This disorienting effect of the disease has many aspects, but can result in "confusion in distinguishing oneself from another person" (38). Kid's manifestation of this symptom is typically tied to the written word, whether his own or someone else's. He has trouble remembering the events of the journal, even if he wrote them down originally. He also has trouble distinguishing himself from the reputation built up for him by word of mouth and the newspaper (367). And finally, he can't recall writing the poems that

form the collection he publishes in Bellona, *Brass Orchids* (628). Even if Kid wrote the poems, he questions his ability to claim them as his own, “are these poems mine? Or will I discover that they are improper descriptions by someone else of things I might have once been near; the map erased, aliases substituted for each location” (465). Kid wonders if the poems are his in a metaphysical way, whether the experiences they describe are captured by the words, or are just an approximation. At one point, Kid even mistakes another book of poetry as his own, though it is written by Ernest Newboy, a famous poet that visits Bellona (226).

Delany also examines the role of writing once it has left the writer’s desk and is presented to the world. Ernest Newboy describes the public life of a writer as it relates to the impossibility of judging the quality of writing. He’s a character that seems created solely for the purpose of discussing writing, specifically poetry, with Kid, and his name ironically connects him to Kid, who is “earnest” and also “new” to the city. When asked whether Kid’s poems are good or not, Newboy tells Kid two stories. The first is about a writer he hated until he heard the author’s voice. The second story is the reverse, a writer he loved until he could connect the voice with the writing (163). Newboy uses these stories to show Kid that he couldn’t objectively judge his work and won’t tell him whether he thinks it is good or bad. The distinction is meaningless. Newboy’s stories also relate to Kid’s experience with schizophrenia. Since all of the characters in the novel are present for events that are impossible in reality, like the sudden appearance of a second moon, or the idea of a city continuously shrouded in smoke and fog, their judgment is meaningless. Kid’s constant questioning of his situation indicates that he is one of the

least deluded characters, but the schizophrenic symptoms he shows clearly inhibit his judgment.

Later, when Kid visits Newboy at Calkins' estate, he describes the process of writing poetry as a shield, "On one side . . . is inscribed: 'Be true to yourself that you may be true to your work.' On the other: 'Be true to your work so that you may be true to yourself.'" (258). As a person continues to write, the "shield" becomes a "lens" allowing others to see the writer through his or her work, and finally a prism. "This you-shaped hole of insight and fire" (261). Newboy's complicated metaphors and introspective examination of poetry and the effects of fame on writing contrast Kid's naivety about the process. Kid, however, experiences his own evolution as an artist and the effects of fame when *Brass Orchids* is published.

The collection is distributed around Bellona and Kid is invited, along with his friends and the Scorpions, to a party at Roger Calkins' estate. At the party, another poet, Frank, gives Kid his criticism of the collection. "The language is extremely artificial. There's no relation, or even tension, between it and any sort of real speech. Most of the poems are pompous and over-emotional—I'm sure you were sincere about every one of them" (619). Frank tells Kid that the only reason anyone claims to like the poems is because Kid is infamous around the city and they see the collection as a "performance by a talking dog" (620). Later, Frank even tells other guests that Kid didn't write the poems at all, and simply lifted them from the journal and claimed them as his own (627). Since the reader hasn't actually read any of the poems, Frank's opinions come as a shock. The amount of effort Kid put into his poetry is apparent, and all of the response to them has been positive until this point.

Newboy acts as a buffer between the wildly enthusiastic response Kid gets from some of the people who read his collection and the negative, possibly jealous response he gets from Frank. Kid learns from Newboy that both of these responses are valid because they are both relationships between a reader and a text, but they are also flawed because they are not, and cannot, be objective reviews. Because Newboy's metafictional discussions about poetry question judgment in a way that recalls the confusion of schizophrenia, it's interesting to look at another section of the novel where Delany uses his image to break the barrier between author and character, while also questioning Kid's sanity.

When Kid first joins the Scorpions for an attack on a department store, he looks into a mirror and sees Samuel R. Delany reflected back (338). Later, Kid reads in the journal:

*If an author, passing a mirror, were to see one day not himself but some character of his invention, though he might be surprised, might even question his sanity, he would still have something by which to relate. But suppose, passing on the inside, the character should glance at his mirror and see, not himself, but the author, a complete stranger, staring in at him, to whom he has no relation at all, what is this poor creature left . . . ?*

(360)

This experience brings up the metafictional relationship between author and character. Exactly how alike is Kid to the author that created him? The idea of a character coming face to face with his author is directly associated with schizophrenia. During the early stages of the disease, a euphoric state is often confused for direct contact with a creator

(Torrey 10). This scene also explores an aspect of mental illness that is often confused with schizophrenia, the split personality, or dissociative disorder (80). Delany created Kid, and insinuates that the character is a reflection of his own personality by appearing as Kid's mirror image.

By examining the relationship between the author and the text of the novel, as well as the relationship between the text and the reader, Delany redefines how a novel is traditionally read. Kid is associated with Delany directly through the mirror, but the confusion Kid experiences regarding the authorship of his poetry and his journal entries, and the ending section of the novel that is completely told through Kid's journal, makes the reader question the validity of his experiences as they're told by the novel. The reader's relationship with Kid is created through the network of foreground symbols that confuse both of them. Do the symbols have meaning or are they just a delusion? If the symbols have meaning, do they mean the same thing to Kid as they do the reader, and is the meaning assigned to them what was intended by the author?

Delany suggests that if the reader considered "artichokes," a repeated, yet meaningless detail from Kid's ride to the city, somehow meaningful or significant, then maybe the preconceived societal notions of race, sexuality, and writing are equally fluid:

What Delany has done is construct not an impoverished, but a rich text, that deals specifically with the break-up of social signs . . . and in which the various social privileges of the text (in its various modes) simply cannot be held onto, because each is laid against a fictive foreground plane that, as we perceive it, vanishes in the background and is swallowed up in a concert of possible deconstructions. (Steiner, "Some Remarks" 77)

The shifting realities and planes of meaning are handled so smoothly because Kid is an unreliable narrator with some degree of mental illness and a history of instability.

Because readers are absorbed in deriving meaning from the repeated symbols and potential answers to their mysteries alongside of Kid, they trust his viewpoint more than they would an unreliable narrator whose goals were contradictory. The reader is just as deluded as Kid, and the schizophrenic symptoms become a unifying framework that allow the character and the reader freedom instead of producing distrust. Since the relationship between author, character, and reader becomes blurred in not only a metafictional sense, but also in the shared decoding of the symbols in the narrative, Kid and the reader are allied both with and against the novel's author. Is Delany the creator or his character? Is Kid a genius writing his own story or experiencing schizophrenia? There is not a single correct answer, and the tension between the conflicting viewpoints creates an experience for the reader that models the symptoms of the disease.

Though schizophrenia isn't named in Samuel R. Delany's Dhalgren, its symptoms are present throughout the novel. They create a web of foreground symbols that allow the possibility of everything that goes on in the background. Without the disorienting and destructive effects on perception the disease causes, Dhalgren would lack a foreground structure for the reader to associate with. When viewing a Necker cube, most people immediately focus on the cube that faces toward the bottom left. With practice they can readjust their focus to view the cube that faces the upper right. The artifice of Kid's mental illness allows readers to immediately situate themselves in his assumptions before they alter their perception and flip the cube, unveiling the new symbols Delany has carefully hidden in the shadows of the old.