BECOMING MORTAL

A Study of Death in Late Works by John Banville, Philip Roth and J. M. Coetzee

Rebecca Downes

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Supervisor: Dr John Kenny
Department of English
National University of Ireland, Galway

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Abstract

This study explores the centrality of the boundary condition for creative endeavour through close readings of late works by John Banville, Philip Roth and J. M. Coetzee. The thematic concern with death in these authors' late periods relates to their respective interrogations of the fundamental role that confronting mortality plays in the practices of writing as well as reading. In each case, the limit that death presents for thought is allied with the necessity, at the core of creative work, including the work of the critic, to exceed the self and to bring the new into being.

In his late period, Banville moves towards an emptying of content, gradually erasing the subject from the centre of his aesthetic and foregrounding the impersonal forces at play in aesthetic experience. In drawing attention to the dissolution of bound identities in the literary event, he presents death as a process intrinsic to life and a crucial constituent of the art experience. Likewise, Roth's late aesthetic centres on the apprehension of death in the living present, an experience that violently disrupts the progress narrative of being-towards-death. Mortal awareness is at the crux of his critique of utopian ideologies that depart from creative and critical engagement with the contingencies of the present. In Coetzee's late work, death emerges as the very source of the writer's authority; in placing himself at the precipice of death, he casts off inherited modes of thinking and writing so that a singular voice might emerge. The sheer newness and strangeness of Coetzee's late voices compel the reader, in turn, to abandon known templates for understanding and to respond creatively and contingently. For all these authors, art emerges not out of unlimited freedom but from confronting limitation and finitude. Their works impose a demand on the reader to eschew interpretive templates and to attend to what is present on the page.

In addition to drawing out the significance of death in the authors' respective oeuvres, this study contributes to an emergent critical conversation that seeks to counter a decentring relativism that prevailed in literary criticism of the late twentieth century. It presents a case for *re-centring* the work of literature and rehabilitating the critical practice of close reading.

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1. Introduction

"At the very rim of consciousness the soul, which is indeed like a little bird, emerges and shakes its wings and begins its dance."

J. M. Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus*.

Presence Matters

Literature happens at the edges of language, at the frontier between the sayable and the unsayable. The limits of life and the limits of language appear to be bound up with one another, and if that is so then death is naturally implicated in the work of writing. This thesis looks at how mortality figures in late works by John Banville, Philip Roth and J. M. Coetzee, all of whom have made death a central preoccupation of their respective late periods. In each case the turn to death is distinctive and sustained, and for all three writers it entails a reflection on the art of writing *finally*. Despite the distinctiveness of the writers' individual styles and the singularity of the works addressed here, a central preoccupation with *presence* is evident in the work of all three. While personal interrogations of mortality are implicit in these late works, it can also be said that they respond to a broad cultural predicament that has manifested itself in a pervasive devaluation of truth, distrust in language and, in the field of literary studies, a long obsession with absence and negation, with what is not given. This naturally takes on extra resonance when considered from the perspective of one's own death. In contemplation of absolute absence, what matters most of all is presence.

Death, asserts Paul de Man, is "a displaced name for a linguistic predicament", by which he means that as soon as we enter into language, into "the prosopopeia of the voice and the name", in order to restore the life that is destroyed by death, we deprive ourselves of life (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 81). Life ostensibly falls away from us when we speak or write the word *I* or the word *death*; the quest to preserve life and make present that which eludes us ends in a negation of the self and the world. This is the double bind that Maurice Blanchot defines in

declaring, "When we speak we are leaning on a tomb" ("Literature and the Right to Death" 391). This conception of language as that which mediates, and thereby alienates, the putatively unmediated poles of subject and world runs deep throughout Western modernity. We find it in the Romantic idea of poetry as the fall into reification of creative flow, in the fractured forms of Modernism with their subjectivist preoccupations and in the simulacral realms of postmodern works. The modernist aesthetic was marked by a sense of fracture and lost order: word and world were not only of a different order of reality, but the idea that language could even accurately reflect the real could no longer be upheld and the subject of modernity was confined to inauthenticity and the unhappy consciousness. A sense of triumphalism prevailed in the postmodern era and a more celebratory attitude to the liberation afforded by the loss of wholeness, order and authenticity. The 1960s and 70s saw a widespread challenge to authority, most notably for our purposes here that of the author, which had many positive effects, particularly in debunking the idea of universal man and opening up the field of literature to new interpretive possibilities and challenges. But discrediting all authoritative or originary truths also created a kind of relativism that found expression in suspicion and doubt, which in our own times has taken on a particularly nihilistic character.

There is a notable shift of focus away from the doubting consciousness and epistemological scepticism in the novels that I address here, a turn to presence and a manifest desire to escape the nihilistic impasses whereby language marks the absence of truth, of the real, of authentic inscription. They all look to new ways of attending to and valuing the material present, and controvert a broadly postmodernist appeal to silence, absence and metonymic slippage. There are signs of a new trust in language that, in the case of all three authors, is concomitant with a thematic focus on death. This thesis investigates that conjunction and the idea implicit within it that it is perhaps in confronting mortality that we might overcome the negative structure whereby the word is the murderer of the world.

My discussions of the novels focus on the authors' negotiations of *writing* and death in their respective late periods. Contexts relating specifically to the authors and the critical corpus of responses to their works are, where relevant, addressed in the chapters that follow, although I will discuss in this introduction my demarcations in relation to lateness and within this my choice of novels. The three main chapters

are discrete investigations and I do not compare or contrast between chapters, as this would mean imposing a distorting agenda. There are, however, necessarily reflections, refractions and affinities, which are addressed here and briefly in the closing remarks at the end of the thesis. The purpose of this introduction is to set out my approach to *reading* the texts, which will consolidate the following chapters without enforcing or overstating connections across a collection of very different works. This is neither a method nor a theoretical framework but something looser: a stance or an attitude, and a reflection on the act of reading that provides a broadly philosophical undergirding for the subsequent chapters.

My main concern here, then, is the event of reading as it relates to the thematic focus on death. Close, responsive reading has been the bedrock upon which my research was based, but this is neither a purely technical stylistic analysis nor an appeal to the liberal humanist covenant between reader and text. The concerns of each chapter are specific to the texts in question and theoretical discussions have evolved in *response* to the novels rather than as prior questions. What follows is not a programme for reading that I set out with at the beginning of my research. Nor do I navigate a path ad hoc through a variety of theorists and critics arbitrarily chosen. Rather, it should be taken as an attempt to log certain key turning points in thinking through the broader themes of the thesis that has its source in close readings of the novels. From the beginning, this has been an exploratory study rather than an explicitly critical one. In an interview for the *Paris Review*, Philip Roth claimed: "At their best writers change the *way* readers read. That seems to be the only realistic expectation. It also seems to me quite enough".[1] This thesis consists of the lessons in reading gleaned from the fiction. It has struck me at moments that such an attitude may be naïve, but I stand by it. In reading literary texts we are not reading for information that can be verified or falsified but entering into an encounter with language that exerts its power in other ways. The question of literary value has been a central concern over the course of writing this thesis. This is partly due to the prevailing concern with value in contemporary literary critical discourse, but, more specifically, it has to do with the many crises of conscience that I experienced over the course of the research, having to defend, not least to myself, the rationale for the study. At a death studies conference I was surrounded by scholars engaged in

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all emphases and parentheses within quotations appear in the original text.

applied work for public benefit—palliative care professionals, grief specialists, end of life consultants—in the light of which my own project seemed at best a form of arcane scholasticism, at worst a flimsy and decadent folly. In the end (in both senses of the word), however, it is not a question of discursive rivalry or epistemic evaluation but of complementarity. Literary works can delve into corners of experience and afford kinds of knowledge that reference and signification cannot reach and whose value is not easily quantifiable. This is particularly salient in discourses around death, and the kind of reading practices that we learn from engaging with literary texts, which are not necessarily unempirical or spiritual but experiential and embodied, can awaken us to otherwise inarticulable modes of understanding.

My central guiding question throughout has been to address the concern with death, focusing particularly on style, on the *way* language is used. This has necessitated a methodological openness, an attention to how what is said relates to *how* it is said, and close consideration of the interplay between the acts of writing and reading as interrelated events. The stance I articulate in relation to mortality exposes the limitations of the critical method and the demand for a more contingent response. In various ways, the works that I address here undermine sceptical, ideological and suspicious reading practices that seek meaning in absence and negation or that seek to overthrow meaning altogether and demand an attention to what is present on the page.

One of my purposes in this introduction is to make a case for reading as an encounter that is founded on shared mortality. I want to do so without presenting death as timeless and universal and without invoking an ethics of otherness founded on absence or on abstract concepts of hospitality or debt. Although it may have ethical applications, what I propose is not an ethics of reading. Rather, I want to develop a stance in relation to addressing works of literature based on the limit that death presents for thought. If the boundary condition is common to both life and the linguistic practices of literary writers, it is also implicated in reading literary texts. Artworks summon us to the edges of experience and the borders of understanding in ways that confront us with our finitude. This is not only a structural analogy, but also a cognitive and sensory event. The responsiveness and precariousness of our bodies and the various ways we experience and synthesise time become manifest in

aesthetic experience. In encountering works of art, we open ourselves to the unfamiliar, to new forms of knowledge, and, in doing so, we venture to the limits of our lives, limits that are fluid and permeable. The dynamic nature of being, its relational and contingent character, is revealed to us in artworks. A work of literature is not only an object or a tissue of textuality but also an event which, in however small a way, opens us to the immanent forces of life and death that exceed our personal stories.

Reading here and now

It seems appropriate to begin a discussion of reading as it relates to death with Roland Barthes's 1967 essay "The Death of the Author", in which he famously claimed, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). Half a century later, the author, uncapitalised, is coming back into the study of literary texts, most notably in the form of archival research and genetic criticism, where the rationale is not to re-instate the author as an authority but to attend to the act of writing and to ground criticism in historical, political and cultural realities, while escaping the relativism that prevailed after the challenge to authorial authority instigated by Barthes and his contemporaries. At the same time, an increasing number of critics are turning their attention to the act of reading, and a body of scholarship is emerging that challenges the kind of reading *against the grain* that became hegemonic in academic criticism in the late twentieth century. What these various strands of criticism have in common is that, rather than focusing on the textual object, they attend to the *processes* of reading and writing and to the event qualities of literary works. This is precisely the opposite to the severance implied by the death of the author and the kind of literary analysis which attends to the text rather than the *work* that dominated literary studies for decades.

Before engaging with the contemporary scene, however, it is worth returning to the concept of "the death of the author" and its correlate "the birth of the reader", in order to distinguish what is worth retaining from this watershed moment. This is not to suggest that Barthes's essay singlehandedly changed the course of literary studies. Rather, I take it as one manifestation of a widespread questioning of

authority, in this case that of the author, that was vital and that has had significantly positive gains. It is not my intention to return to a naïve concept of authorial authority or to lionise the work of art as a purveyor of universal or timeless truths. On the contrary, the value of the literary lies not in its universality but its singularity. However, it is precisely this singularity that became subsumed in the decentring criticism that took root in the post-structuralism and deconstruction of the late twentieth century. I discuss the distinction between death as mortality and Barthes's usage of the word to denote disappearance in my analysis of Coetzee's work, where I argue that the work's investment in mortality is precisely why we need to bring the author back in, although not in the liberal humanist sense that Barthes is critiquing. Leaving aside mortality per se for now, I want first to argue that to truly break the paradigm of a theological truth behind the text, we must amend Barthes's assertion so that the author's death does not procure the birth of the reader but rather a corresponding ceding of authority on the part of the reader.

One of the most frequently quoted assertions in Barthes's essay articulates what he sees as a disconnection of the author from the text at the moment of writing: "outside of any function other than that of the very *practice of the symbol* itself, this *disconnection* occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (142, emphasis added). There is much to value in the idea that the meaning of a work is not to be found in the person of the author but in language itself. Nevertheless, it is not necessary to appeal to authorial authority to acknowledge that language is not only a semiotic system but, among other things, a mode of communication and address (even when the addressee is undefined), in which it is not only meaning that is at stake, but varieties of agency and aspects of linguistic communication that lie outside the sphere of signification and the symbolic. Likewise, on the part of the reader, to seek meaning in the language of the literary text is not only to link the signs of which it is constructed to their referents, or to an infinite chain of signifiers that are self-referential, but to attend to its surface, its rhythm and tempo, the modes of address it presents and the movements of thought it traces.

Implicit in Barthes's positing of a "disconnection" of the author from the text at the moment of writing, where "the voice loses its origin", is the idea that the entry into language entails a radical split that precludes authentic inscription. This

severance, according to Barthes, "liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law" (147). However, it is also possible to say that it is the very idea of this disconnection that leaves God and the law in place but merely posits them as unknowable or at least irretrievable in language. To be disconnected is to be disconnected from something: from the real, from the originary voice of the authentic unified subject, from presence, nature—and so on. It is to posit an abyss between language and an assumed level of unmediated reality prior to signification. By the same token, the activity of reading is also, for Barthes, characterised by this division of the reading subject from a prelinguistic self: "the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (148). What is valuable in Barthes's analysis is that, as he asserts, the "temporality is different", that "every text is eternally written here and now" (145). However, to really abolish the idea that author and text exist on "a single line divided into a before and an after", we need to dispense with the temporality of before and after implicit in the radical disconnection between the author and the text, and simply acknowledge that the subject who writes is not the same subject as the one who existed prior to writing but one who creates not only a work but a self in the process of writing and that the reader likewise creates him- or herself as a reader through the act of reading (145). This means abandoning the linear temporality of the transcendental subject that precedes utterance and inscription in favour of the contingent and creative temporality of becoming. To truly refuse the idea of God, of an a priori law or stable truth, we must reconceive of the subject and of language outside of the dualistic worldview, which posits a subject split into an authentic self and an inauthentic self as uttered or written.

Barthes refines his view of the author and the temporality of the text in his 1973 essay *The Pleasure of the Text*, in which he distinguishes between the author as an "institution", which he pronounces dead, and the erogenous bodies of both the author and the reader that come into play in the acts of writing and reading (27). It is important to note that these are not the bound bodies of the persons of author and reader but the impersonal currents of desire that circulate in the events of writing and

reading, akin to what Deleuze calls the "body without organs".[2] The distinction here is between a radical disconnection at the point of entry into language, which adheres to the temporality of an absolute before and an absolute after, and the Nietzschean untimeliness of becoming. Barthes claims that this can only be addressed in practical and theoretical terms and cannot be accommodated in the kind of technical linguistics from which he develops his theory of the author's death and which deals in forms because it lacks the subtlety to apprehend the formless becomings of the text of bliss. He cites Nietzsche: "We are not *subtle* enough to perceive that probably *absolute flow of becoming* […]. A tree is a new thing at every instant; we affirm the *form* because we do not seize the subtlety of an absolute moment" (60-61). This later text grants a critical force to the work of writing, which I discuss in relation to Roth's aesthetics in Chapter 3. The breadth of Barthes's scholarship and his willingness to re-evaluate his own thought aptly undermines the institution of the author as authoritative genius. My argument is not with any particular author or corpus but with a certain concept of language as a negation of reality and a negation of presence that exceeds the thought of any one writer and, as is the case with Barthes, is not always consistently upheld even within the work of a single writer. Banville is an eminent example in this respect, given the shift from a dualist model of the subject and a conception of language as an instrument of disconnection from reality in his early work to a renunciation of these ideas in his later novels. In his interview for the *Paris Review*, Banville contradicts common postmodernist interpretations of his work when he tells Belinda McKeon: "The world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language". In Chapter 2, I discuss this in relation to the turn to mortality in Banville's later novels, where death is figured not as a radical disconnect from life but as indivisible from life, and where the artwork is not a representation of life or death but participates in this dynamic of becoming in which death is always implicit.

In his 1969 essay "What is an Author?", Michel Foucault, the other renowned critic of the institution of authorship, focuses on the historico-political

[2] Deleuze takes the term "body without organs" from Antonin Artaud and introduces the concept in *The Logic of Sense* (1969), where he describes it as a "body sieve" (129). It becomes a cornerstone of his thought and is developed further in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), co-authored with Felix Guattari. In this later work, the authors assert that a book is "a machinic assemblage" consisting in part of a body without organs that acts on other bodies without organs "continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity" (4).

context within which the text is enmeshed as well as that within which it is received. In this text, Foucault attends solely to the historical and cultural situatedness of the work, to the extent that the text is presented as something that can be looked *through* in order to interrogate its *passive* role within a network of discourses. Reading, then, becomes a form of cultural diagnostics that attends to what the text betrays rather than what it challenges or interrogates. As with Barthes, I attend to Foucault's analysis in more detail in relation to Coetzee's work. Here, I want merely to remark upon the way in which both Barthes's focus on semiotics in "The Death of the Author" and Foucault's attention to a text's placement within a vast discursive network preclude the agency of the writer *in favour of* that of the reader, albeit an anonymous one. The text, in Foucault's analysis, "would unfold in a pervasive anonymity", but only under the scrutiny of the objective analyst that is the cultural critic (314).

For both Barthes and Foucault, the aim was to close the distance between writing and reading, to strip both reader and writer of authority and open literary texts to discursive, non-authoritative readings. Their respective focuses on larger contexts—language in Barthes's case and cultural and political power in Foucault's—served to shift the work of art from the centre of the reader's attention and to reposition it as a text within a sea of textuality. Far more than the visual or non-narrative arts, the novel has been particularly susceptible to this reduction to a text by virtue of its overt intertextuality, not only in its engagement with other literary works, but in the sense of Julia Kristeva's account of intertextuality as "the transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another" ("Revolution in Poetic Language" 111).[3] The novel's social embeddedness, the loose bagginess that Henry James ascribes to it, its capacity to accommodate competing ideas, exemplified in Dostoevsky's dialogism from which Kristeva develops her concept of intertexuality, all served to make it particularly amenable to this decentring activity that replaced the "work of art" with the "text". It is, of course, both and it cannot be denied that context is crucial to the reading experience. I do not advocate a reversion to the hermetic approach of the new critics, which is merely another mode of seeking the

[3] This definition is from Kristeva's 1974 doctoral thesis, but the concept was developed in her earlier essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1969), in which she discusses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism.

"truth" of the text. However, it must be acknowledged that contrary to what Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva and their contemporaries intended, the division of the activity of writing from that of reading deepened in this decentring shift from work to text. The "death of the author" deprived the work of writing of its critical force, while the "birth of the reader", as the one responsible for the production of meaning, took much of the creativity out of critique by turning the work of art into a cultural object to be analysed within the play of textuality that comprises culture. As contextual modes of criticism became institutionalised, as they became methodologies and theoretical frameworks, their critical force began to wane. There are of course many fresh and important critical readings still emerging, but it is also true that the institutionalisation of critical and theoretical *methods* has deprived critique of its insurgent power, and, as many critics have noted, has installed suspicion at the core of literary criticism.

In Coetzee's novel *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), the protagonist JC writes of the prosecution arguments against a group of Al Qaida suspects on trial for conspiring to bomb Disneyland: "Where did the prosecutors learn to think in such a way? The answer: in literature classes in the United States of the 1980s and 1990s, where they were taught that in criticism suspiciousness is the chief virtue, that the critic must accept nothing whatsoever at face value" (33). In his own voice, Coetzee was an early critic of the kind of reading practice that addressed texts for exclusions and occlusions. In *White Writing*, published in 1988 at just about the time when the devitalising institutionalisation of critique was becoming evident, he observed: "Our craft is all in reading *the other*: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities. […] It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn" (81). Coetzee is especially sensitive to forms of oppression and the privileges, prejudices and dominations that suspicious criticism sets out to expose. In Chapter 4, I discuss how his own late fiction navigates a way of challenging forms of cultural and political domination without exerting a reciprocal domination. His late works deconstruct themselves, undermining their own epistemic ground from within, but they do so not in order to undermine truths. On the contrary, truth seeking is central to Coetzee's art, which is committed to seeking a way out of the nihilistic negations and rampant suspicion of late-twentieth century critical discourse.

As Coetzee observed, in the late twentieth-century academy, the newly pre-eminent strains of literary studies attended to what was not given, and to the positioning of the work of literature in relation to what lay outside it. A shift had occurred from the quest to discern a theological truth *behind* the work of literature, with recourse to the godlike Author, to looking *outside* the work, at its signifying relations, in order to determine its meaning and, since the signified only acquires meaning in relation to an excluded *other* in a chain of relations that is infinite, no "true" meaning is possible. All manner of ideological positions and theoretical templates could be invoked in order to reveal the text's blind spots and its unconscious collusion with forms of injustice. There is blindness in all writing, including, and perhaps especially, critical writing, and the danger with the hermeneutics of suspicion is that it often uncovers, in a myopic manner, what it seeks to find. This kind of criticism that exploits literary works to reinforce a pre-formulated ideological position is satirised in Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), in which the protagonist happens upon the lecture notes of a friend's daughter. She has noted her professor's remark on Yeats's "Meru", "The poem's emphasis is on man's obligation to strip away all illusion in spite of the terror of nothingness with which he will be left", to which she has added, "man=human", followed by "Class criticized poem for its lack of a woman's perspective. Note unconscious gender privileging—*his* terror, *his* glory, *his* (phallic) monuments" (165). Roth is playing *agent provocateur* here, given that Sabbath, the most extravagantly offensive of Roth's male characters, is himself set on stripping away all illusion in the face of death. The absurd reductiveness is an obvious swipe at some of the cruder feminist critiques of Roth, which he derides in his interview for the *Paris Review* as "stupid reading". In Chapter 3, I discuss how the sophistication of Roth's prose style works to shatter ideological paradigms and to undermine readings that are not contingent and responsive to what is present on the page.

Now that the paradigm of reading for undersides and absences is losing its critical currency, the question being posed by an increasing number of scholars in

recent years is: where to now?[4] We do not want to forget the valuable lessons of the various theoretical approaches that overthrew notions of divine authorship and that exposed the biases of the canon and the preconceptions that underpin liberal humanist criticism, and yet there is a pressing need to escape a decentring relativism whereby the literary text can mean anything depending on the reader's placing it within whatever frame of questioning he or she chooses. What, then, can we rehabilitate from Barthes and Foucault? In what form can the critical force of the text itself be addressed without reverting to an outdated hermeneutics whereby the task of the reader is to reveal the "truth" of the text with recourse to the person of the author? And how can we bring creative *as well as* critical agency back into our readings without falling into naïve subjectivism? In various corners of literary studies, from the so-called affective turn to data analysis in the digital humanities, we are seeing a general refocusing of attention from behind or outside the literary work to the work itself. More and more critics are reconceiving the act of reading as an encounter rather than an interrogation. What I want to argue is that this is not merely a prescription for reading, and hence another methodology, but part of a wider paradigm shift that finally breaks with what Claire Colebrook calls "the long history of Western subjectivism: the idea that behind language, actions, difference and communication there is a ground or subject *to be expressed*" (20). The activity of reading must be reconceived not as an epistemological activity, whereby we ask what knowledge the linguistic manoeuvres of the text can reveal of a pre-existing reality or subject, even if it is the excluded other that might be excavated from the gaps in the text, but as an ontological enquiry, so that we ask what the text *is*, what it reveals of itself and of the subjectivities, including our own, that are formed in and through what Derek Attridge in his book *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) terms the *event* of literature. Although Attridge's focus is on the experience of reading, my own conception of the event of literature incorporates the scene of writing as well as

[4] Of course, many critics such as George Steiner and Christopher Ricks were opposed to the suspicious theoretical approaches associated with post-structuralism and deconstruction from their inception, holding to more traditional liberal humanist forms of criticism. More recently and from more progressive standpoints, several thinkers and literary critics have remarked on the need to move on from critical and oppositional reading practices. Apart from the thinkers, including the novelists, I discuss above, other key figures include Bruno Latour, whose article "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" (2004), although its focus is not specifically on literature, was pioneering in this regard, and Rita Felski, whose *The Uses of Literature* (2008) and *The Limits of Critique* (2015) offer refreshing ways of addressing literary works that are not grounded in suspicion, but are what she terms in the latter work "postcritical".

that of reading. The writer creates him- or herself *as a writer* by writing, just as the reader *becomes* a reader by engaging with the work.

This does not mean a reversion to the truth of the text. On the contrary, to truly realise the objective of liberating works of literature from the myth of authoritative truth, we must attend to the here and now of the literary event, which does not require a severance of the figures of author or reader from history, politics, social embeddedness, corporeality, life experience, beliefs, opinions or knowledge. These can never be suspended or expunged and are part of the richness of the literary encounter. Attridge uses the term "idioculture" to denote the "embodiment in a single individual of widespread cultural norms and modes of behaviour", and argues that in the event of literature an individual's idioculture is "fractured and pressured and thus open to alterity" (21, 83). What is valuable in his account is his acknowledgement that the event of literature is a performative event that is singular to the *here and now* of every reading and that requires neither a suspension of cultural predispositions nor an imposition of "known and fixed parameters and values" that would "transform its performativity into a static and therefore useful paradigm" (119). Rather, this event takes the form of an encounter in which changes are wrought in subjects. The reader becomes subject to the work and becomes a subject *through* the event inasmuch as the writer becomes a writer through the act of writing.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze argues that a true response to a work of art should aim at creative symmetry: "The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself" (139). What I take from Deleuze is a conception of thinking that is ontological insofar as it conjoins being with knowing. This is not to revert to a Cartesian concept of the subject as a thinking thing and to the rational, self-determining subject of modernity. Rather, it is to propose that original thought is not something that is applied to things in the world, for our purposes literary texts, but that the encounter with the world, the other person, the object or the work of literature constitutes a taking place of thinking that changes who we become as subjects. The work makes demands of us and in answering to those demands thought necessarily comprises the dynamic of an always-evolving subjectivity, the continuous process of becoming a subject through

this creative movement. Just as the work of the creative writer is honed out of reading and writing, the critical writer is also both a reader and a writer. Both activities are not only acts of creating textual objects but comprise the creation of the self as a writer and a reader. It is in this sense that the destruction of an image of thought is a death of the subject, and the genesis of thought without an image is a birth, so that thought is not an epistemic enquiry but a creative becoming. It is this *becoming other* that comprises the art experience and that brings into play the destructive and creative forces integral to life.

The object of thought without an image, for Deleuze, is a problem that has not yet been established, for to establish a problem one must already have the form of a solution. A true critique must work without a problem; it must find the problem in its object. Therefore, in the context of reading works of literature, it must be what Timothy Bewes calls a "reading with the grain". To read purely with the grain, however, is to abjure critique, and indeed creativity, entirely. This would be a reading such as Jorge Luis Borges parodies in his story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote", in which the eponymous writer performs such a faithful reading of Cervantes's novel that he ends up reproducing it verbatim. This kind of hermetic reading is a reading that refers to nothing but the text and that attempts absolute mastery of the text. What I want to suggest is that it is not necessary or even valuable to restrict oneself to the text, even in a less pure sense than in Borges's formulation, that reading with the grain takes place in the here and now, which incorporates all that the writer *as a writer* and all that the reader *as a reader* brings to the text. It is not a matter of limitation or non-intentionality but of the plenitude of the creative event. The crucial point is that this does not arise out of an epistemological effort on the part of the reader but a rethinking of the activities of reading and writing on an ontological level as participating in being. Thinking outside of an image of thought is the creation of the self as much as the creation of a textual object. It is a work of self-overcoming that always constitutes a confrontation with death because it makes manifest the dynamic of continuous birth and continuous death in which we are sustained. To bring the new into being is to surpass the limitations of both language and individuated being and to bring not only a new work but also a new self into being.

In his article "Reading with the Grain", Bewes asks what would it mean to think a work of art without an image of thought, that is, without "the recognition of already existing ideas for thought" (25). Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of the "optical unconscious" developed in the essay "Little History of Photography", Bewes asks if this "tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now", might be discernible in literary works as well, which "would operate completely away from the categories of reference, realism, ethics, ideology, intention, signification" (16, 19). Following Benjamin, Bewes suggests that the critic should attempt to "detach him- or herself, as much as possible, from political or ethical intentions that are announced as such in the text; and to reinsert the work into the moment of our reading of it, the moment of the work's revolutionary power" (24). He presents Deleuze's essay "The Shame and the Glory" on T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillar's of Wisdom* as exemplary of a reading with the grain, a reading that is "one of sustained attentiveness to the 'singularity' of the text, referring the text not to anything outside the text, but to itself—comparing its 'vision' with its 'non-vision.'" (25). Although I find much of Bewes' discussion compelling, I differ from him on the matter of intentionality. How are we to discern what is intentional and what is unintentional, and is not reading for a putative "residue of intentionlessness" in the work not another form of reading the text against itself, that is against the grain, by seeking out its blind spots, its "non-vision" (28, 25)? Furthermore, is contingency such a "tiny spark" or perhaps a more capacious category that does not need to be mined for purity (16)? The problem, in my view, lies in the temporal implications of intentionality, which always operates within the linearity of before and after and therefore always presupposes a subject prior to language. In seeking unintentional moments we are already establishing the writing subject as a dual subject, split into an empirical self and a linguistic self, a self that acts in the world and a self that writes. To look for the unintentional then is to seek the exceptional manifestation of a subjectivity concurrent with language. What if this were not the exception at all but the rule?

As my readings of Roth's novels will show, I agree that it is often the case that the ethical and political force of a work is not to be found in its manifest content, but in the non-signifying aspects of the text, its formal qualities or its affective force. However, we cannot ignore what is given by way of signification and the political

predicaments represented in the text either as if these elements, by virtue of the fact that they appear to be more intentional, are not important or genuine. The power of Roth's novels often derives from a dissonance between realist content and affective force. In *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth invites his readers to delect in the baroque tempestuousness of his prose style, even as it describes repugnant situations or cruel sentiments. It is precisely the fact of being torn between responses to the manifest ethical (or unethical) orientations of what is given in the text and the affective experience of our encounter that lends the work its power to disrupt and disturb. It is often the complexities of realist dilemmas and testing situations in which characters are confined and restricted that grant meaning to the vigour and energy of Roth's prose. In a similar manner, Banville's writing frequently plays on a disconnection between the pathos and beauty of language and the manoeuvres of plotting and characterisation. This serves to emphasise the emotional resonance of Banville's highly poetic idiom, independent of what it describes, but the impact depends upon our attention and our ethical responses to what is represented as well as the event qualities of the work.

If we take seriously the idea that there is no transcendental subject that pre-exists the work, no true meaning behind it, that the text is always written here and now, then the question of intentionality is immaterial. Furthermore, it is not necessary or especially useful to refer the text to nothing outside itself. When I read Deleuze's essay "The Shame and the Glory", what strikes me is not his adherence to the text alone. In fact, he makes reference to other writers and thinkers including Goethe, Proust, Melville, Genet, Bergson and William James, and he does not need to distinguish between writer and text because Lawrence's book is autobiographical. What is crucial, however, is that his reading is distinctly Deleuzian. It contains within its schizoid, fractal style an entire corpus of philosophical and literary scholarship through which a highly distinctive image of thought has emerged. It is an image of thought that is always seeking to renew itself by surpassing itself as thought without an image. This matter of style is of vital importance and I will return to it. For now, I merely want to remark upon the plenitude of Deleuze's reading, and to suggest that, rather than any prescriptive purity, "the *most generous reading possible*" must incorporate this largesse (Bewes 4). The object of creative critique is not to seek either originary meanings or unconscious moments, both of which have a

retrospective aspect, but to respond by following trajectories. Creative response does not attempt to master a text, but to become minor in the Deleuzian sense by branching off from a centre. To restrict oneself to nothing outside the text is to severely delimit a creative response. What is important is that one answers to the demands of the text and that the trajectories of enquiry prolong and augment the literary event, rather than seeking closure or critical ascendency. To remain within the circularity of a hermetic engagement not only limits response but has a universalising orientation that has not fully broken with the transcendent objective of seeking true meaning.

As readers, we are also born simultaneously with our encounter with the text. We also create ourselves through the act of reading. We respond to texts with all our resources of knowledge, with our senses, with fellow feeling, with our ethical beliefs and commitments, and, crucially, with our intellectual curiosity. We sustain and enlarge its mode of existence as we expand our own existence. None of this means sifting the intentional from the unintentional, nor does it entail discounting extratextual aspects insofar as they inform a *creative* response. Establishing affinities between aspects of an author's biography and his or her work, or placing the work within a theoretical framework, are not creative responses where they do not drive the reading forward out of necessity. This does not mean that we radically sever the writer from the work or that we eschew theory entirely. Necessity is of far more importance that intentionality. I agree with Bewes that reading with the grain must attempt to dissolve "the distinction between writer and critic, between […] the activities of writing and reading themselves" (3). It is not for nothing that Wallace Stevens's angel of art is a *necessary* angel. If critique is to aspire to creative symmetry it must be guided by necessity, which is not to say utility. If the temporality of intentionality presupposes priority and posteriority, the temporality of necessity is that of the here and now. Necessity is what leads us from recognition to strangeness, from the concept, which is an image of thought, to creative thought. Deleuze reminds us that "concepts only ever designate possibilities. They lack the claws of absolute necessity – in other words, of an original violence inflicted upon thought; the claws of a strangeness or an enmity which alone would awaken thought from its natural stupor or eternal possibility […]. Thought is primarily trespass and violence, the enemy". To trespass, to cross the limit of recognition into foreign

territory, is to confront the limits of possibility and to attempt to exceed them: "Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*" (*Difference and Repetition* 139). This encounter at the limits of thought is where literary language as a mode of transforming the self is always in play with death. In placing demands on us, in making us subject to them, works of literature draw us to the borders of being, so that the encounter with the new is always an encounter with finitude.

In my discussion of Roth's work, I address how the thematic engagement with death thematises this violent encounter with the new that forces creative thought, and I have sought to preserve in my response something of the emotional and somatic impact of the prose. This impact is neither diminished nor enlarged by speculating on the consciousness or unconsciousness of Roth's creative process. It is of no concern to us whether a writer has planned aesthetic strategies in advance. It would indeed be fatuous to suggest that this was not the case, just as it would be absurd to imagine that what happens on the page is entirely predetermined. Likewise, it is not necessary to shut ourselves off from the world outside the text, as if we are trying to catch ourselves off guard, which we cannot consciously do in any case. These matters are immaterial if we think of the text not as a fallen object but as a temporal event that participates in being, an event through which subjects are transformed in creative becomings. I draw on a variety of theoretical texts in my readings in the subsequent chapters, not in order to tame the works into interpretive frameworks nor to curtail them, but to expand, albeit slightly, their existence. To write—and critique is also writing—is not a supplement to life or a representation of life but the taking place of life in all its dynamism, the taking place of the new. This is what we respond to in the event of literature, an event in which we take part, in however small a fashion, by entering into a co-creation, sustaining and augmenting the work, as it does us, extending it and ourselves forward rather than looking back for origins.

A porcupine's death

To bring mortality back into the centre of our discussion and to draw out these ideas around necessity and thinking-as-being as they relate to death, it is useful to look to an episode in Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), in which the eponymous protagonist is addressing an academic audience on the topic of the lives of animals. Controverting the philosopher Thomas Nagel's well-known assertion that human beings cannot really know what it is like to be a bat, Elizabeth argues that the idea that we are unable to think our way into other forms of life is "restrictive and restricted". Acknowledging that for Nagel the bat is merely an example, which might be replaced by any other non-human life form, in order to perform a thought experiment that has nothing to do with bats but is concerned with the nature of consciousness, she sets her point of view as a writer against his philosophical stance: "like most writers, I have a literal cast of mind, so I would like to stop with the bat. When Kafka writes about an ape, I take him to be talking about an ape; when Nagel writes about a bat, I take him to be talking about a bat" (76). She does not, however, stop with the bat, but moves on to what seems an analogy of her own, which she opposes to the deductive logic upon which Nagel's reasoning is based. She claims that, in fleeting moments, all human beings, particularly in their latter years, are capable of knowing what it is like to be a corpse: "The knowledge we have is not abstract – 'All human beings are mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal' – but embodied. For a moment we *are* that knowledge. We live the impossible: we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can" (77). This embodied knowledge of death corresponds to what Deleuze refers to as thought without an image. It necessitates response, violates thought, and threatens the reasoning consciousness with annihilation: "For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 77). The moment of *being* knowledge, of being *alive* inside it, shifts thinking from a purely cognitive activity to an ontological disturbance. Real thinking is not an act we perform, but an involuntary transformation that occurs within us by necessity, which expands our way of being in the world. This does not mean that we need to dispense with our intentions but that such intentions are not already structured in terms of preformed

questions or interpretive schemas that impede rather than aid real engagement with other lives. Far from being an impediment to thinking the new, intentionality, the willingness to put our self-positedness at risk by entering into an encounter with strangeness, is crucial to this endeavour: "That is the kind of thought we are capable of, we human beings, that and even more, if we press ourselves or are pressed. But we resist being pressed, and rarely press ourselves; we think our way into death only when we are rammed into the face of it" (77). For Elizabeth, it is not rational cognition but embodied thinking, comparable to what I have called thinking-as-being, which is closer to the way an animal might negotiate the world, that fulfils our human potential and that we should actively pursue.

We should not, however, ignore Elizabeth's claim to think in literal terms rather than analogies. The experience of death is not only an analogy but is at the heart of the ability to think oneself out of one's own structures of understanding and into the life of another being. The larger context of Elizabeth's argument rests on another apparent analogy, a far more contentious one between the Holocaust and the killing of animals for human purposes. But these apparent analogies are more properly considered affinities, where it is not the formula of logical equation that is at stake but commonality, not an image of thought or a structure of knowledge but sharing a substratum of life. Throughout his late work, Coetzee undermines analogic structures such as metaphor and syllogism that deal in abstract identifications. To think in these exchange structures is to refuse to attend to the singularity of the here and now and to turn away from immanent mortal being, which is always at stake in putting one's self-positedness at risk. I discuss further the ethical importance of confronting death in Coetzee's work in Chapter 4. What I want to focus on here is how Coetzee's engagement with the deaths of animals undermines the distinction (or lack of distinction) between the human relation to death and the animal's and what implications this has for thinking through the relation between language and death. The frontier that death presents for thought, in Elizabeth's account, is not an abstract one, but an experiential one that is traversed in thinking death by necessity. To know death is not to apprehend a projected limit but to know it as an animal might, as embodied knowledge that inflicts itself with a violence that jolts us out of a structure of cognition into thinking-as-being.

Coetzee is surely pointing to Martin Heidegger's writings in this sequence, particularly since the syllogistic format Elizabeth derides calls to mind a much commented-on observation in Heidegger's essay "The Nature of Language", in which a connection is suggested between language and death with recourse to the animal: "Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought" (107). Several key thinkers have disputed Heidegger's idea that the animal does not die without apprehending death or that the human relation to death is fundamentally anticipatory and abstract. Jacques Derrida disrupts any clear distinction between the anticipatory structure of *Dasein* and the perishing of the animal, by arguing that being-towards-death, where death is the ownmost possibility of *Dasein*, is essentially aporetic. He argues that the distinctions between Heidegger's "death as death", perishing and demising "are threatened in their very principle, and, in truth, remain impracticable as soon as one admits that an ultimate possibility is nothing other than the possibility of an impossibility" (*Aporias* 77). Giorgio Agamben, in his book *Language and Death*, thinks through the same passage of Heidegger's, arguing that it expresses the very foundation of Western metaphysics: the loss of the Voice of being in the language of man. This poverty of Voice has, for Agamben, a purely logical dimension, and he sets about breaking the link between logic and ethics so as to establish a ground for ethics based on social praxis rather than the negativity of the Voice and the separation of living man from speaking man. For Agamben, as for Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello, the negative conception of language as that which plunges us into alienation and inauthenticity is overcome in undermining the distinction between the death of *Dasein* and the death of the animal. If our true relation to death does not take the form of rational projection or abstract possibility but rather is immanent, experiential and embodied, then man's dwelling place, his *ethos*, is with the animals and he dies as animals die. If, for Heidegger, poetry reveals that "language is the house of Being in which man ek-sists by dwelling", for Agamben, man lives in language not in the manner of Heidegger's ek-sistence but as co-existence ("Letter on Humanism" 237). There is no Voice from which man has been sundered. We live in language, and die by simply ceasing to live: "exist[ing] in language without being called there by any Voice, simply to die without being called by death" (Agamben,

Language and Death 96). Language, for Agamben, is social praxis; it is ethics. It is not the expression of thought or the negation of being, but the expression of being itself, and death is not something that beckons us but that is always immanent in being. The limit condition is here and now: we confront it in our thinking and surpass it in the taking place of being that is thought without an image, in the newness of literary language.

It is precisely, then, in our relation to death that we can find our way back into language and overcome the negative structure whereby the word negates the world and alienates us from the real. The apprehension of death as an experience in life that Elizabeth Costello describes is central to the works I discuss in this thesis. Crucially, this is not a purely corporeal event. Rather, it undermines the dualistic worldview and the radical divide between nature and culture that founds a whole set of dualisms: human and animal, word and world, mind and body, and, most notably for our purposes here, life and death.

"Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death," the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously claimed, although he went on to advise that the reader who understands his logical propositions should recognise them as a ladder, which must eventually be kicked away: "He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright" (87, 89). Since, for the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, the link between language and logic enshrined in the root *logos* is inviolable, this can only be achieved in silence. It might be said, however, that the reason we desire and require literature is to breach this copula, that the value of the literary lies in its capacity to afford an experience of language that exceeds logical utterance and brings death into the sphere of experience. Indeed, what I have been arguing here is that the particular kind of thinking that takes place when we engage with literary works is not a purely logical cognitive operation but an embodied form of thought that brings about changes in who we are as subjects, precisely by confronting us with the limits of our understanding and of our very being and compelling us to surpass those limits. In *Language and Death*, Agamben traces an etymological link between thinking and exceeding:

> *Only a trace of the Latin term* cogitare*, for centuries a key term indicating thought, remains in the word* intractable *(Italian* tracotanza*). As late as the*

> *fifteenth century* coto *and* cuitanza *meant thought*. Intractable *derives from the Latin* ultracogitare*, and passes through the Provençal* ultracuidansa: *to exceed, to pass the limit of thought, to think beyond,* to over-think. (108)

To think oneself out of self-positedness, to kick away Wittgenstein's ladder *within* language, is to exceed the reflexivity of the *I* that encloses being within the illusory bonds established by the reasoning consciousness and to apprehend being itself, not *my* being but univocal being that is common to all life. To think death is always, at some level, to think one's own death, but this does not confine us to the sphere of atomised subjectivity. Rather, thinking death entails thinking beyond the bounds of our own subjectivity and, contrary to Heidegger's implication, even beyond the bounds of the human. The value of the literary lies precisely in its capacity to afford an apprehension of life that exceeds logical categories and transcends our human experience of time as being-towards-death, to afford an experience of death in the present and thus to intensify the becoming other that characterises being itself.

Reading is an event that breaks down subjective boundaries. The encounter with the text is an encounter across bodies, an experience that is both cognitive and sensory, and one that collapses the putative distinction between these categories. The mutability of our bodies and the flux of life and death in which we exist is revealed to us in literary works; they awaken us to the forces that move us, energies that traverse our being, that connect us to one another, to the world around us, and to our finitude. In traversing the bounds of individuated existence and transcending the temporality of lifespan or life story, they enable us, as the poet Wallace Stevens wrote, to see the world clear of its "stubborn, man-locked set" ("Angel Surrounded by Paysans" 15). Literature is the creaturely voice of language that knows the presence of death. To write is to discover the voice of the animal in ourselves, because, as Deleuze reminds us, "it is the animal who knows how to die, who has a sense or a premonition of death" ("Literature and Life" 2). It is precisely in thinking our mortality as an animal might, with our entire being, that we bring a new self as well as a new work into existence. This is what Deleuze means when he claims: "Literature begins with a porcupine's death, according to Lawrence, or with the

death of a mole, in Kafka" (2).[5] The language of living being, which is univocal and impersonal, is a language of detours that moves away from the rational, the universal, from public rhetoric, from the ideological and from the language of the establishment. Language, Deleuze claims, "must devote itself to reaching these feminine, animal, molecular detours, and every detour is a becoming-mortal" (2). Literature's relation to death does not rest on the negation of the world and of life by the word. Rather, literary language affirms life and intensifies the sensation of living by releasing being from the bonds of personhood.

If language is our dwelling, our mode of existence is style. In fact, the idea that as subjects we exist in language is implicated in the old-fashioned concept of style in literary criticism, the idea that style is the man. It is a notion that was discredited in the wake of the author's "death", but it is worth rehabilitating in a modified form. We have already established that in order to ground language and ethics in material reality and to bring the death of God to full fruition without falling into nihilism it is necessary to dispense with the negativity of a disconnection between living man and speaking man. But this does not mean a return to personal expression, psychology or biographical speculation. To read with the grain is always to read *in* the grain, to inhabit a writer's style, where style is far more than a matter of grammar and syntax. In an essay on his influences, Coetzee writes of the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert:

> What one learns from Herbert is not a body of ideas but a certain style, hard, durable: a style that is also an approach to the world and to experience, political experience included. Ideas are certainly important—who would deny that?—but the fact is, the ideas that operate in novels and poems, once they are unpicked from their context and laid out on the laboratory table, usually turn out to be uncomplicated, even banal. Whereas a style, an attitude to the world, as it soaks in, becomes part of the personality, part of the self, ultimately indistinguishable from the self. To put it another way: in the process of responding to the writers one intuitively chooses to respond to, one makes oneself into the person whom in the most intractable but

[5] The references are to D. H. Lawrence's essay "Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine" and Kafka's story "The Burrow".

also perhaps the most deeply ethical sense one wants to be.
("Homage" 7)

To attend to style is to inhabit a worldview, to embody a way of looking at the world. It is not a discorporate activity of cognitive projection that procures no ontological disturbance but merely abstract exchange and keeps language bound to logic. Rather, we share in the being of another by attending to presence, by opening ourselves to the power of a work, attending to the shapes and sounds of words and the musical rhythms of language, to the way a writer arranges thoughts through the interplay of syntax and signification, rhythm and representation, to the very constitution of his or her being *as a writer*. It is a holistic experience that is curtailed in the application of methods, the posing of suspicious questions and the unpicking of ideas. What I have attempted in this introduction is to defend an approach that has consciously not been methodical but has been contingent on my encounters with the novels. I have unpicked some of the ideas that have emerged in order to establish cohesion and as a way of taking stock and of articulating a stance of my own that has emerged not from blind adherence but from attentive response.

To inhabit the being of another is like inhabiting the being of a bat: it is a matter of seeking affinities rather than differences, a matter of sharing being. The being of artworks is not the being of a lifeless thing but is much more dynamic and vast. It is a power of life that disrupts boundaries and that crosses limits, an ontological disarrangement that brings us into contact with the mutable nature of experience and the processes of life and death in which we partake. I have been arguing for a conception of both reading and writing as activities of co-creation. This is not to suggest an intimacy between reader and writer as co-creators, but that the writer in writing creates not only the literary artefact, but creates him- or herself as a writer and that the reader in producing a reading creates him- or herself as a reader. Works of literature create writers and scholars as much as the latter produce theses and critical works. When we respond to works we are responding indirectly to a whole canon of other works and worldviews, which contribute to the continuing formation of our own. Hans Georg Gadamer's phrase a "fusion of horizons" to describe hermeneutic practice gathers extra resonance when considered as an encounter in which limits become permeable and being becomes sharable (317). It is

in this sharing of being that we find our own voice, at the horizons of being where we meet in shared mortality.

Lateness

The account I have drawn of a relation between death and the activities of both reading and writing is not, of course, restricted to the reading and writing of late works or works that are thematically concerned with death. The novels I address here thematise this power of becoming in works of art, which is a feature of all aesthetic events and one that comes into sharper focus in contemplation of mortality. Late works tend to be overtly reflexive and this often involves reflection not only on the works themselves but also on the preceding oeuvre and on the processes and purposes of making art. In his essay "Late Works", the novelist John Updike remarks that late works are haunted by previous works. In late life, the author "is burdensomely conscious that he has been cast, unlike his ingénue self, as an author who writes in a certain way, with the inexorable consistency of his own handwriting". Deleuze and Guattari also remark on this activity of taking stock of a career, of no longer being consumed with the desire to *do* philosophy or art but being "seized" by the question "What is it I have been doing all my life?" (*What is Philosophy?* 1). Each of the works that I look at in the following chapters are marked to a greater or lesser degree by this sense of self-interrogation in relation to the nature of artistic creation, and the waning of desire is a manifest theme in some of the works. But they are also deeply concerned with the contemporary cultural moment. It would be reductive to generalise too much in this respect. Some of the novels here suggest a standing back from the world and a certain coolness that comes with age, while others are far from cool. Nevertheless, the concern of all the authors with mortality and with the art of writing after decades of creative work does grant a certain clarity of perspective on the present and on presence. Before addressing this further, some context is necessary.

The term "late" as I have applied it to the novels requires justification. It is more than two decades since Roth published *Sabbath's Theater*, the earliest of the novels I discuss, and he produced ten more books before announcing his retirement

in 2012. Banville was only fifty-five years old when *Eclipse* (2000) was published, and so far five novels have followed, which does not include his crime fiction, published under the pseudonym Benjamin Black. Coetzee is also still writing and shows no sign of slowing down, having recently published his latest novel *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016). My periodization has more to do with the turn to death as a central concern than with the writers' ages or the ratio of their production prior to and following the demarcations I have loosely applied, although all of the works are relatively late in chronological terms. Banville's thematic focus on mortality in his postmillennial novels is accompanied by stylistic changes that articulate a profound shift in his philosophical and aesthetic concerns, and I discuss three of the novels from this period that best reflect this. In the case of Roth and Coetzee, a little more needs to be said. Although mortality has been a concern in earlier works, *Sabbath's Theater* marks the beginning of an intense focus on death that was to continue until the end of Roth's writing life. It is inappropriate, however, to define a distinct stylistic shift, precisely because Roth's work is always shifting from book to book. There is immense stylistic variation throughout his late works, as there is throughout his oeuvre as a whole. In general, however, his novels of the nineties are marked by a rebellious energy and an engagement with American history and culture that is related to his turn to mortality as a major theme, and which is central to my discussion of his work. By contrast, his Nemeses series, which, along with *Exit Ghost* (2007), were to be his last works before he announced his retirement in 2012, are shorter and more stylistically restrained. In the interest of balancing depth of analysis with the breadth of Roth's engagement with death, I discuss two of his major novels of the nineties and the first of the Nemeses works. Coetzee is even more problematic, given that death is a preoccupation throughout his oeuvre, especially since *Age of Iron* (1990). However, *Elizabeth Costello* marks a turn to an interrogation of mortality as it relates to authorship, which is my main concern. The novels of the post-millennial period are stylistically distinct, more fractured and experimental, and mark what I see as a preparatory phase for the latest works, which may be said to be after-death books. My analysis covers two of the immediate post-millennial works, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), as well as one of his most recent works, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013).

These considerations are discussed in more detail and contextualised with respect to the thematic and stylistic concerns of the respective authors in the chapters that follow. In each of the chapters, I refer to other works of both fiction and non-fiction by the authors for comparative purposes and where it is necessary to advance my discussions, but for the most part the above demarcations apply.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that "late style" is not a neutral term, but one that has become synonymous with Edward Said's account of late works in his posthumously published *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2006), the subtitle of which already alerts us to a distinction from the present discussion. Late style, for Said, is fundamentally against the grain, although the book itself, in my view, is not. Said's readings are generous and faithful to the writers that he discusses and obviously feels close to. It is a penetrating study of how heightened awareness of mortality is reflected or, as Said has it, appears "in a refracted mode, as irony", in the style of artists whose late works he finds characterised by "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" (24, 7). Written with extraordinary acuity and empathy, no doubt heightened by his own awareness of imminent death but also of his own historical and cultural milieu and his intellectual interests, it identifies a particular style of lateness that is characterised by alienation and exile from the present. Said's own late style might be considered late modernist, and indeed, he finds literary modernism a "late-style phenomenon" (135). Seamus Deane attributes to the book a *fin de siècle* character that discloses "the effect in works of art of the creator's consciousness of his or her own approaching death and of the link between it and the death of an historical era or system which can only at this late moment be glimpsed or seen in retrospect, yet retains or re-creates all the intensity of the past life, now understood to be also a passing era" (200). One could certainly draw parallels with Said's account of late style and Roth's novels of the 1990s, which are shot through with an iconoclastic energy and a relentless *going against*, but it is not my intention to match or compare the novels in this study with aspects of Said's account.[6] Rather, I want to focus on how, in a similar vein to that

[6] Peter Boxall discusses late style in his article *"Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century*", in which he discerns a distinct sense of alienation not only from the times but from a changing concept of time in the late work of a number of contemporary authors including Coetzee and focusing particularly on Roth. My own readings likewise identify a newly emerging temporal consciousness, which, if it is disorienting, nevertheless augurs a departure from a profound sense of alienation that is a feature of modernist and postmodernist art and culture.

remarked upon by Deane, the consciousness of death in the works I address here appears in certain stylistic features that helps to bring to light a certain consciousness that, rather than passing, is dawning in our own times.

On the whole, the characteristics that interest me in these late works are very different to those that preoccupy Said. Rather than exile, which is the motif *par excellence* of a modernist aesthetic, what I have been attempting to define is the end of the long exile of modernity and the discovery of a voice in language, the advent of a language that articulates attachments rather than absences. For Said, Nietzsche was the great philosophical figure of an "'untimely' stance" that designates "ending *and* surviving together", that "increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism" that marks late style (136, 17). This is the Nietzsche that smashes the word mirror, the Nay-sayer who, with Dionysian fervour for the destruction of morality and the law, rails against cultural infirmity and docility. But there is also the affirmative Nietzsche, who if he was exiled from his cultural milieu was in another sense deeply at home on the earth and who rejoiced in immanence. It is this Nietzsche and his untimely cosmic forces that characterises the kind of lateness with which I am concerned here.

Rather than death refracted through the mode of irony, which is fundamentally dualistic, what is evident in these works is an overcoming of the ironic consciousness and an apprehension of death in the moment, as the essential constituent of creative endeavour. It is not a case of mending the fractured word mirror of the moderns but of dispensing with the restrictive analogy of the mirror, which pertains to language as a signifying system. Works of literature are not mirrors in which we can only apprehend a humanistic or subjectivist image of an unreal world. They are instruments of self-creation, nodes of connection, of teaching and learning and desiring. Words are not only signs but also event constituents. They transmit forces of life and desire, which expand and sustain not only the existence of the literary text but also our own creative being in the world.

In his book *The Five Senses*, Michel Serres writes that language is dying, that science has taken its place as the reservoir of memory, the instrument of capitalism and the curator of information. In our age of advanced technology, of algorithms and data banks and the democratisation of information, a new language, a language to come, can rise from the ashes unencumbered to sing songs of the five senses. It is

this language, no longer alienated from the body, not textual but carnal, that we find in various forms in these works: in Banville's intensely sensuous prose, in the tangible materiality of Roth's language and in the stripped down plainness of Coetzee's late style. There are no apocalyptic forms, no lamentations for a fractured world, for lost wholeness or failed transcendence. Rather, there are small contingencies: the molecular depths of a shaft of light, a scrap of paper with the words "can something be done Im dying [sic]" (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 165), a man in a cemetery deranged with grief uttering "Here I am" (Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 393). This does not mean a renunciation of politics but a reminder that an ethics and a politics must be grounded in the material present. We navigate our contemporary moment much as we do our mortality, by living in it, and literary texts, in teaching us how to read, teach us how to attend to what is present, to cease mourning a tragically unreachable transcendence, and to find ourselves here and now, to become mortal.

2. Neither alive nor the other thing: Late Banville

"In the midst of death, life."

John Banville, *The Untouchable*.

Dying into life

More so than most writers, John Banville can be said to have constructed his own fictional world. He writes in series, remodels and reuses names and characters, reinterprets themes and hones ideas. Although repetition is a defining trope, his work is not only self-referential, but is a *work* in the sense of an ongoing project. The distinctive unity of his oeuvre tends to obscure somewhat this sense of a continued aesthetic investigation and to overshadow the transitions in his art and the development of his mature style.[7] His penchant for the lyric voice and the monstrous solipsism of his protagonists place questions of selfhood at the centre of his aesthetics. Throughout the oeuvre, his mostly first-person narrators are plagued by self-division and doubt, their quests for authenticity repeatedly thwarted by that quintessentially modern condition, "an over-consciousness of self" (*Shroud* 41). There are, however, broad focal shifts from the plight of the reflexive self in his early work—which finds apposite expression in the twins of *Birchwood* (1973) and *Mefisto* (1986) and which is reflected in the general focus on epistemological scepticism in the science tetralogy—to the problem of the *other* in the art trilogy,

[7] Of the major scholarly works on Banville that extend to the work after the millennium, John Kenny's (2009) is the one that is most sensitive to these shifts in focus. The emphasis in the monographs by Derek Hand (2002) and Elke D'hoker (2004), both of which cover the novels up to and including *Eclipse*, is on the unity of the oeuvre. Both studies focus on the dualities of Banville's fictional world and an aesthetic of failure, which in my analysis gives way to more capacious multiplicities and a more affirmative aesthetic in the later fiction.

followed by a preoccupation in his later period with self-consciousness as consciousness of death.[8]

All of Banville's post-millennial novels are concerned with the challenge that mortal awareness poses to the self-positedness of the subject and, despite their elegiac notes and their themes of grief and loss, the antagonisms and epistemological imbroglios that characterise the earlier work defer to a more affirmative aesthetic in these late fictions. The thematic preoccupation with death is concomitant with formal and stylistic developments that increasingly erase the self from the centre of his aesthetic. Full of crossovers and substitutions, instances where characters are absent from themselves or overpowered by extraneous forces, as well as moments of self-expansion when boundaries between subject and world dissolve, these later novels move away from the concern with the consciousness of the individual subject to a broader concept of life that not only exceeds the self but extends beyond the human.

In an interview with Arminta Wallace for *The Irish Times* on the publication of *Eclipse* (2000), Banville professed to think of himself as "a post-humanist writer", claiming that, for him, "human beings are not the centre of the universe". He stated his aim "to have nature, the world itself, reflected in the characters, so that you can almost see through them" and claimed that *Eclipse* was as close as he had got "to writing a book that has no real centre". In this chapter, I explore how this decentring of the subject relates to the thematic shift towards mortality in Banville's late period, before proceeding to close readings of *Eclipse*, *The Sea* (2005) and *The Infinities* (2009). Although death is a concern in all of the late novels, and I refer to other works where relevant, these three works stand out as Banville's most intense meditations on the alliance between creativity and mortality. Stylistically, they are the novels in which the shift from a broadly postmodernist aesthetic characterised by negation, silence and failure to a more expansive prose style that emphasises expression and affirmation is most apparent.

In my discussion of *Eclipse*, I interrogate how Banville exposes a denial of time and death in the infinite deferral of the living present that attends the reduction of the literary to the text. Banville draws on physics and painting in the science

[8] The science tetralogy refers to the four novels *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *Kepler* (1981), *The Newton Letter* (1982) and *Mefisto* (1986), and the art trilogy to the three inter-related works *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993) and *Athena* (1995).

tetralogy and the art trilogy respectively as analogues for the work of writing; and acting, in the late period, is another artistic cognate. The use of theatrical tropes such as dramatic monologue, the familiar references to the circus and the commedia dell'arte in *Eclipse* and *Shroud* (2002), and the observation of the unities in *The Infinities*, as well as the adoption of *Amphitryon* as a major intertext across the late period underline the performative aspects of Banville's late novels, drawing the focus away from the semiotics of the text to the aesthetics and erotics of the event. Although anxieties around selfhood are still a central concern in the late period, the focus is no longer on the fractured subject of modernity and the negating effect of language. Rather, the dissolution of the subject is revealed in the event of the artwork, which disturbs ostensibly bound identities and confronts the finitude of the individual by exceeding it. There is a new attention to the integral role played by mutuality and shared experience in the art event and a fidelity to the expressive and communicative capacities of poetic language. The thematic centrality of death procures a liberation from the impasse of the "I" persecuted by its own sense of inauthenticity, and a renunciation of the rehearsals of failed transcendence that characterise the earlier work.

In his introduction to Said's *On Late Style*, Michael Wood observes: "Explorations of the making of the self can go until the very end; the self's unmaking is another affair, and late style comes close to that" (xvii). While Banville's late style is, in many ways, contrary to Said's observations about the disharmoniousness of late works, becoming less rather than more fractured and fractious in the late period, Wood's comment resonates with the shift toward an aesthetic of self-loss in these novels. The sea becomes an important aesthetic symbol in Banville's artistic negotiations of mortality, an inhuman element or inverse world, formless and outside of human dominion. The deaths by drowning in the late trilogy and *The Sea* aesthetically figure the individual subsumed by "the great world's shrugs of indifference" (*The Sea* 264). The prose style is looser and more aleatory than in earlier works, reflecting a dynamic conception of the self embedded in the generative, creative rhythms of the natural world. The bending of nature to human will and the work of self-fashioning give way under the weight of mortal awareness to a less proprietary disposition and an emphasis on bearing witness to forces not integral to the subject, and under which subjectivity itself is placed under erasure.

Banville notes: "It is one of the chief ironies of the [art] trilogy that it is in those passages when Freddie contemplates the literally inhuman—the figures in paintings, or the figments of his own imagination—that he most closely approaches that state of full feeling humanness which is his one, consistent aim" (*Possessed of a Past* 358). But the inverse also applies, especially in the work subsequent to the art trilogy, and it is the more compelling thought. The realisation of our humanity in artworks is a conventional postulate of liberal humanism, but what is foregrounded in Banville's late work is art's capacity to expand the horizons of perception beyond what is proper to the self and to the human, to not only represent within the novels this expansionary and ecstatic mode of experience, but to bring about its occurrence in reality. The focus on mortality is accompanied by a melting of the *I* and a move away from the depictions of alienated subjects lost in the web of language, at a remove from the natural world. The paradigm whereby language distances the speaking or writing subject from nature and from the real is replaced by a configuration of literary language that traverses the confines of bound identities on a level that is not abstract but experiential and real.

The first-person phenomenological perspective is essential to Banville's art and most of his novels are first person narratives. The exceptions are *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) and *Kepler* (1981), as well as partial deviations from the first-person in certain sections of *Shroud* and *The Infinities*, which are arguably ventriloquial, although the latter is a more complex case and I will return to it in my discussion of the novel. Having made a prolonged attempt to write *The Sea* in the third-person, he finally had to return to filtering everything through a central consciousness. But the ostensible contradiction between a form that is intimately bound to human consciousness and the disavowal of the centrality of a subject in the late work should not be ascribed to apostasy or the blindness of insight. Contradiction and paradox are, after all, fundamental to Banville's aesthetic, and the human and the inhuman are not mutually exclusive categories for him. In a 1992 interview, he referred to his novels as "phenomenological exercises" and this applies equally to the late works (Banville and Hanly). Their focus is not on transcendent knowledge of things *in themselves* but on things as they emerge *for* consciousness. The model here is not a perceiving subject painfully alienated and at a distance from the world but a world coming into being for a subject, what Merleau-Ponty refers to

as the "birth of being for us" (178). Banville's richly descriptive prose is focused on the objective or inhuman as it emerges within subjectivity.[9]

Such an infolding of the objective into the heart of the subject discloses a dynamic of becoming as continuous birth, but this also entails a perpetual passing away.[10] Death, in Banville's aesthetic, is intertwined with life, and time is always experienced as loss. In an essay on his aesthetics he claims: "At every instant time falls away from us, at every instant of time we are falling away from ourselves. We are constantly shedding our essential selves, invisibly, impalpably, like scurf" ("Alternative Worlds" 25). Banville's art repeatedly represents this dynamic of generative and entropic processes. The narrator of *Eclipse*, Alex Cleave, has "fallen into thrall" with himself: "I marvel at the matter my body produces, the stools, the crusts of snot, the infinitesimal creep of fingernails and hair" (52). Likewise, in *The Sea*, Max Morden, deep in mourning, has developed "a queasy fascination" with his bodily processes, "the gradual ones, the way for instance my hair and my fingernails insistently keep growing, no matter what state I am in, what anguish I may be undergoing. It seems so inconsiderate, so heedless of circumstance, this relentless generation of matter that is already dead" (70). This focus within the works on the perpetual flux of growth and death is reflected in the drifting, paratactic syntax, particularly in *Eclipse* and *The Sea*, and the burgeoning and receding rhythm of metaphor.

For Banville, all knowledge of the world, including scientific knowledge, is fundamentally metaphorical. The difference between the arts and the sciences, he claims, is that art knows itself to be metaphorical in that it knows its truths are contingent: "The trick that art performs is to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and back again in the twinkling of a metaphor" ("Beauty, Charm, and Strangeness" 41). But the making of metaphor is not a supplement to nature, a mere defamiliarisation. On the relation between language and nature, the poet and essayist Francis Ponge writes: "If we've made our way into the familiarity of these private

[9] I draw here on Dermot Moran's account of the aim of phenomenology "to describe in all its complexity the manifold layers of the experience of objectivity as it emerges at the heart of subjectivity" (Moran 2).

[10] On the analogy between giving birth and creative work, see John Kenny's "Well Said Well Seen", which explores the trope of ekphrasis in Banville's work as "a desired reversal of death" and an "idealized act of virtual birth through art" (61), and Robin Wilkinson's analogy of stillbirth in "Echo and Coincidence in John Banville's 'Eclipse'" to describe "a crisis of creation that culminates in the sacrifice of the ideal child" (356).

chambers of nature, and if they were thereby brought to new life in speech, it is not only so we may grasp this sensual pleasure anthropomorphically, but also that a more serious co-nascence may come of it" (*Mute Objects of Expression* 53). Similarly for Banville, the making of metaphors is not only an activity of representation but is a creative event in itself. Poetic language is not a representation of nature but a manifestation of nature's own creative processes. The staging of perception in Banville's phenomenological aesthetic is not concerned with intentional acts of consciousness but with bearing witness to the synchrony of birth and death in the dynamic rhythms of nature, of which human life is a part. This is why he refers to beauty as "an almost nonhuman pursuit" (Banville and McKeon) and, after Wallace Stevens, to the imagination as an "inhuman author" (Banville, "The Personae of Summer").

Banville repeatedly describes the artist's role as witness bearer and the work of art as a matter of revealing the world, of describing things so attentively and in such detail that they blush: "When we blush, or when the object blushes, it is at its most vulnerable but it is also at its most sensitive and it gives up something of itself that otherwise would be held inside" (Banville and Bigsby). To make an object blush is not only to confer intensity but to endow it with consciousness, and in Banville's art objects are frequently endowed with uncanny life, poised on the precipice of animation: a house has "a tense and watchful aspect" (*Shroud* 13); an armchair sits "braced somehow and as if about to clamber angrily to its feet" (*Ancient Light* 27); pieces of furniture stand "sullenly at attention […] like almost living things" (*Eclipse* 16). Inordinately effusive on the minutiae of weather conditions, Banville is a connoisseur of the pathetic fallacy. But if the apparently inanimate world is brought to life, the animate characters that populate his novels are regularly represented as not quite human. They are often thinglike, lapidary, even mechanistic, or figured as otherworldly, as gods, ghosts or angels. Such ontological mutability is part of the work's playfulness, but it is a serious play that blurs the supposedly inviolable border between animate and inanimate, and between life and death. It undermines the stability of forms and opens onto a dimension in which life is not proper to persons, or bound to life forms, but dynamic and nomadic.

Contemplating the mysterious life that emanates from objects in both literature and in life, the literary critic Kenneth Gross observes that the "life of the

object may steal itself from the living. It may be a form of life that keeps contact with the dead, with the life of what we have lost, or fear to lose" (164). It is not necessary to resort to mysticism or magic to conceive of this seepage of life from the observing subject into the thing. It is even essential, from a phenomenological perspective, to conceive of things as animated by thought, since phenomenological experience is never intransitive; an object is always present *for* a subject. But, on a purely material level, to conceive of perceptions of objects as encounters in which life is transmitted from a perceiving subject is to enter into a level of magnification where apparently solid entities dissipate into a sea of moving particles. Banville's late writing, with its emphasis on movement, the miniscule and the barely perceptible ephemera of the everyday, is always gesturing toward this underlying unity in multiplicity, where edges become blurred and everything disperses into flux and flow. At this shared level of existence, the boundaries between things dissolve and the linear temporality of bound entities does not cohere. The vibrant descriptions of the infinitesimal and of movement and change in Banville's late work draw us into that microscopic dimension in which life and death lose their polarity and there is only mutability, transmissions, metamorphoses, and infinite duration. To make the world blush is not only an ideation or a cognitive act; it is to make manifest and bear witness to the very movement of life itself, to make visible the invisible but no less real connections that lie beneath commonplace levels of perception.

Moreover, to discover this life in objects, to meet the object in shared animation, is to apprehend that life is not something that is proper to the self. Gross observes that to "find this life in objects returns *us* to life, to the experience of life arriving from inside us and outside us, in all of its surprise, its energy of conflict" (165). To become conscious of life as a vast interconnected field of forces rather than something contained within individual forms demands an attitude of self-relinquishment. It involves a giving over of oneself to the encounter with the object, what Ponge refers to as a co-nascence, an absorption and a self-forgetting that is integral to the work of writing. Gross writes: "It has something to do with reading, and with writing, with following the life and demands of words, with sitting at a desk, with the energy of words moving through my hands onto the page or screen" (167). Contrary to the broadly postmodernist supposition that language distances the subject from the real, in this view the immersion in language vivifies the world,

making everything *more* rather than less real. In *The Sea*, Max Morden, whose name signals the novel's morbid preoccupations, finds "in moments of inexplicable transport, in my study, perhaps, at my desk, immersed in words […] I was neither alive nor the other thing and yet more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world" (97-98). Here, the immersive inwardness of creative work engenders a sensation of self-loss that procures an intensification rather than a diminishment of reality. Rather than understanding this in terms of an atavistic, high modernist belief in the transformative power of the individual artist, this work of vivifying can be understood in a more literal sense, as the unfolding of life itself, comparable to Heidegger's concept of the world *worlding*. The artist, in this account, is not the manipulator of nature but its witness.

In a 2005 essay "Fiction and the Dream", Banville declares that the "writing of fiction is far more than the telling of stories. It is an ancient, an elemental, urge which springs, like the dream, from a desperate imperative to encode and preserve things that are buried in us deep beyond words" (*Possessed of a Past* 372-73). This appeal to depth should not be reduced to that psychological slogan "the return of the repressed", not least because it exceeds the merely personal, but also owing to Banville's long-standing allegiance to Kafka's maxim "Never again psychology!" In his interview with Belinda McKeon for the *Paris Review*, he remarks: "Of course, my books are about life—what other subject is there?—but life is so much more than psychologising". Art, for Banville, is precisely the opposite of psychologising, which crudely delimits the sublimations of the imagination by reducing them to the personal. Banville is not interested in the codification of life through art but in its intensification and its transformation. The vitalist aesthetic that emerges in his late period presents a conception of life as a force that flows beyond and between subjects, and out of which forms, including the forms of art, emerge. The life of art is not a coded representation of the life of the artist but exists *in itself*. The artist-narrator of Banville's latest novel *The Blue Guitar* (2015) spells it out: "Trans-this and trans-that, all the transes, that's what I was after, the making over of things, of everything, by the force of concentration, which is, and don't mistake it, the force of

forces. The world would be so thoroughly the object of my passionate regard that it would break out and blush madly in a blaze of self-awareness" (172).[11]

Banville's books are books of evidence in the sense that they crystallise the creative process, but fiction is not only the tangible record of an act of creation. It is also inherently processual in the affective domain and is thus fundamentally concerned with the transmission of aesthetic force through the medium of language. I use the term *affective* here to distinguish the event qualities of the fiction, which incorporate both semantic and somatic elements, from the semiotic or textual object, and to denote a capacity to alter subjects and thus to bring about changes in reality, however modest or fleeting. This transmission of life in the artistic encounter is not confined to the narrative content of the fiction or to the work of creation but is continuous and dynamic. In his reading of *Eclipse*, Robin Wilkinson figures the finished artwork as a fall into reification, "the stillborn infant that the creator dreads, the work as lost object" (363). But thinking of the novel as a fallen object ascribes to it a Romantic irony that deprives it of continuing life: it becomes a fossil of the creative energies that brought it into being. Banville's late aesthetic repeatedly presents life as something that is manifested in encounters and interconnections and the artwork as participating in a vast network of relations. The tenuous and dispersed life of the work of art is made explicit in *The Sea* in the way that emphasis is placed on the contract between the reader and the novel, a category that comes increasingly to interest Banville in the postmillennial period. Speaking at a literary festival in Rome after the publication of *The Sea*, he remarks that the "pact the reader makes with the fictional text is a mysterious and fascinating one. No matter how hard the novelist presses on the reader's credulity and willingness to suspend disbelief, the contract holds" (McCarthy, "Being John Banville"). In *The Sea* and *The Infinities*, Banville plays with this contract to draw attention to the transaesthetic event of the artwork, which constitutes its relation to death.

Banville is a consummate stylist and his art aims above all at exercising and experiencing linguistic power, which is configured in the crossovers, penetrations

[11] Much of *The Blue Guitar* is given over to such reflexive commentary on process, to the extent that it has the quality of an artistic manifesto rather than a work of fiction. Of course, it is both, but the self-commentary weighs the narrative down and some of the rhetorical comments addressing an unknown ear read as thinly disguised authorial interjections, many of which border on contempt for the reader. "That only shows how little you understand me and what I have been saying, not just here but all along," is a particularly glaring example but not an isolated one (112).

and usurpations within the fiction. Such evacuations of subjectivity reveal a free force of life that connects subjects to one and other, to external objects and, crucially, by virtue of its traversal of the margins of the self-conscious subject, to finitude and death. Nietzsche mythologises this impersonal life with his dialectic of the Dionysian and Apollonian drives set forth in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The Dionysian, the formless flux of life itself, is, for Nietzsche, nature's artistic drive, and the tragic artist is the one who achieves, in moments of ecstatic vision, an apprehension of this Dionysian chaos and responds in equal measure by releasing that formless life in semblance. Considered thus, art is a release of life itself wrought by the shaping power of the artist. It is in this same sense that the forms that populate Banville's late art are simulacra or masks for the creative and destructive forces of nature.

It is style that, for Nietzsche and Banville, is the essence of art, but style is not personal expression. Style, in the Nietzschean account, is expression purged of the personal, is rather an expression of unalloyed life. Style is the transformation of oceanic nature into works of art, but it is important to distinguish this from a dualism of form and content. Style is not form but *per*forming. It is a dynamic, centrifugal force. Style wants to be admired. It has a communicative content that is not captured in the architecture of form. "*Communicating* a state, an inner tension of pathos through signs, including the tempo of these signs—that is the point of every style", writes Nietzsche (*Ecce Homo* 40-41). Style, in this sense, is the liberation of life, a pure *joie de vivre*. It is in making manifest this substratum of life from which everything emerges and into which all things pass, that the art experience relates to death. Characterised by this dynamic of dying into life, Banville's late style is inherently affirmative, even celebratory.

Banville acknowledges in *Eclipse* "a move toward emptying of the content", and much of the late work can be seen as striving for a Flaubertian acme of pure style (Banville and Wallace). *The Infinities* is the novel that comes closest, and it is not insignificant that it is his most intense meditation on death. Nietzsche's point that the Dionysian and the Apollonian exist in reciprocal relation rings true here; the more open the artist to the flux of indifferent nature, the formless chaos that is death, the more shaping power is required to release it into semblance: "with sublime gestures he shows us that the whole world of agony is needed in order to compel the

individual to generate the releasing and redemptive vision" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 26). Redemption, here, does not pertain to a moral economy of sin and atonement but denotes a liberation of life energy, or, as Leo Bersani has it, a "release of being" (Bersani 98). The airy aesthetic of *The Infinites*, its experiments with narrative voice and its buoyant humour all figure this release of being from the bounds of ostensibly stable forms. More generally, the motifs of doubles and mirrors that Banville deploys in earlier novels proliferate into series and multiplicities in the postmillennial period, and this is aligned with the shift of focus from the life of the self as constructed by consciousness to a more radical fracturing of the subject and a vitalist conception of life that is nomadic and emergent. It is this subject, embedded in the world, ever permeable to the life flow that underlies all forms, the subject as a confluence of forces, always in flux, that is the subject of these late works.

The conjecture that art can engender an overcoming of the self is well-worn, but what makes Banville such an interesting writer for our times is his negotiation, in his late period, of this phenomenon outside of the transcendent paradigms of Romanticism, religiosity, and the sublime on the one hand, or a postmodern *via negativa* on the other. Ingo Berensmeyer observes in the art trilogy "glimpses of a future for a 'posthumanist' imagination, although authorless, subjectless, decentred, and disseminated – apparently, it can as yet only be defined, if at all, *ex negativo*. In the trilogy, consequently, the emphasis is on the silences, the absences, the interstices of the written, on what is *not* on the page" (255). The moment is the crucial temporal unit of Banville's prose and, contrary to the art trilogy, in which the emphasis is on tableaux and moments of stillness, the late novels are replete with moments of rich description and movement, and the emphasis is emphatically on what *is* on the page. Banville's late aesthetic is one of vivid presence; it is about "the presentation of hard evidence" and about making visible that which is ordinarily beyond the reach of our senses (*Possessed of a Past* 369). This corresponds to a new interest in the surface of language and an abandonment of earlier preoccupations with the desire for a reality, a ground or a subject beyond language together with the lament that there are no such absolutes.

Banville's art is fundamentally about *ways of seeing* and many critics see the dialectic of rapturous self-loss and acute self-consciousness that emerges throughout the middle and late period as an aesthetic of failure, as a continual confrontation with

limits, and a positing of the real as painfully out of reach. Elke D'hoker finds in the novels up to and including *The Sea* a fundamental opposition "between a romantic quest for wholeness and an ironic awareness that such harmony does not exist; between a fundamental awareness of the gap between self and world and a defiant attempt to overcome this gap", and argues that "the modern, dualistic world-view and the attendant alternation of hope and despair are absolutely fundamental to Banville's fictional universe" ("John Banville's Dualistic Universe" 346). Derek Hand, whose study covers the novels up to *Eclipse*, also notes that Banville "has been telling the same story for many years […] The story he tells is one in which his protagonists come to understand the limitations of the human imagination's engagement with the real world" (1). Writing on *Eclipse*, Peter Boxall claims that Banville inherits from Beckett an aesthetic premised on a "continuing failure of the utopian imagination", in which unity remains an "unspoken possibility" (59, 64). Brendan McNamee also finds that the later fiction sustains the illusion of an unattainable reality beyond appearance: "*Eclipse* and *Shroud* can be seen to share a central concern of Banville's entire corpus: investigation of the nature of this magic cloak of fiction that will somehow delineate, without defining, the perennial absence, the ghost, of the real" (220). The general theme here is the failure of transcendence, and while such readings are certainly viable since Banville's narrators never do transcend terrestrial existence, remaining for the most part unredeemed and all too human, the late work does offer a different way of seeing the perennial predicament. One of the most perceptive readers of Banville's late work is Hedwig Schwall, who, in her article "Mirror on Mirror Mirrored is All the Show", observes a move beyond the dualistic model "to a more complex, Deleuzian fragmentation of the subject" and finds in *Eclipse* and *The Sea* "a new dynamism in the representation of the dividual" (121, 128). The crucial shift, in my view, is from the artwork as fallen object, which perpetuates Romantic, modernist and postmodernist anxieties about the real, to a conception of the work as a transaesthetic event. Considered in this dynamic sense as the transmission of force, poetic language is not a pale impression of a more profound, authentic reality beyond appearance, but an autonomous *becoming*.

Affirming immanence

The "aesthetic of failure" hypothesis focuses largely on the tragic, downplaying the comedy of existence with which it is bound up; it centres on the agony of self-division without affirming the pleasures of dissolution, and, crucially, it figures unity as the quietude of self-presence rather than the chaos of primordial unity. Banville's late art celebrates the necessity and the beauty of semblance rather than dwelling on disappointment that such semblance is mutable and transient. Self-overcoming, in the Nietzschean sense, does not entail transcending the world of appearance, nor does it pertain to the narrative temporality of *life story* bookended by birth and death. Considered in such terms, it is always a failed endeavour. Banville's art is primarily an art of moments; narrative plotting is subordinate to digressions and episodic divergence, and self-overcoming pertains to the rapture of the moment. It entails a subjugation of linear time, and an apprehension of "timeless time" (*Eclipse* 169), or the time of the "infinities" in the eponymous novel, a time in which birth and death inhere simultaneously. It is in episodes of self-forgetting when the shackles of reflexive consciousness are loosened that the illusoriness of a unified, atomised subject is revealed, and life, ecstatic and dispersed, is released. It is a subtle distinction, but a distinction nonetheless, between failed transcendence and an affirmation of immanence. It is a matter of shifting vantage points; but when ways of seeing are at issue, the perspectival shift is crucial.

Although Beckett casts a strong shadow over the early work, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which the older Banville has stepped clear of that falling statue. At a 2011 conference on Beckett, Banville reflected on how his reverence became tempered in latter years from regarding his older compatriot as "a superhuman artist" to recognising that "his venture was an entirely human one" (Banville, Haughton and Radley 860). It is worth taking this as more than just figurative speech and considering the literal sense in which much of Beckett's fiction *is* bound within the form of human consciousness figured in terms of enclosure and entrapment. Death is the final insurmountable frontier to the freedom of the

individual in Beckett's work and its oppressive spectre haunts all of his fiction.[12] Banville's first novel *Nightspawn* (1971) is heavily influenced by Beckettian themes of human impotence articulated in self-cancelling structures. The narrative almost doesn't get going, so wracked is it by self-consciousness: "How should I begin? Should I say that the end is inherent in every beginning?" (11). The end, in turn, circles tortuously back, having nowhere else to go, no language of transcendence, only endless deferral:

> These words could go on and on, until we are all up to our balls in paper, and this same testimony would remain: I love words, and I hate death. Beyond this, nothing.
>
> Come, one more effort to transfix it all, to express it all. Try. I cannot. The world is … Art is … No, no use, I cannot. You must, there must be a conclusion. A word, even. Try. Try now, here. Could I? Try. Chapter one. My story begins at a — (198-9)

This is the artist as Scheherazade wielding words to forestall annihilation, and the territory of the fiction is exclusively interior, concerned with the torsions of a voice painfully ensnared within reflexive consciousness. In a 1987 book review, Banville makes a comparable remark on the relation between writing and death: "Every artist knows the song which Thanatos's sirens sing […]. Indeed, art may be essentially no more than a barrier erected against that terrible, sweet music" ("The Mystery and the Madness"). But in latter years this conception of death as art's antagonist gives way to a creative affiliation that has quite a different character. In the late novels, death is not primarily an end to be forestalled but something that is implicit in, and concurrent with, life, and that can, however fleetingly, in the rapture of the moment, be apprehended through the art experience.

In Beckett's fiction, or at least in Banville's Beckettian-inspired early fiction, death is that which destroys meaning and quashes hope, but in Banville's late aesthetic it is the confrontation with, and exceeding of, limits, which is a continual coming up against death, that generates life. Reflecting on the theme of mortality in

[12] As Coetzee remarks, the short fictions that Beckett published toward the end of his life offer a more life-affirming stance in the face of death and move away from the trap structure that characterised his early work and that intensified in his post-trilogy fiction. See p. 169-70.

The Infinities, Banville remarks, "the price that we pay for our self-consciousness is that we get the consciousness of death, which sweetens every single act in our lives. It's just momentous. The fact that all this will end" (Banville and Owens). But this should not be reduced to an economy of days, of time accruing value in proportion to diminished futurity. Although this is a factor in how the works address mortality, there is something much less abstract than a logic of exchange at stake. Banville's writing *works* primarily by excess and not economy; its focus is on the transmission of aesthetic force rather than the transaction between sign and signified, on style rather than the machinations of plotting. It is the experience of *momentousness* that is important, the enormity that one will simply cease to exist and the intensity of *moments* that prefigure that final dissolution.

Confronted with the awareness of mortality, the artist may be spurred to greater leaps of faith, more elaborate arabesques, but this formulation is contained within the bounds of the self as an individuated human life. Banville's late novels are preoccupied with instances where the limits of ostensibly discrete selves are traversed, where characters are invaded, usurped or penetrated by external forces. The life force of the late works encompasses the mechanical, the vegetal, the apparently inanimate objects, which are not merely animated by the artistic imagination but presented as themselves alive and in flux: "Life is everywhere, even in the stones, slow, secret, long-enduring" (*Eclipse* 138). It is a cosmic perspective that emerges within the perceptual apparatus, which is not transcendent but immanent. The experience of limits, as well as the experience of the traversal of those limits, is at the heart of both the meditation on death and the art experience. Banville's art, with its emphasis on blindness and revelation, is about presenting new perspectives rather than changing how things are. It originates in an openness to the myriad currents of life energy that connect subjects to one and other, to the earth, and, crucially, to the horizon of their own finitude.

The major precursor haunting Banville's late fictions has to be Henry James. At the same Beckett conference, Banville speaks ruefully about the fact that the giants Joyce and Beckett overshadowed what he sees as the proto-modernism of James. "I think we're scrambling now to catch up with James's modernism," he claims. "We have to go backwards" to James, "who caught in a far more serious way than Joyce did, for instance, the sense of what it is actually to be conscious. Because

when you read those late novels of Henry James you're wading through a fog that is exactly like life" (Banville, Haughton, Radley 865).[13] James's influence over Banville is evident in the stylistic changes wrought in his writing around the millennium: the more ambiguous looser sentences, the move away from the self-cancelling irony of earlier works, and a new interest in capturing atmosphere and emotional resonance through style.[14] In his essay "The Art of Fiction", James writes that the novelist competes with the painter in his "attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle" (390). This is precisely the objective of Banville's painterly aesthetic in his late period. He depicts life as a surface, as something that emerges out of a dynamic field of interactions and connections and nuances. In his *Paris Review* interview, he claims: "how things look and the beauty of how they look is just as important to me as the people who are in the foreground. […] Human beings in my work are figures in a landscape, and the landscape is just as important as the figures". His late work dispenses with the supposition implicit in all ironic writing that there is a real beyond appearance, an a priori subject behind language. As in James's fiction, everything in Banville's late novels happens within language. It is a flat ontology of the surface, a mask of appearance that masks nothing.

Like his narrators, Banville is accomplished in *Maskenfreiheit*, so when he speaks in the first person, outside of the novels, there is undoubtedly a certain degree of invention, which is not to say untruth. He freely blurs the frontier between life and art, reality and illusion. It is not surprising then that he should invoke the myth of the sirens in an anecdote, often repeated, about his first encounter with "the golden

[13] Given the tremendous influence James cast over twentieth-century American fiction, Banville must surely speak from a purely European perspective when he notes, "we decided for whatever reason to follow Joyce and Beckett into experimentalism" (865). Although the Jamesian inheritance becomes more apparent in later works, Banville's engagement with James goes back at least to the 1980s when he adapted James's *The Spoils of Poynton* for radio, and his 1993 novel *Ghosts* also draws heavily on *The Turn of the Screw*.

[14] As well as manifesting in the stylistic changes in Banville's writing in the postmillennial period, his profound interest in James' writing is evident from the frequency with which his name is mentioned in interviews and book reviews from the time. In his review of Roth's *Everyman* (2006), Banville cites James: "In literature, […] we move through a blest world in which we know nothing except by style, but in which also everything is saved by it" ("Grave Thoughts from a Master").

world of art" ("Alternative Worlds" 24).[15] The fragment he describes is of a young girl skipping school when she catches the strains of her classmates singing and presumably undergoes a spiritual awakening. Banville suggests that it was he, rather than the girl in the story, who had a small epiphany, an experience of "time-out-of-time" (25). He likens it to "a sense, as one has in dreams, of clearly remembering a place where I have never been, a place that is at once strange and wholly familiar. […] It is the world as I know it, ordinary and everyday, yet somehow immanent with inscrutable significance" (25). Whether or not it is a conjured simulacrum, a place where he has indeed never been, the fragment serves as a synecdoche for his late aesthetic. All the attributes are there: the rapturous moment, the sense of self-loss, the distortion of temporality and, crucially, the focus on the work's affect on the reader rather than its formal qualities or narrative content—the work in question was, he notes, "hardly more than a religious pamphlet" (24). The content of the fiction in the story, like the narrative content of his own work, is secondary to the intensities it produces for the reader and merely thematises the more ephemeral event qualities of the work, its affective force.

Versions of this fragment appear in several of the novels and, in repetition, the scene, if it can even be called such, acquires an almost talismanic potency, standing as an aesthetic marker emptied of referential content but imbued with a plenitude of affective, often erotic, force. In *Eclipse*, Alex Cleave, in a mood of onanistic languor, catches the "ragged sound of a children's choir […], and it might have been the seraphs singing" (53). This is a near repeat of a postcoital and melancholic moment in *The Book of Evidence* (1989); and in *Shroud*, Cass Cleave is drawn out of her room in the middle of the night by the sound of a child's song: "It was not so much a sound as a part of the silence, a part of the night, there and not there, like darkness, or the air itself" (186). The repetition of parenthetic interludes such as this across novels is part of the intricate reflexive circuitry that comprises Banville's oeuvre. Full of echoes and half-quotes, the late fictions draw on a

[15] The anecdote first appeared in an essay "Making Little Monsters Walk" in *The Agony and the Ego: The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored* (1993), edited by Clare Boylan, and was subsequently published under the title "The Personae of Summer" in a special issue of the journal *Irish Literary Studies* entitled *Irish Writers and Their Creative Process* (1996). Banville delivered the same essay to an audience at the Festival degli Scrittori in Florence (2008) and it was reprinted in Raymond Bell's anthology *Possessed of a Past* (2012). It also appears in an essay "Alternative Worlds" in an anthology of works from writers who participated in the Clifden Community Arts Week from 1977-2007.

tropology hewn over the course of his literary career. Twins, the circus and the commedia dell'arte are all quintessential Banvillean tropes that recur throughout his oeuvre. His characters are all variations on a small troupe of types and they become increasingly defined as types as the variations proliferate. By this late phase in his career the corpus tends toward a vast phantasmagoria of simulacra.

But this referential depletion cannot be ascribed to the disintegration of the sign and the kind of postmodern playfulness that to some extent characterises his earlier works, and indeed exemplifies the preoccupation of a host of late twentieth-century writers, literary theorists and philosophers with the breach of the semantic link between the word and its referent. There is an implicit critique in the late work of this negative hermeneutics fixated on the failure of reference and the play of signifiers. As the work turns toward mortality as its major theme, the focus shifts away from an exploration of the limitations of figural language and on to a more celebratory interrogation of linguistic power. In *Shroud*, Banville engages critically with one of the most radical theorists of the negative hermeneutics Paul de Man, on whom the novel's central character is loosely based, but the more pronounced stylistic changes that herald this new phase are to be found in *Eclipse*. Although it is not certain whether Banville's critical engagement with de Man dates back to the writing of *Eclipse*, it seems likely that he would have encountered de Man's essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality", published in *Blindness and Insight* (1983), given that it is widely regarded as a seminal text of deconstruction. Whether or not this is the case, Banville's preoccupation with time and rhetoric, his own interest in Nietzsche who heavily influenced de Man, his interrogation of the relation between language and reality and, crucially, the overcoming of irony staged in *Eclipse* makes the essay a useful touchstone for interrogating the novel's rhetorical, or, to use de Man's term, tropological, experiments.

Overcoming irony

Eclipse is a pivotal text that heralds a new phase in Banville's art, in which a renunciation of the aesthetics of failure and of the dualistic worldview becomes increasingly apparent, and this is inextricable from the work's interrogation of the

ligature that binds writing and death. Tracing the ways in which time and death are configured in language in this novel reveals a paradoxically death-denying and life-negating disposition in the potentially infinite structure of the ironic consciousness, which is set in tension with stylistic strategies that signal a new affirmation of both life and death. The torturous dualisms that predominated in previous novels yield here to a more optimistic, although not naïvely positivist, aesthetic in which affective exorbitance takes precedence over referential depletion. The emptying of referential content does not mean that meaning must be sought in form. In fact, the constitutive difference of the form-content dichotomy, along with its ideological correlate of subject-object, becomes blurred in the more nebulous category of style and the phenomenon of aesthetic power. The negative power of irony to undermine meaning and, crucially, to defer endings, is countered here by the affirmative and expressive power of beauty. This is a tension that runs throughout the oeuvre, but in *Eclipse* the scales tip toward expression, as the sheer force of rich description and the extraordinary affective power of metaphor exceed the veto against vitality configured in irony.

Given the evidence in his work as a book-reviewer of Banville's wide-ranging intellectual and philosophical curiosity and knowledge, this surely has much to do with the contemporaneity of the work and the intellectual currents of the new millennium, but there is evidence that the shift away from a negative aesthetics is also bound up with the turn to the theme of mortality. It is as if having his characters consistently face the prospect of their own mortality—and one might speculate a personal confrontation with death too—forces a rejection of the endless formal manoeuvres of irony in favour not only of a testament to having lived but of a writing that carries within it a force of life.

Eclipse is narrated by Alex Cleave, an actor by profession and afflicted, like all of Banville's narrators, with a "hideous awareness", an "insupportable excess of self" (88). He suffers, he claims, from "the actor's hubris, to imagine the world possessed of a single, avid eye fixed solely and always on him" (10). The novel opens with his flight from "the peopled world", the stage of invented gestures, and a lifetime courting applause (10). He wants, or claims to want, to live "without an audience of any kind", to "cease from performing and simply *be*" (46). The rub is patent: the narration slips in and out of dramatic monologue and Cleave is evidently

still playing to an audience, conscious of the reader's "avid eye". Later in the novel, the reflexive turn is overtly determined when the diary conceit is revealed and we learn that the narrative comprises Cleave's "jottings", in which he notes "a distinct rhetorical cast […] often I catch myself speaking the words aloud as I write them, as if I were addressing them directly to some known and sympathetic ear" (130-31). Another in a long line of great dissemblers in Banville's fiction, a master of doublespeak and a professional fictioneer, he is naturally unreliable and an inveterate exhibitionist. On the novel's opening page, he commands in quintessentially Banvillean measured clauses and mannered style: "See me there, the haunted one, in my fiftieth year, assailed suddenly, in the midst of the world" (3). The dramatic monologue overtly flags the event qualities of the work by underlining the relation between the text and the reader, a point to which I will return. On a purely textual or formal level, however, the ekphrastic depiction of the self as if in tableau epitomises de Man's account of the ironic consciousness by dramatising the bifurcation of the subject into an empirical self "in the midst of the world", and a linguistic self looking back from a future vantage point. This temporal split in the narrative voice is the crux around which the novel turns. It is staged in the narrative drift between the past and the present tense, and more jarringly, through the prolific use of the temporal deictic "now" with past tense narration, which figures throughout.

For de Man, what sustains irony is not merely the divergence of the world and the word, which is characteristic of all figural language, but the temporal nature of the distance between them, the branching off into before and after, between which lies an insurmountable gap. It is a radical rupturing of the subject that destroys the illusion of self-presence. This is much like the *dedoublement* that occurs at the beginning of *Eclipse*, when Cleave is troubled by an unexpected weight, a strange usurper, experienced as a bodily invasion: "I was accustomed to putting on personae but this, this was different" (3). This alteration in the character of the double from a willed projection to a strange irreconcilable other is the event, repeated in various configurations throughout the novel, which founds the ironies of the text and underlines the temporalisation of the problem of authenticity. The cleavage—evidence of Banville's fondness for nomenclative punning—into before and after marks the shift from self-fashioning to the unravelling of the self. With this

unwanted intrusion, the question of the authenticity of the subject becomes the problem of accepting temporal existence and confronting the fact of death.

However, it is not his own death that Cleave must ultimately confront but that of his troubled daughter Cass, who is on a research trip in Europe. For the greater part of the novel until the news of her suicide at the end of the penultimate "act", Cleave is embarked on a melancholic, and often humorous, self-elegy. The "weight" or "ballast" that has descended and eclipsed his light, "as if something had plummeted past the sun, a winged boy, perhaps, or falling angel", is heavily alluded to as the weight of mortal awareness (3). His invocation of Dante on the opening page as he remarks on a cold that is both "infernal" and "paradisal" sets off a series of allusions to the afterlife (3). He begins to feel spectral himself, and thinks, "perhaps I have at last become my own ghost" (55). Later in the novel, he declares: "For I have died, that is what has happened to me" (167). This mock triumphalism in the face of what is apparently a rather pedestrian mid-life crisis is heavily ironic and typical of Banville's comic impulses. Indeed, part of the book's allure is the delicate balance of bathos with poignant human grief. It often seems a sort of Nabokovian game with Banville, this juxtaposition of the comic and the tragic in extravagant arabesques and tones of ostentatious irony, a flexing of stylistic muscle, for which he is lambasted by some critics who find his work lacking in human warmth.[16] But Banville has never been a social realist and his books deliberately controvert the kind of pathos that rests on easy empathy and the rise and fall of climax, denouement and peripeteia. This is not to say that they are not affecting; Banville works hard to achieve a poignancy that transcends character and situation, a purity and a distillation of affect that is purged of the personalities of character and the specificities of action.

Drawing on Baudelaire's theory of laughter, de Man associates the emergence of the ironic consciousness with a fall, and it is precisely a fall from grace that has ruptured Cleave's self-possession and sent him into ignominious exile. During a production of Kleist's *Amphitryon*, just as he was about to deliver the

[16] The examples are copious. In his review of *The Blue Guitar* for the *London Review of Books,* Theo Tait remarks on the "chilly aestheticism" of his novels, and Michiko Kakutani writing for the *New York Times* was among a host of critics to condemn his Booker Prize win for *The Sea*, describing him as "a highly cerebral author who emphasizes style over story, linguistic pyrotechnics over felt emotion".

pivotal line "*Who if not I, then, is Amphitryon?*", he fluffed his lines and froze on stage before fleeing the theatre for good (89). This too is alluded to as a death; after four decades the actor has "died in the middle of the last act" (11), and "with funereal tread" he makes "a grave, unsteady exit" before the curtain comes down, "ponderous and solid as a stone portcullis" (90).[17] Mortal awareness is the fissure that opens up to fracture the illusion of self-presence and it is at the heart of the ironic consciousness.

Irony is a kind of tragic wisdom for de Man; it does not *produce* the painfully rent subject, alienated from self and world, but merely *reveals* the subject's existing alienation. The pre-ironic subject is no prelapsarian paragon of self-presence but a self-deluded man of culture who believes himself master of his own destiny and of nature. The fall into irony merely exposes his self-deception, revealing him to be at the mercy of nature and bringing home to him his vulnerability in the face of death. For de Man, irony is essentially bound up with negotiating time and is intimately linked to the modern novel; it is through irony that man acknowledges his fallen nature and his mortality. However, there is another way of construing his account that reveals a death-denying tendency implicit in the structural infinity of the ironic consciousness and the dualistic model of the subject more generally. The crucial point to note is that the fall into irony does not remind man of his *participation* in nature, but of his alienation from, and his powerlessness against, natural forces. The dualism of nature and culture runs all the way through in de Man's account and this underpins that other irreconcilable dualism of world and word. The subject is turned inward, always at a distance from the world and painfully aware of his impotence. It is a familiar Banvillean predicament and Alex Cleave is no less alienated: "I am all inwardness, gazing out in ever intensifying perplexity upon a world in which nothing is exactly plausible, nothing is exactly what it is" (15).

Organic unity, for the ironic consciousness, persists only as an illusory dream, and the subject remains within the temporality of before and after, that is, the narrative teleology of individuated existence in which time marches relentlessly

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[17] The symbolic resonances with mortality are also struck in the *mise en abyme*, as the usurpation in Kleist's play is overtly referred to as death:

> AMPHITRYON: I am unhappy, I am smitten down,
> The blow destroys me, there is nothing of me left.
> I am already buried and my widow
> Already mated with another husband. (III.3)

toward a death that consistently recedes but casts a constant debilitating shadow. Synthesis is configured ideally as a rejection of time and a denial of change and death, a romantic quest for stability and the eternal that can only be realised in a sublime leap out of language. Alex Cleave's melancholic desire to "cease becoming and merely to be" (77) is presented in these Romantic terms as a yearning for a prelapsarian unity of pure self-presence: "For is this not what I am after, the pure conjunction, the union of self with sundered self? I am weary of division, of being always torn. I shut my eyes and in a sort of rapture see myself stepping backward slowly into the cloven shell, and the two halves of it, still moist with glair, closing around me" (70). This configures the will to death as a negation of life and a turning away from becoming, change and mutability, an atavistic retreat into the past and a consciousness turned in on itself. But here it is heavy with bathos and comically inauthentic, a wistful self-deception that in fact renounces death. The subject turned back on itself in the *mise en abyme* of the ironic consciousness is an infinite structure and the double is a mirage that promises immortality.

This infinity is played out in the vertiginous madness of linguistic play in which the distance between self and world, that is between the self as uttered and the empirical self, is in fact a willed distance, a wish-fulfillment tactic rather than a painfully borne obstacle to authenticity. Cleave is not really embarked on a quest for authenticity; he has authenticity thrust upon him. His proleptic declaration that he has died is a logical fallacy, much like the will to nothingness of the ascetic, which, as Nietzsche points out, is still a will: "man still prefers to *will nothingness*, than *not* will" (*On the Genealogy of Morality* 120). Likewise, to pronounce oneself dead is inherently to affirm that one is alive. The irony of Cleave's declaring himself dead underlines the inauthenticity of his narrative but also draws a distinction, crucial to Banville's late art, between reference and utterance. The contradiction lies in the gap that opens up between *what* he says and *that* he says it, and the disintegration of the sign through referential depletion keeps the subject intact within the *mise en abyme* of language, safely at a distance from real mortal existence, the pain of alienation being much less acute than that of death. Irony thus configured procures a safe enclave from the reality of time and death, a suspension of the self in the artifice of a language conceived as a set of self-referential tropes. It is a *dedoublement* that

promises an illusory immortality by infinitely reflecting the subject in the mirror of his self.

But Cleave's dramatic monologue not only underlines the split into speaker and subject and the fall into temporal consciousness. Irony, in Banville's work, is not merely an endless playing out of postmodern alienation, but a distancing strategy that introduces elements of shock and humour. Such elements block emotive responses to character and situation so that the pleasures and pathos of the text are explicitly those of language and are at least partly sundered from plot and the human drive for meaning. It is a Brechtian strategy that draws attention to the relation between the reader and the text and to the temporal event of reading. The novel is replete with episodes that resist interpretation, atmospheric fragments imbued with significance but which seem superfluous to the production of meaning within the semiotic system of the text. Whole pages are devoted to exorbitant pastoral descriptions, dream sequences, scraps of memories, many of which do nothing to drive the plot, thin as it is, or in some cases constitute dead ends in the narrative and actively disrupt coherence. Shortly into the novel, Cleave recalls the moment when he first knew he would be an actor. Nothing remarkable is contained in the vignette that follows. It is merely a lucid description of a childhood encounter with an old woman peddling mushrooms. There is no dialogue, no crisis, but what is accented, much like the siren song of Banville's professed inauguration into the world of art, is how the scene moved the young boy: "Something surged in me, an objectless exultancy. A myriad voices struggled within me for expression. I seemed to myself a multitude. I would utter them, that would be my task, to be them, the voiceless ones!" (11). This "objectless exultancy" is the affirmative pole of the unbinding of word and world, which is diametrically opposed to the negative power of irony. The fracturing of the subject here does not take the form of the torturous dualistic *mise en abyme*, but is an ecstatic rupture into multiplicity. The subject shorn of the illusion of self-presence becomes a prosopopeia, an absence through which the voices of unknown others might be heard. In this opening of the self to the figures of the imagination or perhaps even the dead, he himself undergoes a sort of death. The shattering of the illusion of self-presence acquires a more capacious, creative character, an expansive splintering open rather than an erasure or a self-cancelling reflexivity. The episode thematises the role of elaborate description and poetic

language generally in Banville's art which is to bring about intransitive affects, unfettered to situation and meaning.

This is very different to description in realist fiction and is closer to the classical art of *hypotyposis*, discussed by Roland Barthes in his essay "The Reality Effect". Barthes connects modern realism, which always, albeit to varying degrees, contains "useless detail" that serves no direct function in the production of meaning, to the beautiful in classical rhetoric (142). The latter, although extraneous to narrative function, had a *ceremonial* function, and was intended to impress and incite admiration. Barthes distinguishes this from modern realism, in which the function of superfluous detail is to signify the real by not meaning anything. What does not *mean* but merely *is* signifies life: "what is alive cannot not signify—and vice versa" (146). But life in this reductio ad absurdum is a paradoxically moribund category, signaled by an empty sign that operates only as an absence or placeholder, and indeed Barthes positions realism as a median stage in "modernity's grand affair", which he claims is "to empty the sign and infinitely to postpone its object" (148). What is lost, according to Barthes, in the move from classical rhetoric to realism is the suffix "*Let there be*" and with it the "luster of desire" that attends the ceremonial style (147, 146). Banville admits that "let there be" with his narrator-artists, all immoderate impresarios, opulent embellishers whose lavish musings are hyperbolically infused with pathos. Their speech acts are performative rather than constative. Intentionality is not expunged here as it is in realist description, and life is not so much *signified* in the superfluity of the semantic content as *aroused* in the reader. It is this aesthetic force, this force of life erupting in the aesthetic event, that abides even through the patina of ironic insouciance. What Banville's art aims at is an apprehension of this life freed from human context, an "objectless exultancy" that arises out of the transmission of *desire* rather than meaning or sense.

Vivid pastoral descriptions feature more prominently in this novel than in any of Banville's other works, and they serve to collapse, intermittently, ironic distance. Rather than dramatising a distance between self and world, the emphasis is on immersion and thrilling proximity. In one such scene, Cleave, far from being alienated from nature, declares, "never in my life, so it seems, have I been so close up to the very stuff of the world, even as the world itself shimmers and turns transparent before my eyes" (49). The deconstructive critique of Romanticism

regards the preoccupation with nature in Romantic literature as a desire for temporal stability, and Banville parodies this wistful desire for permanence in the art trilogy. But the depictions of nature in *Eclipse* are very different from the still tableaux of the earlier art novels. All is movement and flux and the narrative is replete with episodes in which the putative distance between the speaking subject and the world onto which he gazes collapses in a prose style that is sumptuous and limpid, imbued with a ceremonial resplendence. The focus is not on emptying the sign of referential content, but of infusing it with a superabundance that exceeds and even deflects reference. The word becomes a channel for the transmission of power, what Nietzsche called a "gesture" rather than a code to be deciphered (*Ecce Homo* 41).

By his own admission, de Man derives his Nietzschean ideas about literary language not by attending to Nietzsche's writings on art but by projecting the ideas of the minor work on rhetoric, which is centred on epistemic concerns, onto his larger philosophical ideas.[18] This is a classic example of his deconstructive method of reading the work against itself. Nietzsche, as adopted by de Man and the deconstructive school, is the master of negation, the great Nay-sayer; but as Banville observes, "he was also, of course, the great Yea-sayer" ("Making Ourselves Up"). "Affirmation was his credo", Banville writes, and it is this affirmative Nietzsche that haunts Banville's late aesthetic ("The Last Days of Nietzsche"). To project Nietzsche's more epistemologically oriented analysis onto his thought on art, which as de Man himself observed is "the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression" and hence does not pretend to epistemological transparency, is a distortion (*Blindness and Insight* 11). Nietzsche recognised that much of human experience cannot be categorised in terms of truth and falsity, that art, which for him is the very act of living, is prior to the logic by which we measure truths. Logic is, for Nietzsche, "only the left-over *residue of a metaphor*" (*The Birth of Tragedy and*

[18] See Chapter 5 of *Allegories of Reading*, which begins "It may seem far-fetched to center a consideration of Nietzsche's relationship to literature on his theory of rhetoric", and in which de Man readily admits that the work on rhetoric "appears to be an eccentric and minor part of Nietzsche's enterprise" (103).

Other Writings 147).[19] In his own highly stylised rhetoric, he yields to the limitations of referential language and develops a mode of literary expression that does not rest on pretences to referential opacity but on the category much more central to his work: power.

Nietzsche's final days in Turin form the backdrop for *Shroud*, and his late writings that were composed in this period when he was on the cusp of catastrophic physical and mental decline, cast a deep shadow over Banville's own late period. The epitaph to *Shroud* is a citation from Nietzsche's *Nachlass*: "*We set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, at which we can see no further, e.g., the word 'I', the word 'do', the word 'suffer': - these are perhaps the horizon of our knowledge, but not 'truths'*".[20] Chief among the legacies Banville inherits from Nietzsche is a faith in the communicative and expressive capacities of style. Language may not be amenable to conveying "truths" but this does not mean it is a closed system that does not touch reality. A gifted literary artist himself, Nietzsche imparts his philosophical ideas as much through the style of his sentences as their content.[21] In *Ecce Homo*, he writes:

> Every style is *good* that really communicates an inner state, that makes no mistake with signs, with the tempo of signs, with *gestures*—all laws governing the rhetorical period are an art of gesture. Here my instinct is infallible.—Good style *in itself—pure folly*, mere 'idealism' like, for instance, the 'beautiful *in itself*', like the 'good *in itself*', like the 'thing *in itself*'… Always assuming that there are ears—that there are those who are

[19] See Charles Altieri's "Poetics as 'Untruth'" for a reading of Nietzsche that dispenses with the epistemological problems of reference. Altieri proffers the category of force as an alternative to untruth in his Nietzschean analysis of literary value. In an article on the relation between science and art, Banville takes a similar position, claiming that "modern science, particularly physics, is being forced, under pressure of its own advances, to acknowledge that the truths it offers are true not in an absolute but in a poetic sense, that its laws are contingent, that its facts are a kind of metaphor" ("Beauty, Charm, and Strangeness: Science as Metaphor" 40).

[20] The quotation is from *The Will to Power* (267).

[21] David Wood underlines the role of style in Nietzsche's philosophy, noting that the ambiguity and complexity of the concept of the eternal return in Nietzsche's writing stands testament to "a profound distrust in the adequacy of descriptive language, but an equally profound respect for the possibilities opened up by innovative styles and strategies of writing". Wood observes that "it is precisely the descriptive inadequacy of his accounts that pushes us to other ways of understanding him" (35). Banville also notes that Nietzsche is "as much poet as philosopher", claiming that "we are persuaded of his arguments—if we are persuaded—by the force and elegance of his language as much as by the rigor of his thought" ("The Last Days of Nietzsche")

> capable and worthy of such a pathos, that those to whom one *may* communicate oneself are not lacking. (41)

There are notable resonances here of Cleave seeking a "sympathetic ear" for his self-aggrandizing rhetoric (*Eclipse* 131). The overt performativity of Banville's writing, like that of Nietzsche's, shifts the focus away from reference and toward the power of expression, the capacity to transmit an "inner tension" that words such as "emotion" and "feeling" do not quite capture, because what is in question transcends the personal and the psychological and exists "in itself". Good style, in this sense, may be defined as the capacity to produce what Deleuze and Guattari call "affects", the impersonal energies of the work of art, which they define as the "*nonhuman becomings of man*" (*What is Philosophy?* 169). Banville references Deleuze's writings on the cinema in *Ancient Light* (2012), and his late aesthetic resonates strongly with Deleuze's ideas on art. It is its capacity to produce affects and thus to offer an ecstatic mode of experience which transcends the bounds of the human subject, that makes Banville's fiction an art of death.

This has nothing to do with plot. Plot is always of lesser importance to Banville than style and although the pathos of plot may echo and augment the pathos of style, in many instances Banville deliberately places them at odds. In a deep state of grief after Cass's death, Cleave remarks: "The tragedians are wrong, grief has no grandeur. Grief is grey" (191). But the affective intensity of the novel does not follow this trajectory. Despite the more restrained and deeply sad notes in the book's final section, there is a certain continuity and even ironic humour that underlines the divergence of pathos from plot when, in reply to Miss Kettle's "I'm sorry for your trouble", out of automatic courtesy, Cleave breezes: "Oh, it's no trouble" (196). His melancholic self-absorption throughout the narrative is no, or not much, less affecting than his grief over his daughter's death in the final section. Nor is the affect of the work something ephemeral that cannot be captured by consciousness or grasped by close cognitive attention to the language. The power of the text comes from the manner in which it gives form to complex emotional states, so that they gain density and singularity, the character of the "in itself", while retaining a sense of ephemerality and transience. Affect is the flux and flow of life's intensities endowed with substantive, independent and sharable existence. It is not something

that happens outside of language or that is so fleeting that it dissipates before coming to consciousness. Banville's art is a perfect rejoinder to such suppositions. The ceremonial character of his prose, its implicit "let there be", commands a slow sort of attention and creates an intensity of affect that is not rationalised away by a consciousness that lags behind a visceral receptivity.

Cleave's recollection of his mother's death provides a particularly powerful example of the affective force of description in the novel. There is significant poignancy in the scene when he finds her collapsed in the toilet, a "bluish cast" to her face and "froth on her lips". It is all the more affecting because of the gestural jump from, and aesthetic equation of, the bluntly material to the sensation of shock, a sudden mortification that prefigures death: "I thought she was dead; I felt strange, very cold and calm and distant from myself" (59). He hauls her up and holds her to him: "She was warm and flaccid and faintly atremble, and I was shocked to find myself thinking of Lydia as she would be at the climax of love-making" (59). The heat of the living body and the faint eroticism contrasts sharply with the emotional freeze that the shock of the discovery induces, and this juxtaposition of opposing sensibilities is a defining feature of the novel, in which contradiction runs right down to the minutiae of sensation. He recalls her lying in hospital, her hands "unmoving, pale as paper", looking "like a more than life-sized statue of herself" (59). It is the attention here to the modulations of texture and weight that suggest the affective intricacies and contradictions of the scene. The emotive resonance arises out of sheer description as the passing of time and the approach of death are conjoined with a poetic economy of expression that distils time into a bare gesture: "The cherry trees blossomed, and the blossoms fell, and then the leaves fell" (60). It is a quite extraordinary example of the purity that Banville strives for in this novel, to "make prose have the weight of, and be as demanding as, poetry, […] to get more intensity, […] to get simpler" (Banville and Wallace). This eschewal of narrative temporality in favour of the fluctuating rhythms of nature and the episodic quality of poetry procures a respite from the temporal succession of human time and mimetically figures the liberation of life from the bonds of life story.

He takes her home for the final stage of her dying, and the waiting is described in an intoxicating drift of diffuse sensations as her life dissipates into formlessness and death: "the sense of her, all that stalled potential, the house

hummed with it" (60). Death is not a limit here but the absence of limits, an organic unity that is not the unity of self with sundered self but the self subsumed into the undifferentiated multiplicities of the world. It is as a miniaturist that Banville is at his best, in those moments that attend to the myriad fluctuations of weather or memory. In such moments, the human world and the supposedly inanimate world exist on a single aesthetic plane, which is not a plane of representation but a force field of intensities. The accumulation of descriptive adjectives in the portrait of the dying woman impregnates the scene with an extraordinary and contrasting vitality: "the little hard blue teary eyes […] brimming with all that was pent in her, the years" (61). And the microscopic attention to minutiae grants a sort of life through the force of ceremonial description: "the teacup and cracked jug that stood with her rosary beads and prayer book on the bedside table". Pathos is in the piling on of detail after mundane detail, "her puckered, whiskery lips" and "the water going down her gullet in hiccupy swallows" (61). Here death is not the negation of life but the melting away of individuation into the swarming life of the world. The tumescent prose opens onto the infinitesimal, the molecular, and a slow diffusion of life that figures death as a becoming rather than an end.

Cleave credits her with a heightened sense of perception, but it is a sympathetic projection because it is he who, in a state of hypervigilance, thought he could hear her breathing from remote parts of the house, could sense "[l]istening shadows" and the "interior tremors" of her body (61). In this conflation of mother and son coupled with the sense of claustrophobia and his scrupulous alertness to her presence, the bounds of personhood become porous and dispersed. The scene reaches something of a crescendo as she fades and there seems a determination to capture all that is slipping away:

> Then I would see myself here as a child, kneeling on the floor in the rain-light of a winter afternoon, lost in my solitary games, my mother lolling in bed with her magazines and her chocs, and the wireless whispering and the rain tapping on the window panes, and now I would shake her a little, not roughly, feeling the bones of her shoulders shift inside their parcel of loose flesh, and at last, surrendering, she would lay her raddled old head against my shoulder and exhale a long, slow, whistling sigh. (61-62)

The long embracing sentence enfolds his mother's life from his earliest memories of her to her imminent death, and the cradling gesture figures a gathering of the past into the present, into actual presence, and the dead into a sort of life. It is difficult not to be moved by such moments of plaintive rapture and to be engulfed by the aesthetic intensity and the conflation of form and sensation in rhapsodic drifts. But with the freezing of the scene into a morbid tableau, a grievous inversion of the Pieta, and the switch to the ekphrastic mode, the ironist returns: "Look at us there, a deposition scene in reverse, the dying hunched old woman cradled in the arm of her living son, in our dome of candle light, lapped in our noisome, ancient warmth" (62). It is a deathly deflation, followed by a bald fact and a dying fall: "Presently she died. It was, as they say in these parts, a great release" (62). It is the death of the other and the problem of survival that finally lead Cleave to an authentic confrontation with mortality. This movement out of narcissistic self-enclosure thematises a conceptual shift from the ironic *mise en abyme* of the reflexive self to a nomadic model of the subject. The self as uttered is no longer alienated from a putative authenticity, split off from a desired wholeness. Rather, the more radical fracturing of the subject into undifferentiated singularities represents a becoming with the world that breaks from the dualistic model and exposes the illusoriness of the bound subject elevated from nature.

Siren songs

The solar eclipse that attends the news of Cass's death is the organising aesthetic principle around which the novel coheres; everything portends that occultation. The use of "now" with the past tense augurs the cessation of becoming and the pure presence that Cleave ostensibly desires, a temporal subsidence that is foreshadowed when the time of narration and the interior time of the narrative become blurred: "no, no, that is now, not then; things are running together, collapsing into each other, the present into the past, the past into the future" (167). This all anticipates the denouement and the overarching anachronism of Cleave's prescient, albeit unconscious, grieving for Cass. The apparitions of a woman that he witnesses

throughout the novel, vague at first, but becoming more distinct as the narrative progresses, mirror the living presence of Lily, the caretaker's daughter who, unbeknownst to Cleave for the first section of the novel, has taken up residence in the house.[22] When he discovers that she is living there, Cleave waits for the moment when she and the ghost will coincide, when the apparition will descend on her "like the annunciatory angel, like the goddess herself, and illumine her with the momentary benison of her supernatural presence" (124). A transposition between Cass and Lily is implied during the eponymous eclipse and just before the news of Cass's death arrives. In an eerie scene at the circus, a malevolent clown puts Lily in a trance, prompting Cleave to come to her rescue and to claim: "My name is Alexander Cleave, […] and this is my daughter" (187). This mirrors the incident that began the unravelling of his life, and it marks a closure of sorts, a collapse of ironic distance, and an answer to the question: "*Who if not I,* […]?" (89). Although in his brief return to the stage Cleave attains the unselfconscious grace he so desires, it brings not the quietude of self-presence but self-loss and pain: "it was as if a drop of the most refined, the purest acid had been let fall into an open chamber of my heart" (187). The implied conflation of Lily and Cass and the conjunction of night and day and of dark and light in the eclipse are figures for the collapsing of boundaries under the pressure of the creative imagination, and thus the apprehension of death at the heart of life.

Unresolved coincidences feature throughout *Eclipse*, weaving a lattice of associations and tracing the dream-work of metamorphoses and similitudes that comprise the fiction. Dreams are a crucial component of the late fiction, but they are not only, or even primarily, allegorical devices. In the opening pages of *Eclipse*, Cleave recounts a dream of an Easter morning in childhood and of receiving a present of a toy chicken that lays an egg, the two halves of which are "slightly out of true" (6). This finds echo in an actual memory from his childhood some fifty pages later: "It was Eastertime. My father had brought me a present. What was it? Some kind of bird, a plastic thing, yellow" (56). No connection is acknowledged, however, and dream and memory remain "out of true". Another dream of an erotic act between a white woman and a black slave, from which Cleave wakes to his first apparition of

[22] For a discussion of Banville's allusion to Joyce's "The Dead", which begins "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet", see Jason S. Polley's "Maternal Property and Female Voice in Banville's Fiction" (282), Derek Hand's *John Banville: Exploring Fictions* (167) and Robin Wilkinson's "Echo and Coincidence in John Banville's *Eclipse*" (366).

the ghost, resonates with his discovery of a stash of pornographic pictures, one of which portrays the very same scene as the dream, but again the correspondence is not remarked upon. He later refers to Lily as an "all too actual odalisque" (123), a term which chimes with the dream and the photograph. These resonances and coincidences do nothing to drive the plot, but add to the foreboding atmosphere of the novel and in tracing the dream-work of the artistic imagination they illuminate the novel's reflections on the demonic forces at work in artistic creation, building narrative tension toward an epiphanic moment when all is no longer "out of true". The play on words links truth with death, where death is figured aesthetically as the collapsing of difference into identity and the co-existence of ostensibly different ontologies on a single plane. Having Cleave fail to knit the narrative together is an eschewal of linear narrative plotting, but also of the order of representation. Dreams are not figured as dimmer representations of waking life but are implicitly posited as existing on an equivalent level of reality. In Banville's art of the surface, there is nothing *behind* the dreams and visions, and poetic truth is not something behind appearance but is to be found in appearance itself. By the same token, death is figured as co-extensive with life rather than as a cessation of life.

Banville's late tragedies all centre on "catastrophic inattention" to the living world and the recognition of this blindness across the divide separating life and death. The dying or dead female other is the siren muse that incites the male imagination to bridge the divide through the work of art. If Cleave, who "made a living from shaping", is a mask for the power of the Apollonian imagination, then Cass is an obvious Dionysian archetype (10). She suffers from a severe condition that induces catatonic fits and manic episodes during which she experiences paranoid delusions and hears voices in her head. Her illness worries, fascinates and enrages Cleave, and her literal haunting of him is a ghostly supplement to the complex emotional hold she has always maintained over him. He both envies and fears "her irresistible repeated compulsion to risk the self's stability", which is precisely the inverse of the over-consciousness of self from which he suffers (98). Fear, he claims, is intrinsic to the actor's art: "a terror of the self, of letting the self go so far free that one night it might break away, detach entirely and become another, leaving behind it only a talking shell, an empty costume standing there aghast, topped by an eyeless mask" (186). It is such a letting go of the self, rather than crippling self-

consciousness, that characterises the incident that has driven him into exile in the first place. His loss of self is signalled in the crucial line "*Who if not I,* […]*?*", after which, in self-enforced exile, he becomes more like Cass, seeing visions and losing the thread of his life's coherence. He begins to understand how it must be for her "moving always in the midst of familiar strangers, uncertain as to what is real and what is not, unable quite to recognise the perfectly recognisable, spoken at by voices out of the air" (124). Under the force of his searching scrutiny, the world opens its crevices, reveals its underlying unity in Dionysian visions.

Patricia Coughlan takes Banville to task over his association of the feminine with death and over his alleged posthumanism, arguing that he never quite transcends a humanist aesthetic, that while he destabilises certain binaries, he leaves the privileged hierarchy of the male-female opposition intact. It is not within the scope of this analysis to defend the representational politics of the novel, and I am in broad agreement with Coughlan's argument. Nevertheless, my focus is not on the conscious or unconscious biases that might be revealed in the text but on the strictly literary category of linguistic power, which thematically represents, through the desire of the male imagination for the dead female other, the erotic and deathly forces at play in the art experience. Indeed, Banville's female characters are not fully realised or granted autonomous subjectivity, but nor are any of the other characters apart from the narrators themselves. Even the narrators, however, from *Eclipse* on cannot be said to be at the centre of the work in any substantial sense. As the characters of classical drama were masks for the gods, Banville invites us to think of his characters, particularly in the late work, as less than, or more than, or certainly not quite, human. Like the figures of Greek drama, the circus, the commedia dell'arte or the characters of myth, they are a series of masks for the Dionysian energies of the artwork.[23]

This aesthetic of the mask is figured in the multiple surrogacies, substitutions and duplications that characterise the late trilogy. *Shroud*, published two years after *Eclipse*, focuses on Cass's relationship with the academic Axel Vander, with whom she consummates by proxy her illicit desire for her father. Her catatonic absences

[23] The most recent monograph to have been published on Banville is Mark O'Connell's *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions* (2013), which although eloquently argued, deploys various psychoanalytic theories to explore—and even explain—Banville's narrators. Such a treatment of the figures in Banville's fiction as psychological subjects is at odds with Banville's non-realist aesthetics, and places the novels within a humanist framework that is radically challenged in the late period.

from the later novel correspond to her spectral presence in *Eclipse*. Cass, for her part, is a surrogate of sorts for Vander's wife Magda, and the situation gets even more convoluted in the third novel of the trilogy *Ancient Light*, in which Alex Cleave returns to acting to play the lead role in a biopic of Axel Vander, and a further series of mirrorings ensues. This multiplication of doubles and proxies accentuates the manner in which the characters are presented as ciphers, their actions not self-willed but generated out of forces acting through them, erotic forces especially.

Wallace Stevens's book of essays on poetry *The Necessary Angel* is alluded to when, near the beginning of *Eclipse*, Cleave finds a charred copy in the grate: "*The Necessary*… with a final word obscured by a scorch mark that I thought might have been *Angel*" (15-16). Stevens's conception of "nobility" in the book's first essay is commensurate with what I have been calling "style" in Banville's work, which cannot be reduced to personal expression: "as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same" (Stevens 35-36). Similarly, Banville's characters are not psychological subjects, nor are they symbolic in the way of stock characters in the commedia dell'arte, which would entail being symbols *of* some attribute or character trait. Rather they are ciphers for the manifestation of forces, intransitive masks. "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words," writes Stevens (32). There is for Banville and Stevens nothing behind the words or the forms that the poet makes of them; it is the force manifest in the words and images, not what they signify, that counts.

Cleave feels a "spasm of sweetish sadness" as he remembers a page from one of Cass's childhood copybooks: "*The Bud is in flower*, she had written, in the big, wide-eyed hand of a five-year old. *Mud is brown. I feel as fit as a Flea. things can go wrong*" (14). Partly repeated at the close of the novel and later appearing as the epigraph to *Ancient Light*, this passage testifies to a language clean of irony, the innocent grammar by which the child discovers the world and begins to communicate states of feeling. Cleave contemplates his own obsession with language: actorial, affected and contaminated by distrust in its capacity to render reality. He wonders if Lydia is right in calling him a sentimentalist: "I brooded on words. Sentimentality: unearned emotion. Nostalgia: longing for what never was" (14). He feels condemned to a simulacral realm in which he is trapped and alienated

from the "real", tossing words around in his head: "Anaglypta. All afternoon I had been searching for the word and now I had found it. Why glyp not glyph? This, I told myself, this is the way I shall be condemned to pass my days, turning over words, stray lines, fragments of memory, to see what might be lurking underneath them, as if they were so many flat stones, while I steadily faded" (19-20). This dramatises the disillusion with, and abandonment of, Banville's earlier aesthetic concern with the anguished quest for, and the failure to gain access to, a putative real beyond language. It contrasts sharply with the rhapsodic intensity of the book's descriptive passages, particularly at two crucial moments toward the end of the novel: when word of Cass's death reaches him, and his final sighting of her ghost on the closing page. It is in these moments that the two senses of "true" come into phase: the poetic truth that is the release of being by the sheer affective force of language and the poetic death of self-overcoming.

With the news of Cass's death, past and present converge into a shattering immanence. It is a paradigmatic instance of the rapturous moment of self-expansion. Time opens onto infinite duration and the vista expands from the "little window" with the geraniums and swarming midges in the foreground to the whole "superabundance of summer" and its teeming life, and beyond to the star Sirius, and back to Cleave's childhood when he believed that the stars are "where the dead live" (188). Here is the darkness of the night in the glare of daytime logos, the Dionysian truth in Apollonian semblance: "These are the dog days, when Sirius rises and sets with the sun" (188). Like the eclipse, it is a perfect image of the night in the day, a collapsing of difference that aesthetically figures death. It is news that "has been coming […] for a long time, through an immensity of space, like the light of a distant star, of a dead sun" (188). The Dionysian moment that the narrative has been building towards is configured in the eclipse of "dead" and "sun". The cosmic perspective is all encompassing, taking in the past and the present, the day and the night, the living and the dead, a centrifugal force that counters the myopic interiority of the ironic consciousness.

Upon his first vision of Cass's ghost, Cleave has a sense that "something is being asked" of him and recalls the book title "*The Necessary…*", upon which the vision disperses "as if it had not departed but only changed its form, or refined itself into a frequency beyond the reach of my coarse senses" (27). Like Stevens's angel in

his poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans", the demand that Cass's ghost makes is to pay more attention, to look beyond the human range of perception, to "see the earth again, / Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set" (14-15). In *Shroud*, Cass embodies this inhuman vision in which dream and waking are indiscernible. Her world is all cacophony and flux in which she discerns all-encompassing patterns, unanchored significances and metamorphoses, and the Dionysian truth that "despite their seeming disparity so many things are secretly the same" (*Shroud* 180). The voices and visions that she experiences seem as real to her as empirical phenomena. She has trouble differentiating reality from illusion and longs to prove the reality of her experiences:

> In a film that she had seen when she was a child there had been a man who in what seemed a nightmare had fought and killed someone and then had woken to find himself clutching a real button that in the dream he had torn from his victim's coat. Someday she too might come back from one of her so-called hallucinations and open her palm and show them in triumph one tiny, hard, bright bit of evidence that even they could not deny. (126)

This desire has its corollary in Banville's books of evidence which are fragments redeemed from the oneiric world of the imagination. His artistic objective is to transform the formlessness at the heart of being into semblance, to bridge the gap between the visible and the invisible and make manifest the mutable nature of existence, and it finds one of its highest expressions at the close of *Eclipse*.

In the novel's final sequence, Cleave has a vision of Cass in the garden, no longer half-seen but vivid: "There was a brimming in her, an exaltation. Her eyes had a dazzlingly viridescent shine". The extraordinary brilliance of the scene, bathed in light, and the heightened language, now cleansed of irony, has an almost sacramental quality that reaches quite an extraordinary intensity. "I reached out a faltering hand to touch her, and I spoke her name, and she seemed to pause, and shiver, as if she had indeed heard me, and then at once she was gone, leaving only the glistening chord of her passing, that faded, and fell" (214). The cord nestled within that final falling chord resonates with the moment of the second apparition, which occurs as Cleave remembers holding her in the moments after her birth: "I

seemed to hear the twang of an umbilical cord, one that I had paid out of myself, severing" (42). Conjoining birth and death, the poetic vision melts into the non-signifying music of Banville's prose. The tone is one of affirmation and of a distilled emotion that is overtly the pathos of art. A final exhilarating image captures the confluence of pain and affirmation more intensely than any other in the oeuvre: "Outside, in the garden, the bright day stood, a gold man, stilled in startlement" (214). The anthropomorphism lends form to the formless creative forces of the inhuman, impersonal will. A manifestation of the dark Dionysian night in the commemorative prose of the day, it is, aporetically, the darkness of the day.

Nightbook

The subsidence of past into present and the imaginative conjuring of the dead into presence conjoin remembering and imagining in Banville's aesthetic. Memory and loss are perennial themes throughout his oeuvre and they are integral to the aesthetic of failure that characterises his early work. At the close of his second novel, *Birchwood*, the protagonist, Gabriel Godkin, laments memory's miscarriages: "How many have I lost that way? I began to write, as a means of finding them again, and thought that at last I had discovered a form which would contain and order all my losses. I was wrong. There is no form, no order, only echoes and coincidences, sleight of hand, dark laughter. I accept it" (174). But this aesthetic centred on the lost object and the failure to recoup losses and recapture lost time implicitly identifies the lapses and sublimations of memory as powerful creative catalysts, and this comes to the fore in a more affirmative light in the later work. Walter Benjamin asserts that the essence of Proust's *mémoire involontaire* is not remembering but forgetting, and associates the *Recherche* with the workings of the dream, an inverse Penelope-work that is woven by night and unravels in the light of daytime logos ("The Image of Proust" 202). Like Proust's opus, *The Sea* is a nightbook; it obeys the metamorphic laws of the dream and, as dreams do, disperses in the waking hours. There is a significant move away from the concern with the immediacy of perception and the lavish natural descriptions of *Eclipse*, to a preoccupation with the ephemera of the dreaming mind, from the hyper-alertness of the day to the dark unconscious.

Crucially, this is not a hermetic turn inward and an ironic alienation but a more profound self-abandonment and an emancipation from the linear temporality of the self-conscious subject incessantly seeking an illusory pure presence that has always already slipped into an irretrievable past.

The end of *Eclipse* implicitly configures the artwork as an orphic space and this alliance of writing with mourning is the central preoccupation of *The Sea*. In Charlie McCarthy's documentary film "Being John Banville", broadcast in 2008, Banville speculates that the grief in *The Sea* may have been a delayed manifestation of his own grief for his mother and father, both of whom died when he was in his thirties. Elsewhere, he remarks of his novel *Mefisto*, written in the aftermath of his parents' deaths: "For the first time, out of whatever extreme of distress it was that I was in, I began to let things happen on the page which my conscious, my waking, mind could not account for" (*Possessed of a Past* 370). In a shift from the rigid formal structuring of the three preceding science novels, the prose style in *Mefisto* is looser, more sinuous, and in *The Sea*, where grief is dealt with directly as the central theme of the novel, this fluid style is more pronounced. Banville observes that "part of being an artist is not being able to feel in time. […] I feel after the event," he claims, "long after the event" ("Being John Banville"). The emotion in Banville's highly wrought prose is not raw, but this is not to say it is diluted or weakly reproduced. On the contrary, it is too strong, too concentrated, to be raw emotion. The stylistic rendering of the self-abandon of the newly bereaved is far too artistically refined to be unconscious as it was in *Mefisto*, but its contrivance does not diminish its force. Art for Banville is not a representation, but a refinement and an intensification, of life. This is why the past holds such a fascination for him and why he consistently portrays it as more vivid than the present, as paradoxically *more present*.

In *The Sea*, Max Morden invokes the events of the past in order to feel what he cannot feel directly or intensely enough in the present. Disoriented and numb with grief for his wife Anna, who has died of cancer, he retreats into his memories both of his marriage and the events of a childhood summer fifty years ago. The past is vividly alive for Morden, possessed of "a force so strong it seems one might be annihilated by it", and the childhood sequences are narrated with an effulgent clarity that implicitly collapses temporal distance (47). This synthesis of temporal

experience, whereby the past overwhelms and at times drowns out the present, dissolves the historical constitution of the subject and the linearity of experience structured in terms of before and after. This is similar to the way in which Deleuze and Guattari describe the temporality of the subject in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Instead of a historical subject, constituted along a temporal line that links the distant points of past and present, they present a nomadic subject who "constitutes himself as a gigantic memory" (293). Rather than a line linking determinate temporal vectors, they proffer lines of becoming, which are open-ended, having only a centre constituted by the co-existence of old present and actual present. This dynamic central point is not a pure present but a nexus of potential, a point of creative becoming. We should replace memory, they argue, with the concept of becoming: "*Becoming is an antimemory*" (294). Works of art are, for Deleuze and Guattari, this liberation of the line: they "have detached themselves from the task of representing a world, precisely because they assemble a new type of reality" (296). In a similar sense, the subjects of Banville's late fictions are not historical subjects. They are not representations of culturally and historically determined individuals; rather, they are nomadic subjects possessed of a reality independent of representation. They are not individuals but points of becoming. The novelist, wrote Proust, "sets loose in us all possible happinesses and all possible unhappinesses, just a few of which we would spend years of our lives coming to know and the most intense of which would never be revealed to us because the slowness with which they occur prevents us from perceiving them" (Proust 87). This does not pertain to the variety of events portrayed but to the spectrum of affects generated in works of fiction. It is in this sense that the force of Banville's work lies not in the actual representations of events and situations within which characters are enmeshed, but in the pulses of life that the enmeshments make manifest, the range of intensities that the work elicits.

Max Morden, like all the figures of Banville's late fictions, is barely a self at all. *Max* is phonetically suggestive of *mask*, and we learn that it is not Morden's real name but part of his professed strategy as a young man to "fulfil the fantasy of myself" (105). Monica Facchinello notes that the name Max is applied to minor characters in *The Book of Evidence* and in *Shroud* as "more an alias than a name"

and claims that, in Banville's work, "'Max' identifies without characterising" (36).[24] The trope of the mask in Banville's earlier novels, particularly in *Mefisto* and *The Untouchable* (1997), in which the central character is named Victor Maskell, is still tied to the individual subject and to ideas of self-division and self-fashioning.[25] But, as we have seen, the character of the mask changes in the later work so that it is no longer tied to the individual subject but comes to represent the absence of a subject, the death of the individual and the impersonality of the work. On an experiential level, this becoming-other that belongs to the art experience is always a re-enactment of an initial awareness of mortality, of not being self-contained in our energies. In empirical reality, such awareness is ordinarily dispersed and gradual to the point of imperceptibility, a very slow or diffused dawning. In the work of art, however, it is compressed into moments of extreme intensity, so that in becoming subject to the artwork our awareness of the mutable nature of being and hence of our own participation in natural processes of generation and passing away is awakened. In the same way that the ephemera of the past are transformed in creative work into sublimated and condensed forms, constituting new and independent realities, sensations that in our own lives are so diffuse and subconscious as to be imperceptible are brought alive in our encounters with works of art. We draw our own lines of becoming in the co-creation that is the artistic event.

Morden's retreat to the environs of the past takes him to the beachside town where he spent his childhood holidays and to his memories of one summer spent in the company of the Grace family—the twins Chloe and Myles (who, like Max, are around eleven years old), their nanny Rose, and their parents Connie and Carlo. The events of that summer, which culminate with the drowning of Chloe and Myles, are intertwined with Morden's recollections of his marriage to Anna, particularly over

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[24] Facchinello suggests that the character Max Molyneaux in *The Book of Evidence* is a fictional mask for the Irish Taoiseach of the time, Charles Haughey, and cites Max Schaudeine's non-committal self-introduction in *Shroud*: "You might call me Max, if you wish" (Facchinello 36, Banville 254).

[25] The essentially temporal notion that the self as uttered is always already past and therefore irretrievable, that within presence there is always absence, is explored through the figure of the lost twin in *Mefisto*. Later, in *The Untouchable*, Victor Maskell proposes, in telling his story, to strip away his social masks so as to reveal "the very thing itself", his "soul", his "self", only to accept in the end that he *is* his masks and that to strip them away is to obliterate the self (7). Thus, the narrative self is portrayed as not only divided but multiple and palimpsestic. We move from the subject riven by self-division to a more radical dismantling of the subject, but in each case the subject is still defined by a linear temporality that, in aesthetic terms, emerges in the deconstructive irony of the inauthentic subject.

the previous year from her diagnosis to her death, as well as sequences from the narrative present. Banville originally intended to write the childhood story in the third person as a stand-alone novella, but having made prolonged attempts to make this work he had to bring in the framing narrative and the first-person voice. It is not the past itself but its manifestation in the present that interests Banville, experience delayed and distilled to greater intensity, more ephemeral and yet at the same time more vivid. This conjunction of potent luminosity and evanescence is the novel's distinctive feature. The narrative strands are loosely woven together in a Proustian Penelope-work of genesis and dissipation: the more the temporal threads intertwine into a radiant meshwork of echoes and similitudes, the more the whole delicate edifice melts towards chronological subsidence and a final sublime dissolution.

The drowning of the twins towards the end of the novel is juxtaposed with Anna's death, and a network of echoes and allusions connects the recollections of Morden's life with Anna to the childhood memories. There are obvious echoes between his marriage and the juvenile relationship that develops between his younger self and Chloe Grace. Max's ascension from the holiday chalets with their outdoor facilities to the urbane social sphere of the Graces and through the gates of their rental house the Cedars (which represents, to his mind, the upper echelons of the gods) mirrors his entry by marriage into the louche and moneyed world inhabited by Anna and her father. The alignment of Chloe and Anna is matched by a corresponding affinity between Max and Myles. Myles alludes to Miles in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, an important intertext for *The Sea*. We never find out Morden's real name, but the semantic similarity between Max and Miles / Myles is suggestive of a conflation. Web-footed Myles is an apt figure for the adolescent Max, himself an amphibian creature, hybrid inhabitant of dual worlds, straddling the gap between the chalets and the Cedars, as well as the innocent sphere of childhood and the enticing grown-up world of adult desire. Myles's muteness makes him a shadowy, almost spectral presence in the book, and the silence of his world resonates with the silence, "heavy as the sea", that descended on Max and Anna on the day of her diagnosis and which has not left him since (65). Moreover, Morden explicitly identifies his marriage to Anna with the twins' bond when he reflects, "even in our most savage fights we were only violently at play, like Chloe and Myles in their wrestling matches" (217).

The mirroring of Max and Anna's relationship by that of the twins is also played out in the intimations that Chloe's precocious pursuit of Max plays out an incestuous desire for her brother. A nomenclative allusion to Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*, a romance between a brother and sister for which Pierre Bonnard produced a series of well-known illustrations, is reinforced by the fact that Morden is writing a monograph on Bonnard. In a scene at the local picture house, which has distinctly sexual undertones, Chloe compares her bond with Myles to the film they are watching, in which two escaped convicts are manacled together, and to a pair of opposing magnets "pulling and pushing", an admission that arouses a prurient excitement in Max: "After she had said it she fell darkly silent, as though this time it was she who thought she had let drop a shaming secret, and she turned away from me, and I felt for a moment something of the same panicky dizziness that I did when I held my breath for too long underwater" (81).

As both stories draw to a close, Max recalls the night that Anna died and how she gripped his wrist just before losing consciousness: "That monkeyish grasp, it holds me yet" (238). This is immediately followed by his recollection of a sexual encounter with Chloe just before her death when, in a gesture mirroring Anna's, she reached out and grasped Myles's hand. Shortly afterwards, the twins walk into the sea and drown. After the drownings, Max, "a thing of air, a drifting spirit, Ariel set free and at a loss", runs to fetch Carlo and Connie (247). The scene matches exactly his first encounter with the Graces, as Carlo enters the house with the very mundane words that he had spoken when Max first watched him retrieving something from the car at the beginning of the book, "Damned thing, it seems to be…", and the narrative chink closes with Ariel's entreaty: "Was't well done?" (247). The similarities between the intertwining narratives, the references to *The Tempest* and the final suggestion that Max has conjured himself into the Graces' lives all proffer a reading of the childhood story as an insubstantial pageant, an imaginative displacement of traumatic grief. By having his symbolic self follow his beloved to her death, Morden imaginatively puts to death that part of himself that is shackled to Anna, as Myles and Chloe were "tied to each other, tied and bound" (82).

However, Banville guards against determinate interpretations and reductive psychological readings in the trap he sets in the novel's closing section, a plot device borrowed from *The Turn of the Screw*. Miss Vavasour, Morden's landlady at the

Cedars who turns out to have been the Graces' nanny Rose, corroborates the story of the summer when she admits that she had been in love with Connie Grace. Morden's enlightenment is the reader's entrapment in an unresolvable ambiguity. With these twists, Banville ties a Gordian knot, simultaneously shattering the realist illusion and disrupting an allegorical reading. This has the effect of shutting down any clear distinction between past and present, real and imaginary, shifting everything onto a single aesthetic plane. It draws us out of the events depicted *in* the work to the *event of the artwork*. In his essay "Fiction and the Dream", Banville asserts that in dreams as in works of art "cracking the code is not important, […] the code itself is the meaning" (*Possessed of a Past* 365). The power of the novel lies neither in its realist nor its metaphorical account of grief, but in the way it captures the very texture of grief on a level that is independent of both the order of representation and that of the symbolic. The meaning of the work is not *behind* it but on its surface.

In a book review written at the time he was completing *The Sea*, Banville betrays some of the preoccupations of his own art. He distinguishes the genre of the novel from other artistic forms such as music, poetry and painting in suggesting that the novelist alone "must work within the delusion that life as human beings live it is a fair representation of reality". He cites James as the writer who came closest to a solution to the problem of the novel's human scale, particularly in the rich ambiguity of his late works. Who else but James, he asks, "has managed to make language obfuscatory to the point of impenetrability and at the same time so luminously revealing?" ("A Double Life"). Although the style of *The Sea* is far from the notoriously elliptical prose of James's late works, its vaporous sentences generate a comparable sense of translucency in accretion and obfuscation. Through ambiguity and atmosphere, Banville captures the fug of a traumatised and disoriented consciousness. Throughout *The Sea*, there is the sense of peering through sheets of water or glass, whereby everything is soft-edged and slightly indistinct, and the aleatory prose proceeds along random trajectories and trains of associations and allusions. This is not a representation of human consciousness but the becoming-inhuman of consciousness, an externalisation and a crystallisation into a vast aesthetic assemblage. The work of art is a living thing, writes James, "a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the

mind; […] it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations" ("The Art of Fiction" 388). This is precisely the opposite of ironic interiority, which addresses the problem of the limitedness of the human perspective negatively and remains unhappily wedded to the promise of a real *behind* language. Banville's Jamesian appeal, in this late work, to the surface of language goes far further in answering Stevens's angelic injunction to *see* the world free of its "man-locked set" than the aesthetic of failed transcendence. In *The Sea*, the *I* never transcends the word but dies into language.

Reflecting on the period after Anna's diagnosis, a year prior to the narrative present, Morden recalls feeling as if it was he himself and not Anna who was approaching oblivion, and likens the sensation to the work of writing:

> Strange as it was, however, this imagined place of pre-departure was not entirely unfamiliar to me. On occasion in the past, in moments of inexplicable transport, in my study, perhaps, at my desk, immersed in words, paltry as they may be, for even the second-rater is sometimes inspired, I had felt myself break through the membrane of mere consciousness into another state, one which had no name, where ordinary laws did not operate, where time moved differently if it moved at all, where I was neither alive nor the other thing and yet more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world. (97-98).

This "imagined place of pre-departure", hovering between the uncanny poles of strangeness and familiarity, aptly describes the ambiguous temporal space of the novel, its fragile, shimmering existence on the verge of dissolution.[26] "On occasion" conveys a sense of vagueness, augmented by "perhaps", and the build-up of short subordinate clauses pushes the scene further into an undifferentiated past and into blurry ambiguity like so many ripples, until at the centre the "I" is literally "immersed in words". This immersion in untimely flux is the novel's extended metaphor. Far from the controlling narrators of earlier works who were ever in pursuit of stillness, Morden is adrift in waves of grief, carried along by his desire for the dead beloved. With notably less dialogue than in Banville's other works, the

[26] For an account of the uncanny in Banville's work see Hedwig Schwall's article "Mirror on Mirror Mirrored is All the Show".

narrative seems shrouded in a subaqueous silence. The extended verb phrase "I had felt myself break" is typical of the novel's slow, immersive tempo and passive, drifting syntax. There is the sense of coming to the surface in "breaks through" and a distinctly amniotic ring to "membrane", but if this is an aesthetic configuration of birth, it is also death, a giving over of the self to the continuous birth and continuous death of creative becoming. The experience of being out of, or adrift in, time, the loss of self in the rapturous moment, is, in this novel, a mode of keeping company with the dead.

As well as reminding Morden of his absorption in writing, the feeling of being on the edge of existence, of standing before death, also recalls his first experiences of erotic rapture, "standing for instance with Mrs Grace in that sunlit living room, or sitting with Chloe in the dark of the picture-house, I was there and not there, myself and revenant, immured in the moment and yet hovering somehow on the point of departure. Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it" (98). In the first part of the book Max is besotted with Connie Grace, and in his humid dreams he is "at once her demon lover and her child" (88). The transfer of his affections to Chloe in the second part is overtly figured as his transition from the shelter promised by the mother figure and "the immanence of all things" to being "severed" from the world. "Before, there had been one thing and I was part of it, now there was me and all that was not me. […] Before I had been housed, now I was in the open, in the clearing, with no shelter in sight. I did not know that I would not get inside again, through that ever straitening gate" (168). This constellation of sexual awakening, mortal awareness and the work of writing thematises a more general desexualised eroticism that belongs to the work of art. The seductive sensuousness of the prose, the pleasure of being moved by its aesthetic force, elicits a yielding of autonomy and a heightened awareness of mortality.

The orphic character of the fictional space is dramatised most intensely in a powerful passage at the close of the first half of the novel. Morden is standing in front of a mirror, in the classic pose of the self-conscious, ironic subject, but the narration drifts away from the reflected self to the quality of the radiance in the room. Its "hard, unyielding, dry glare" sinks into the walls, lending them "the parched, brittle texture of cuttlefish bone" (131, 132). The pitiless, arid brightness creates a sense of piercing grief, an awful epiphanic confrontation with loss. On the

lightest of narrative threads, a spot of light which "streamed outward in all directions like an immensely distant nebula", he is transported out of time and into the metamorphic world of the dream:

> Standing there in that white box of light I was transported for a moment to some far shore, […] where I sat in the sun on a hard ridge of shaly sand holding in my hands a big flat smooth blue stone. The stone was dry and warm, I seemed to press it to my lips, it seemed to taste saltily of the sea's deeps and distances, far islands, lost places under leaning fronds, the frail skeletons of fishes, wrack and rot. (132)

The impression of melting into the numinous vision is achieved in the transition from the harshness of "white", "hard" and "shaly" to the softer serenity of the "big flat smooth blue stone". The shape and colour of the stone resonate with the image of the sea on the novel's opening page, a "vast bowl of water bulging like a blister, lead-blue" (3). Although both images are suggestive of death, there is no violence or sense of threat in the later vision, but a seductive allure, intensified by the hypnotic string of descriptors with no dividing commas. The "I" is highly ambiguous, at once a distant observer and the one observed tasting the salt from the stone, neither inside nor outside, seeming to hover on the verge of absence. There is a sense of being carried along in the trailing constituents of the second sentences from the lightness of fronds and frail skeletons to being sucked into the swampy sediment of dead matter. Intensely sensuous, seductive and visually intoxicating, these sentences are themselves the siren songs of which they sing:

> The little waves before me at the water's edge speak with an animate voice, whispering eagerly of some ancient catastrophe, the sack of Troy, perhaps, or the sinking of Atlantis. All brims, brackish and shining. Water-beads break and fall in a silver string from the tip of an oar. I see the black ship in the distance, looming imperceptibly nearer at every instant. I am there. I hear your siren's song. I am there, almost there. (132)

Everything is staked on affect here, on the surface of the prose, its enchanting rhythms and the sheer beauty of the imagery, so that the art experience enacts the voluptuous bliss of self-loss it describes. All sense of time evaporates in the sweep from "ancient catastrophes" to the slow, infinitesimal drip of water-beads. The poetic arc from the interiority of the mirrored, self-regarding subject to the rapturous surface of language into which the subject dies comes very close to a poetics of pure style behind which there is no longer any ground, any meaning or any subject to be expressed.

Alive to the sensuous potential of language, the grain of words and the myriad ways in which syntax and metaphor generate atmosphere, Banville makes implicit demands of his readers to bring to life the emotional intensities of the prose. The Jamesian trap at the end of the novel accentuates the fragility of the embedded story, its shimmering existence on the edge of dissolution. It is at once an imagined world and yet one that cannot be dismissed as unreal, and thus it draws attention to the special kind of existence of fiction itself. Bruno Latour asserts that the beings of fiction are not "false, unreliable or imaginary", but constitute a particular mode of being that is exceptionally fragile "because they ask so very much of us". The beings of fiction, he claims, are *subject* to us in order to sustain their existence, but we also *become subjects* through them: "No other type of being imposes such fragility, such responsibility; no other is as eager to be able to continue to exist through the 'we' whom they help to figure" (*An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence* 249). The extempore effect of Banville's prose in this novel not only conveys the coming to consciousness of life in all its dynamism, but effects, in reality, this process of creative becoming. We are made quasi-subjects, awoken to the relational dynamic of our subjectivities. In this sense, the orphic world depicted in the novel thematises the precarious existence of the work itself as well as the manner in which the art experience makes manifest the contingent nature of experience, the birth and death inherent in every moment of existence. This is another of Banville's books of evidence, which crystallises and makes manifest energies that are not proper to the self. The artwork is not merely a conductor of these energies but is composed of them. Its very being is in the co-nascence that occurs when we engage with it, in the force that it exerts and the demands that it makes. Our subjection to it reminds us of our participation in forces of becoming that exceed our individual lives. It is not the

representation of lives, but the very fabric of life that Banville's art is concerned with, the posing of the question, as Morden puts it, "at what moment, of all our moments, is life not utterly, utterly changed, until the final, most momentous change of all?" (33-34). The relation of literature to death in Banville's late fiction has nothing to do with linguistic indeterminacy and the *absence* of the real, but rests on this tragic recognition of our mortality through the *presences* it makes manifest.

This recognition of mortality is at the crux of *The Sea* and it is revealed in the short closing sequence in which Morden finally recalls the moment of Anna's death on the closing page. He has stepped out of the nursing home for air and is recalling an instant from the long-ago summer at the beach. The scene is still, only muffled sounds can be heard, and Max stands knee-deep alone in the sea. His feet are "pallid and alien, like specimens displayed under glass", and a rolling swell carries him along a little before setting him down again: "nothing had happened, a momentous nothing, just another of the great world's shrugs of indifference". He is called inside because Anna has died: "and it was as if I were walking into the sea" (264). The entire narrative seems compressed into this mundane memory of a moment long past: the subaqueous silence and the submerged feet distorted by the water's ripples so as perhaps to appear webbed, the strange tide which carried "the gods" away (3). Nothing happens and yet all of the essential elements are present, and in this moment of extraordinary poetic compression the intricate filigree of the fiction threatens to melt into unreality.

Morden's obligation to sustain his *living* memories of Anna, and thus to keep her in a sort of life, is implicitly linked to the demands that Banville makes of his readers to sustain the gossamer world of his fiction. In the same way that Morden is summoned to the edge of his being by the siren song of the dead within the novel, we too are drawn into its watery, Wakean world. Moreover, we are drawn out of our self-positedness to the task of co-creating and sustaining this insubstantial world. Its shifting sands bring home to us the ungroundedness of our being, which is not a negativity but a creative dynamic of living and dying in each moment of existence. The diaphanous world of *The Sea* is saturated with the intense sorrow and exquisite pleasure of this awareness.

Playing for time

In an interview during the period he was working on *The Infinities*, Banville broached the subject of his own mortality. "I would like to live forever," he claimed:

> I find the prospect of leaving this exquisite world… I find it devastating. I find it infuriating. I keep thinking what kind of day would I like to die on. Would it be one of those beautiful, pearl grey, slightly mauve days in June? Or would it be one of those days in September with those Poussin skies? Would it be the depths of winter? You know those bleak mid-winter days. None of them suits me. I don't want to go on any day. […] It's like being at a tremendously good party. […] I know that I'll have to leave, but it's just so good. It's so beautiful. It's so exquisitely beautiful being here. ("Being John Banville")

The catch, as Banville well knows and with which he is much concerned in *The Infinities*, is that were it possible to live forever, life would be drained of this exquisite, transient beauty. It is the very passing of the seasons, the passage of time itself, which makes life so spectacularly precious. This is what old Adam Godley, the eminent theoretical physicist of Banville's novel, finds when his equations unveil the infinity of time. After the initial euphoria, apprehension set in: "The sigh of dead, dank air that wafted back in our faces from the yawning doorway out of what had been our only world was not the breath of new life, as we expected, but a last gasp. […] This is what we discovered, to our chagrin and shame: that we had enough, more than enough, already, in the bewildering diversities of our old and overabundant world" (216-17). It is not immortality that Adam, now on his deathbed, wants but the abundance of the living world that he is about to depart.

Set over the course of one midsummer's day in the environs of Arden House, where Adam lies in death's very anteroom, *The Infinities* adheres to the classical unities, but it also plays a game with time. The dream world of the novel is a sanctuary of grace where the subjective synthesis of time as succession, with death as its telos, is suspended in an expansion of the rapturous moment so essential to Banville's aesthetics. Here the grace period of rapture and the reprieve from

reflexive consciousness occupies all of the narrative space. Crucially, this is not an overcoming of mortal existence but an immersion into the untimely flux at its core. It is about prising open caverns in the ostensibly still and solid world, and revealing the pulsing life in its midst. Much as Joyce set out to do in *Ulysses* or Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*, Banville wants, in *The Infinities*, to fit the infinite into a single day, to fill it with a plenitude of life as if it were the last day of time, which it is for Adam.

At the heart of this enterprise is the overcoming of the self and of reflexive consciousness. Before proceeding to an analysis of the novel, it is worth pausing over the question of selfhood from which we embarked in order to clarify, in the light of Banville's most recent work, the status of the self insofar as it is implicated in the work of writing. In his interview for the *Paris Review* conducted just prior to the publication of *The Infinities*, Banville comments: "I suspect that the reason I don't really believe in the third-person mode is due to the fact that I'm such an egomaniac. Unless it's me speaking, it's not convincing—to me, that is". Of course, there is a good deal of self-ironising here, and it is the fictional *I* of which he speaks. Outside of his fiction, Banville seems ill at ease in the first person. His recently published *Time Pieces* (2016), ostensibly a Dublin "memoir", is, he acknowledges in an interview with Kathy Sheridan for *The Irish Times*, "rather short on facts about myself. […] I'm not interested in myself. […] All life is going on inside my head, but it's invisible. Also, I'm not very interesting myself". Much of the book is deflected away from the self and even the "facts" about his life are, he reveals in the same interview, mostly fictional, which is not to say false—his first love, for instance, is "an amalgam of many people". The personal anecdotes that are offered in the book, whether they are "real" or not, are all recognisable from his novels, and in comparison to their previous incarnations in the fiction, they feel wrung out and used up. There is more at stake here than a writer guarding his privacy, because the very essence of Banville's art is to liberate life from the prosaic particulars of living and extract from commonplace human transactions the pulses and intensities of existence, the very vibrations of life itself.

The purgation of the personal and the liberation of the sensation of living from the life of the self are integral to Banville's aesthetics. One suspects that he doesn't really see the point of a memoir that isn't distilled to the point of almost extinguishing the self, and, by the same token, one begins to see that all of his novels

are memoirs in this sense. In his defence of prioritising art before life in *Time Pieces*, he claims—adding that he "might even deny the need for such a defence"—that art "is a constant effort to strike past the mere daily doings of humankind in order to arrive at, or at least to approach as closely as possible to, the essence of what it is, simply, to be" (53). Such appeals to "essence" and his avowed disinterest in the business of living are suggestive of a kind of antiquated idealism or metaphysical classicism, when rather the opposite is the case. It is precisely the commonplace, phenomenal, corporeal and transient elements of life that concerns him in his art, not momentous events or the miscellany of the subjective psyche, but the dust motes of the everyday, the tremors of life in the phenomena close at hand.

Like all of Banville's novels, *The Infinities* is an interrogation of its own creation and its experiments with narrative voice thematise the evacuation of the self in the work of artistic creation. The rhetorical conceit that establishes the narrator as the inventor rather than the reporter of the story is announced with aplomb in the opening sentence: "Of the things we fashioned for them that they might be comforted, dawn is the one that works" (3). Abandoning the loose, aleatory style of *The Sea*, here Banville accentuates contrivance, and the narrator is in complete control, both in sense and syntax. The iambic rhythm and calibrated cadences reflect a piece of divinely perfected handiwork, and the pragmatic efficiency of "that works" humorously posits the sun's rising as the outcome of the gods' tinkering and a mere compensatory measure for the human travail of having to die. The author-god is overtly invoked and speaking is Hermes, the patron of orators, an apt figure for the high ceremonial style of the book. He is also the psychopomp, whose task it is to escort Adam, recently felled by a near-fatal stroke, to the afterlife. In Scheherazade fashion, this terminus is delayed by the other immortal presences in the novel. Zeus, father of Hermes and chief of all the gods, is besotted with Adam's daughter-in-law Helen, an actress who is rehearsing for the part of Alcmene in a production of Kleist's *Amphitryon*. In a *mise en abyme* that mirrors the action of the play, Zeus transforms himself into her husband, Adam junior, and seduces her, and his eagerness to repeat the performance postpones the departure of the gods, thereby prolonging the duration of the novel. A further distraction, later in the day, arrives in the form of the appropriately named Benny Grace, an old colleague of Adam's, aka

the god Pan, who, as personifier of Adam's eleventh-hour panic at the prospect of dying, affords a further grace period.

The novel draws on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and just as Shakespeare's fairies manipulated the mechanicals, the action of *The Infinities* is driven by the gods' interventions into the lives of the human cast who have gathered to attend Adam's deathbed: his wife, Ursula; daughter, Petra; young Adam and Helen; Petra's reluctant boyfriend and acolyte of old Adam, Roddy Wagstaff; Ivy Blount, the dispossessed heiress of Arden and servant to the Godley's; and Duffy the cowman. As well as Hermes's first-person accounts, much of the book is narrated in a third-person free indirect style that drifts from one character to another, as Hermes eavesdrops on the thoughts of young Adam, Ursula, Helen, Petra and even Rex, the family labrador. This underlines the omniscient perspective while also drawing attention to the way in which the human characters are not self-determining subjects, but are moved by external forces. Thoughts and sensations are externalised; they take shape in the air between characters, making the limits of identity loose and permeable. Furthermore, as the novel progresses, Hermes's voice begins to merge with that of old Adam, at first with a grammatical slip: "I have—*he* has, *he*, I must stick to the third person" (33). At around the halfway mark, ostensibly while Hermes sleeps, Adam's voice breaks through in the first person. The distinction between man and god becomes increasingly blurred, as the entire narrative begins to figure as the eschatological reverie of the old man.

Lying supine in "the Sky Room", old Adam's Attic perspective is an eminent conceit for the writer in command of his material, artfully inventing, marshalling the plot and mastering the flux of time into an ordered unity (14). The audacious nomenclative allusions to divinity and to the progenitor, possessor of the power of naming, augment the correlation between the author and his character, and the arrival of Benny, referred to by Adam as "my shadow, my double, my incorrigible daemon", humorously alludes to Banville's adoption of the pen name Benjamin

Black under which he has published crime fiction since 2006 (160).[27] "He—I say he when I think I mean I", says Adam of Benny (172). But the novel's comic self-referential playfulness in relation to the Banville / Black dualism is only one portion of its elaborate skein of bifurcations and shapeshifting. In conceiving the narrative as all a dream, old Adam figures not only as Hermes and Benny, but also as Zeus, through whom he plays out his desire for Helen, assuming the identities of his son and Roddy Wagstaff. As Hermes, he metamorphoses into Duffy and, for his amusement, seduces Ivy Blount.

All of these interventions comically figure the writer as demigod, plotting, weaving and shaping the narrative. But the fractal dynamic of duplications, substitutions and polyphony also underlines the prosopopeial character of the narrative voice, which is not representative of a subject but of the dissolving of subjectivity in the dream-work of art. Even figuring the narrative as Adam's dream, it is not he—lying in "the celestial dentist's chair" in a state of "life-in-death" (31, 18)—but the gods who are moving the plot along, injecting colour into the human lives. But they, in turn, are mere masks for the impersonal, oceanic energies at play in creative work. "Think, if you can," commands Hermes, "of a sea of eternal potential and of us as the shapes the waters make, surging and swaying; think of the air moulded by weather into transparent forms; think of ice; think of flame—so we are, at once eternal and evanescent" (206). In this reading, the gods are figures for the warring forces of the text: the psychopompic will to death personified by Hermes, the panic change of heart in the form of Benny, and, above all, the powerful lust for life in the erotic force that is Zeus. In the slow transfiguring of the novel's events into the diaphanous fabric of the dream, the weight of content falls away, liberating the imponderable forces underlying the work of art.

However, the ambiguities of this polyphonic maze cannot be resolved so neatly. The introduction of an ostensibly metadiegetic level of narration which would place Adam in a vertical relation to Hermes cannot be sustained, because it is

[27] Banville is fond of playing on his dual identity as a writer, even publishing an interview between Banville and Black on his Benjamin Black website. In "Being John Banville", which was filmed while he was working on *The Infinities*, he refers to this "dark twin" as a dangerous figure: "Benjamin Black could seep into the pores of John Banville's skin and invade him and Benjamin Black could say to John Banville in that Faustian way, that Mephistophelean way, look how easy it is, why don't you relax, why don't your write easier books? The public would love you. […] You'd make a fortune". This resonates comically with the character of Benny Grace, Adam's slightly sordid sidekick, the money man who acts as go-between for Adam's mysterious benefactress Madame Mac.

impossible to definitively place the diegetic levels of Adam and Hermes in hierarchical order. Like a Möbius strip, they slide into each other: on the one hand, Adam's sensing of what is going on around him and his reminiscences, and, on the other hand, Hermes's eavesdropping and meddling in human affairs. It is never clarified whether the gods are figments of Adam's dream, ministering to his desires, or whether Adam is in the hands of the gods, so that both readings must be upheld at once. This narrative technique is a more sophisticated version of the Jamesian trap deployed in *The Sea*; in both novels, the holographic dualities of the text are suspended in ambiguity.

Banville's avowed disbelief in the third person is in keeping with his use of it in *The Infinities*, where he wants to push the credulity of the reader as far as possible in order to emphasise the "unreally real" nature of the narrative (8). The only sense in which the fiction is incontrovertibly real is on the level of the aesthetic event, which is precisely the level that Banville wants to draw attention to. The gradual twist into equivocality and paradox accentuates the paradoxical nature of the contract between the reader and the fiction. We know that the events described in the text are not real, and yet—the "and yet" that is ubiquitous in Banville's novels—on the level of the art event, the intensities that it brings alive for us are quite possibly much stronger and more ontologically unsettling than those afforded by the "real" experiences of everyday existence.[28] It is this distillation of experience to pure intensities in the art event rather than the representation of events that Banville wants to accentuate in *The Sea* and even more so in *The Infinities*.

The novel is replete with iterations of the real-unreal paradox: old Adam is "sleeplessly sleeping", "present and at the same time not", "himself and yet not", and when he wakes, "what he wakes to is not waking" (11, 44, 58, 62); the "essence" of the gods, like that of Adam's infinities, is "essentially inessential" (144); and while the gods dwell in "the infinite here, which is a kind of not-here", all of the humans will die, "in the fullness, in the emptiness of time" (16, 209-10). Such contradictory statements do not possess a force of negation or self-cancelling irony, but that of a

[28] I draw here on Alan Paskow's *The Paradoxes of Art* (2008), in which he ascribes the paradox of art to our "dual vision" when we attend to works of art, our apprehension of them as both real and not real (63). The artwork, he claims, can "make a claim on our being, an aspect of ourselves that is not completely attuned to our ordinary, everyday way of thinking and feeling-perceiving" and thereby procure "an existential expansion of our everyday world" (234).

nonsensical humour. Their purpose is not only to underline the real-unreal paradox in order to draw attention to the fictionality of the fiction; it is the reality of the art event that Banville wants to emphasise rather than the unreality of the events described within it. A distinction must be made from the kind of metafiction that wants to attest to the self-referential nature of language and to articulate a distance from the real through irony. Banville's deployment of the Möbius strip structure in the eschewal of a diegetic hierarchy collapses ironic distance in the Adam / Hermes pairing and establishes the non-reflexive duality of the paradox, thus eliminating the negativity of infinite regress in favour of the positive value of simultaneity.

In *The Sea*, Max Morden attested to entering into an "imagined place of pre-departure" at his writing desk, where he was "neither alive nor the other thing" (97, 98). In *The Infinities*, another limit-space, we find the opposite side of the paradox (which is paradoxically the same—the other side of the Möbius strip) where the artistic avatar of Adam / Hermes is both alive and dead at the same time. In neither novel is the circularity vicious, but there is a subtle difference nonetheless. Whereas Max Morden's narrative of mourning collapses the life / death dichotomy in order to commune with the dead beloved, Adam Godley's story of dying does so in order to reach out to the living loved ones he is leaving behind. The two novels are twinned in this respect, as paradoxical reflections of each other, like the masks of tragedy and comedy back-to-back.

The reflexive structure of ironic metafiction is like that of two interfacing mirrors that reflect each other infinitely in a closed circuit, the eminent motif of the self-conscious subject and of language as a self-referential system. As I have argued in my discussion of *Eclipse*, this structure is both death-denying and life-negating, sustaining the illusion of immortality, while at the same time alienating the self from a putative unmediated relation to the world. The Adam / Hermes duality, on the other hand, has the structure of two sides of the same mirror, where it is possible to see infinitely outwards in two different directions at the same time and to uphold the co-existence of two fictional worlds. This procures an interval of grace, in which life and death inhere simultaneously. As Hermes explains, the human world and the realm of the gods never really intersect, but nevertheless co-exist on the same mirrored surface, that is, the same fictional plane: "To us your world is what the world in mirrors is to you. A burnished, crystalline palace, sparkling and clear, with

everything just as it is on this side, only reversed, and infinitely unreachable. A looking-glass world, indeed, and only that" (260-61).

Paradox is the novel's central motif, and Banville's "looking-glass world" may well be a direct reference to Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, which draws prolifically on Lewis Carroll's *Alice* and *Through the Looking Glass*. In this work, Deleuze situates paradox at the core of his concept of becoming, arguing for a "secret dualism hidden in sensible and material bodies", a "mad element" beneath things that pulls in two directions at the same time (2). A parallel might be drawn here with Freud's first speculative account, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, of the sex and death drives, which in this early formulation he describes as "the forces at work" within "living matter" (85). What is crucial here is that such forces are not proper to the individual subject, but rather pre-subjective, cosmic energies that precede the formation of subjects and the illusion of fixed identities. It is only when we enter into the consciousness of the individual that we enter into the reflexive structure that constructs the illusion of a stable identity and a linear temporality, and it is only when we enter into the signifying system of language and the attribution of the proper name, which posits a fixed identity, that we enter into the dualism of a pre-linguistic self and a self as uttered. However, language, as Deleuze argues, is not only the purveyor of sense but also of nonsense. Paradoxical language shatters fixed identities and violates sense. By destroying the simplicity of signification, paradox awakens us to the *event* of language and to a more profound signification of the paradoxical nature of being itself. The paradoxes of Banville's late fiction are linguistic events that articulate the pure potential at the core of being, the sensation of being pulled in opposing directions at the same time. This dichotomy that belongs to matter, and not to individual selves, is the creative tension that dismantles fixed identities and that draws all matter towards life and towards death. It is this contradictory force of becoming that sustains the living world, without which the "dead, dank air" of infinite death would descend (Banville, *The Infinities* 216). Adam's "exquisite and unimpeachable paradoxes", like the paradoxes of Banville's novel, express the essential paradox at the core of being, that there can be no life without death (216).

Just as in Carroll's work, the paradoxes of the text foreground the event of language, its opposing movements and rhythms and its hallucinatory imagery, the

paradoxes in *The Infinites* direct us away from the activity of sense-making and towards an immersion in the textual event. The events depicted in the text—the rival powers of the gods permeating the human lives, Adam's comatose state where he is both dead and alive at the same time—allegorise the event of the text itself, its affects, the pulses and rhythms and tempo, which are the creative and entropic rhythms of becoming, that is, of being itself. This is what Banville means by an art that exceeds human doings in order to approach what it is to be.

It is with *The Infinities* that he comes closest to his aim of emptying his fiction of content and writing a work of pure style, where style is the Nietzschean gesture, a pure folly that makes manifest the generative and destructive forces at the heart of matter, the contradictory forces of becoming. Style, as Deleuze and Guattari write, is "the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says, even less by what makes it a signifying thing, but by what causes it to move, to flow, and to explode—desire" (*Anti-Oedipus* 133). Old Adam's apotheosis to a state of "pure mind, […] pure thought" is no apogee of Cartesian idealism, and his release from the earthly body is not a disavowal of corporeality, but instead figures a liberation of life energy—the force of Eros—from the bound body (Banville, *The Infinities* 31-32). This is audaciously allegorised in Banville's appropriation of Kleist's *Amphitryon* as a framing story, where it is Zeus's (and Adam's) carnal desire that sustains the action. And it is death that Zeus covets: "Each time he dips his beak into the essence of a girl he takes, so he believes, another enchanting sip of death, pure and precious" (73). The force of desire is also the force of destruction. On the looking-glass surface of *The Infinities*, everything runs to paradox, which is a generative principle that cleaves apart the crevices of experience to reveal the power of becoming at its heart rather than snapping them shut in a vicious circular irony.

The novel's complicated sexual game-playing and burlesque humour thematise the erotic currents that animate the text, as when Hermes ponders the mysteries of human love: "But lo! see what they made of this mess of frottage. It is as if a fractious child had been handed a few timber shavings and a bucket of mud to keep him quiet only for him promptly to erect a cathedral, complete with baptistry, steeple, weathercock and all" (73). The phrase "mess of frottage" fuses the artistic sense of a rubbing as the foundation for a work of art with the sexual meaning of the word, and this lewd Shakespearean suggestiveness carries over in "erect" and in the

rising rhythm of the next sentence. The provocative humour that plays on the texture of words, the surging cadence and the burgeoning of the image from the "timber shavings" and "mud" of words into the cathedral of a sentence exemplifies the sense of vitality and capaciousness that characterises the prose. Its eroticism is not all, or even primarily, sexual. Rather it is about bringing alive an affective experience, about liberating the force of becoming, of desire and destruction, by manipulating the sensuous capacities of language. "Art is suffused with the erotic," claims Banville. "All art, in a way, comes back to the body, and if you make a real work of art it will be at a level of eroticism which is very high" ("Being John Banville"). The novel's pathos is corporeal, erogenous, and is evoked through elaborate imagery, fine-grained descriptions of the sensuous texture of experience and, crucially, poetic tempo.

It is the rhythms and cadences of the prose, its distensions and contractions, the multiple becomings it brings alive, forming and reforming in miniature geneses and expirations, and the blooming and receding of metaphor and simile, that afford an experience of the pulses of pure becoming. This rhythmic pulsing and abating features at various levels, from the short paradoxical phrases to the book as a whole, which begins with the invention of the dawn and ends in dusk and death. It is exemplified in a set piece toward the centre of the novel, which describes a trip that Adam took to Venice shortly after the suicide of his first wife, Dorothy. The episode begins, like the novel itself, with Hermes, paired at this point with Adam, inventing a world: "on a blast of divine afflatus, I am wafting Adam the elder across the seas to where together we shall invent Venice" (122). This is not a recollection but a genesis, narrated in the present tense so that the orientation is towards a world coming into being. He continues: "Forty years ago, more" (122). The word order is vital here. Had this read "more than forty years ago", the direction of the entire passage would be retrograde, casting the action into the far past with "ago" shutting off potential. With the intensifier coming at the end, the sentence carries the force of a creative becoming. "More" has a forward momentum that drives the prose on to the slightly longer sentence that follows. "It is wintertime, and the city's vaunted charms are all crazed over by the cold" (122). This is another propulsive sentence that leads from the flatly factual to the airy bluster of "vaunted", and onto "all crazed

over" which demands an image upon which to project its icy fissures. The prose acquires a buoyancy, beginning to swell into longer, more saturated sentences:

> He is sitting in a restaurant, upstairs, at a corner table, with a view across the canal to where the wedding-cake façade of a white church, which he knows he should know the name of, gleams phantasmally through the midday murk. In some corner of the low-slung sky a weak sun is shining and each wavelet of the leaden canal waters is tipped with a spur of sullen, silver-yellow light. (122)

The eye of the imagination is directed out from the vanishing point of a corner to the lavish vision with its nuances of light and texture. Everything distends, bulging in excess and abundance. Shortly into the episode, Adam is approached by a pimp, aptly named Zeno, who escorts him to a brothel. In drifts of post-coital melancholy and grieving reminiscences of Dorothy, the tense changes to the past and the tone becomes sombre, and the little genesis that began the episode is matched at the end by a dying cessation: "he went on standing there in the lemony sunlight of the Italian noon, and saw again Venice in winter, the grimy air and the wheeling gulls, and gnarled old Charon the boatman crooning for his coin" (133).

It is through tempo, and particularly through comic timing, that Banville manipulates time in the novel, stretching and contracting it with comic digressions and bloated imagery. Banville's funniest book since *The Book of Evidence*, its humour is very different from Freddie Montgomery's blithe causticity and detached sceptical irony.[29] The high rhetorical tone of this later work is not that of a subject unable to transcend his own solipsistic and all too human perspective. Here the voice is liberated from the constraints of personhood and the reflexive dualism. The ironic perspective that views the world at a sceptical distance is replaced by a life-affirming humour. Ironic comedy is about the individual, the reflexive self and the doubleness of language, and it is integral to the dualistic worldview. The humour of *The*

[29] In his article "John Banville's Comedy of Cruelty" Bryan Radley provides a comprehensive and nuanced reading of much of Banville's comedy. I differ from him, however, in his opinion that "the last aspect of *The Infinities* that should be read as a radical new departure is its humour". His appraisal of the novel's humour as "pitiless black comedy" does not, in my view, account for its celebratory qualities (14). Overall, the humour in the novel is capacious in its treatment of human foibles and pokes gentle and generous fun at divine pretentiousness, which marks a departure from the ironic humour of earlier novels.

Infinities is the paradoxical humour of nonsense, where language is all surface, where the duality of the subject is not reflexive but indicative of the contradictory forces of being. The Möbius strip logic of paradox eradicates depth in favour of an art of the surface. Its humour is that of the somersaulting gesture and the joyous release of life from the bounds of individuality. It is about the expulsion of life in laughter, shorn of the weight of sense and of the subject. This humour holds no truck with the troubles of the individual, but is about the communal and the family. It is the essence of the social because it concerns the subterranean forces that draw people together and pull them apart. The extension of the rapturous moment of self-overcoming is a postponement of the rebound into the reflexive consciousness of the individual subject. It opens up a space of grace, granting, for a little while, the limitless perspective of a god. In his book *On Humour* (2002), the philosopher Simon Critchley compares the temporality of the joke to stretching an elastic band: "We know that the elastic will snap, we just do not know when, and we find that anticipation rather pleasurable. It snaps with the punchline, which is a sudden acceleration of time, where the digressive stretching of the joke suddenly contracts into a heightened experience of the instant" (7). The distensive space of *The Infinities* creates precisely this kind of pleasurable tension, a luxuriant tumescence that is all the sweeter for the inevitability of the morbid climax. The transcendence of time that the novel affords is not a transcendence of life but of the tragic predicament through comic elasticity. Its limber linguistic acrobatics awaken us to the sense of life's energies inflating the body and leaving in laughter, like a burst balloon, a sneeze, an orgasm or, in comic parentheses, death itself.

3. **Roth's Fictions of Freedom and Death**

"In the death throes of the creature, at the furthest extreme from freedom, freedom itself irresistibly shines forth as the thwarted destiny of matter."

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Dialectics of death

The question of death comes to dominate Philip Roth's fiction from the mid-nineties on. As well as providing the subject matter for *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *The Dying Animal* (2001) and the late Nemeses series, it is the narrative catalyst for the later Zuckerman books, beginning with *American Pastoral* (1997), all of which are concerned with the writer Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's longstanding alter ego, "entering into professional competition with death" by inventing the narrative of a dead subject's life (Roth, *The Human Stain* 338). It is tempting to extend this to Roth, and to contend that his art also stages a contest with death, but it would be naïve to conflate the fiction writer with the fictional writer. In his autobiographical work *The Facts* (1988), which begins with a letter from Roth to Zuckerman and concludes with Zuckerman's reply along with his commentary on the memoir, Zuckerman advises Roth, "your talent for self-confrontation is best served by sticking with me" (195). To project Zuckerman's venture onto Roth, then, is to overlook the counter-impulse so important to Roth's aesthetics.

The idea of writing as a suspension or postponement of death, the notion that "as long as I speak I live", aligns the artwork with the teleology of life story and the ideology of progress, but this is not primarily what is at stake in Roth's writing. The more compelling and provocative vigour of his late work lies not in its alignment with life but in its affinity with death. The consonance that narrative confers upon life, which is the expression of its being-towards-death, is in tension in Roth's fiction with the violent dissonance of a death immanent to experience that disrupts and diverts the course of narrative teleology and the ideologies of progress and futurity. This dialectical tension is the central dynamic of Roth's late novels—perhaps even

of all his work. It is pertinent, in this respect, that several critics find death to be a chief preoccupation throughout Roth's entire oeuvre, but one that only becomes apparent in the late period as Roth turns his attention to its interrogation.[1] The late works, then, may be said to reflect much more than a writer coming to terms with—or raging against—mortality in old age, but may be more fruitfully considered an exploration of an integral link between writing and death at the core of his art.

This chapter focuses on the relation between death and creativity in three of Roth's novels: *Sabbath's Theater*, *American Pastoral* and *Everyman* (2006). As well as inaugurating an extraordinary creative outburst late in his career and securing his place as a master of American letters, *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral* mark the beginning of a fascination with mortality that prevails throughout all of his subsequent novels. Considered together, they epitomise the contrariety that drives the work, Roth's habit of writing each novel in response to the preceding one.[2] The counter-narrative is his métier and the oppositional impulse figures on multiple levels as a defining feature of the oeuvre, not only in the relations between novels, but within them too. The essential dynamic is one of constraint and liberation, and Roth's late subjects confront the fundamental contradiction entailed in the human relation to mortality: that to know death is the ultimate impediment to freedom as well as freedom's highest expression. To embrace change, transience and death is to embrace life, but Roth eschews any facile didacticism that posits the contemplation of death as morally edifying. Rather, his focus is on the vital role that the human relation to death occupies in American culture, particularly in relation to forms of social domination as well as liberation.

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[1] In a roundtable talk on *Everyman* organised by the Philip Roth Society, Bernard Rodgers opened the discussion by asking the panellists to reflect on how Roth's concern with death and dying in early works becomes apparent in the light of the overt thematic focus on mortality in his later fiction. In response, Derek Parker Royal remarks on "the number of critics and reviewers who are noticing that death is now a part of his writing, when, as you all have mentioned, you go back and look at the earlier works you find it is there from the very beginning" (8).

[2] Relatively early in his career, after the publication of *The Great American Novel* (1973), Roth remarks on "the self-conscious and deliberate zigzag" of his career, "each book veering sharply away from the one before" (*Reading Myself and Others* 73). In his *Paris Review* interview, he remarks on his desire, when starting a new book, for a breakaway from the previous novel, and fighting against his tendency to begin with "an unconscious parody" of the preceding novel. David Gooblar focuses on this continual shifting in his book *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* (2011), and Debra Shostak examines it from the perspective of a postmodern preoccupation with the mutable nature of selfhood in her book *Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004).

Theodor Adorno's account of the artwork as a force field of antagonisms is particularly apt in the case of Roth's fictions, and my readings in this chapter are broadly in line with Adorno's contention that it is the internal, unsolved antagonisms of artworks, rather than their manifest content, that comprise their relation to society. The critique that Roth's art performs of society is not to be found in the image it presents of the social but in the immanent movement of its warring forces. But Roth is also a writer of realism and an appreciation of his work requires close attention to the interrelation between stylistic features and signifying content. Conflict is the crucial impetus for his writing, and he makes no attempt at aesthetic reconciliation of human contradiction and offers no utopian solutions. Transgression is another vital stimulant, but transgression means nothing without limits. Like another of his alter egos, David Kepesh of *The Dying Animal*, Roth is interested in "the discipline of freedom as opposed to the recklessness of freedom" (64). Chris Jenks argues that transgressive behaviour "does not deny limits or boundaries, rather, it exceeds them and thus completes them"; it is "a dynamic force in cultural reproduction – it prevents stagnation by breaking the rule and it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule". At the heart of this, according to Jenks, is the subject's capacity to know death. It is mortal awareness, he claims, that makes human experience "the constant experience of limits" (7). This illuminates the fundamental antagonism at the core of Roth's work, the awareness of limitation and the transgression of that limitation, that is, the *speculative knowledge* of death as the ultimate frontier, and the intimate knowledge of death that arises from the *experience* of exceeding one's own subjective boundaries.

Roth's writing is about challenging forms of constraint and thereby expanding, however slightly, our understanding of what it means to be human. He writes about limit experiences, most notably about sex and death, and in doing so he seeks to challenge moral and cultural standards. He claims not to write about his own convictions but about "the comic and tragic consequences of holding convictions" (qtd. in Roth Pierpont 218). This is not to say that he believes convictions are not necessary, but rather that they should be fluid and constantly measured against the singularity and contingency of the present. His novels challenge utopian ideologies and reductive resolutions of the complexities of human experience through art. If he commits to anything it is to contingency, phenomenal specificity and the singularity

of experience. In a comment on writing about pain in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), Roth claimed that his aim was to be "as *un*symbolic as possible", and *un*symbolic is a near-perfect watchword for his aesthetics (*Reading Myself and Others* 114). His prose is marked by a rigorous adherence to the literal and the tangible, and an eschewal of the general, the metaphorical and the ideological.

In *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (1998), Jonathan Dollimore asserts that the copula death-desire occupies a central role in our culture. Traditional Western metaphysics and religions, he argues, are founded on a perceived gap between reality, which is posited as timeless, and the world of appearance, which is the world of experience and of transience, loss and death. Desire for stable truths is thus aligned with a denial of change and death. Hence, "mutability animates desire even as it thwarts it", so that "the very nature of desire is what prevents its fulfilment" (xvii). I focus on how Roth's fiction undermines this putative distinction between experience and truth, and the challenges that his novels pose to the social and cultural values that are sanctioned by appealing to a reality beyond appearance. Central to my discussion is the way in which the dominant conception of language as a semiotic system is founded on a symbolic order which legitimises and perpetuates a foundational division between nature and culture, as well as the related distinctions between the primitive and the modern, and between immaturity and mature integration into the social. Roth's rejection of universal conceptions of human behaviour and timeless truths implicit in utopian ideologies is enacted in his rejection of the symbolic order and his use of language that attends to the here and now, that forges connections rather than perpetuating a distance between signs and arbitrary meanings.

His eschewal of figurative language opposes the deferrals and diversions of desire—which departs from the living present and seeks the realization of nostalgic return in a utopian future—with the force of the erotic that operates within the material present. At the core of this appeal to the erotic is the implication that to turn away from death is to turn away from life. But the body runs down, the erotic force with which Roth's characters throw themselves into the world wanes and the opportunities for its expression dwindle as the final change looms ever closer. *Everyman*, although a relatively minor work in Roth's oeuvre, poses the most rigorous challenge to an aesthetic reconciliation of the contradictions inherent in the

human relation to death. Its relentless portrayal of mortal confrontation bars any utopian valorisation of the revolutionary potential of death and, more than any other of Roth's novels, it foregrounds the central struggle of the individual in contemporary Western culture to navigate the wish for freedom and the terrible fear of that very freedom.

An overarching theme of many of the major monographs to have been published over the last decade or so on Roth is the adversarial or discordant character of his fiction. In her book *Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004), Debra Shostak traces the counter-impulse through the lens of subjectivity and "the oppositional nature of the I/other dialogue" (12). In *Philip Roth's Rude Truth* (2006), Ross Posnock looks at immaturity, which, he claims, is "diacritical" insofar as it emerges "not from the obliteration of bourgeois restraint, but from pushing or defying its limits, and by being judged against a presiding norm" (xi-xii). The critical role that paradox plays in Roth's writing is the central concern of David Brauner's study, and Elaine B. Safer looks at the various ways in which Roth uses comedy to "mock the age" in his later novels. Patrick Hayes places Roth within a post-Nietzschean intellectual tradition and explores his engagement with the will to power, focusing especially on literary value in opposition to other modes of discourse. I hope to contribute to this critical corpus by honing in on the various ways in which confrontations with mortality figure in the late work as a crucial stimulus for the oppositional force of Roth's writing.

Of the numerous book chapters and articles that have been published on the significance of death in the novels I discuss here, most are thematic in focus.[3] Roth's skills as a realist novelist, his acuity in portraying intricacies of character and situation, and his critical engagement with culture and notions of subjectivity must surely account for the greater focus on subject matter, but Roth is also a stylist and an interrogation of the experiential qualities of the work, which I argue are integral to his fictional engagement with mortality, requires attention to style. My focus combines thematic concerns with close stylistic analysis. I am particularly concerned with the nexus of language, eroticism and death in the late novels, and with Roth's

[3] Examples include James M. Mellard's "Death, Mourning and Besse's Ghost", Jay L. Halio's "Eros and Death in Roth's Later Fiction", Elizabeth Moran's "Death, Determination and the 'end of ends?'", Frank Kelleter's "Portrait of the Sexist as a Dying Man" and David J. Zucker's "Philip Roth: Desire and Death", as well as interdisciplinary papers in the area of medical humanities on the theme of death and ageing in Roth's novels.

engagement with post-Freudian ideas about the death instinct.[4] My intention is not to present a psychoanalytic critique of Roth's work, however. Rather, my discussion of Roth's invocation of psychoanalytic tropes forms the basis for a much broader analysis of the aesthetic and political challenges posed by his fiction.

What makes Roth novels so stimulating and rewarding is their resistance to determinate interpretations. They stage assaults on all forms of ideological commitment so that one cannot ascribe to them any constraining worldview. Their force is their very rebelliousness. If with certain authors we can speak of a progression of ideas and the development of a mature style, no such categorisation is apt in Roth's case. Progress and maturity are the standards against which his writing rebels at every turn. His aesthetic vectors are consistently shifting; contradiction is not only tolerated but is integral to his oeuvre. For this reason, I will consider each of the novels in turn, drawing on parallels and oppositions as they arise.

Beyond Oedipal politics

"I could have called the book 'Death and the Art of Dying'", remarks Roth of *Sabbath's Theater* (Roth and Sandstrom). Thirty pages into the novel, the death of Drenka, Mickey Sabbath's mistress of seventeen years, elicits Sabbath's demented confrontation with both his own mortality and the losses that have shaped him: Drenka lost to cancer, his first wife Nikki disappeared without a trace for thirty years, his brother Morty shot down over the Philippines during the Second World War, and his mother who all but retreated from life after Morty's death. Grief and loss, then, are the main themes of the book, and Sabbath has determined—although with considerable, and often comic, Hamletism—on suicide. This is far from a solemn *ars moriendi*, however. Mickey Sabbath's death-fixation is matched only by his sexual rapaciousness, and, on one level, the novel stages the age-old battle

[4] Apart from the pervasive influence of Freud's thought on post-war American culture, there is early evidence, as Patrick Hayes shows, of direct engagement with psychoanalytic theory in Roth's writing, via Lionel Trilling's essay "Freud and Literature", dating back to an uncollected short story from 1960, as well as a more general engagement with Trilling's responses to Freud in *Goodbye Columbus*. See Hayes's *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power* (45-50). However, it is with *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), the first of Roth's novels to receive widespread critical acclaim, that Roth explicitly brings psychoanalytic ideas into his fiction.

between Eros and Thanatos.[5] However, Sabbath's profane crusade against death is a burlesque parody of this timeworn dichotomy. For one thing, Sabbath is comically rendered, and his profligate, "preposterone"-fuelled sexuality is depicted as quixotic to the point of absurdity (337). Moreover, his powers of seduction have all but deserted him, leaving him with no buffer to block out the prospect that he is "at the approach of the end of everything" (3). Nevertheless, the Freudian concept of the sex and death drives is overtly invoked in Sabbath's sheer appetite for both sex and self-destruction, even if it is joyously parodied at the same time. Another classic psychoanalytic trope is solicited in the opening pages of the novel through repeated allusions to the Oedipus complex. Sabbath's mother's ghost is a constant presence, "watching him, everywhere encircling him", and the severing of the maternal bond is proffered, albeit comically, as an originary trauma the resolution of which promises a recovery of a lost wholeness: "His mother had been loosed on him. She had returned to take him to his death" (17).

On publication, *Sabbath's Theater* elicited a plethora of comparisons to *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), the first of Roth's novels to receive widespread critical acclaim. The earlier novel is comprised of one long psychoanalysis session, during which Alexander Portnoy indulges in a torrential bout of self-disclosure and self-abasement, gleefully divulging the details of his insatiable proclivity for masturbation, his sexual compulsions and deficiencies, and his relationship with his overbearing Jewish mother. It begins: "She was so deeply imbedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise" (1). From here, the Oedipal schema is lampooned throughout to hilarious effect. Roth had just undergone five years of psychoanalysis himself, during which he was diagnosed with "castration anxiety vis-à-vis a phallic mother figure", which he ultimately deemed insupportable (Roth Pierpont 51). While acknowledging the benefits of his years in therapy, he described

[5] Jay L. Halio's reading of the novel upholds the opposition of sex and death, embarking from the premise that "the collocation of sex and death is something that psychologists have long known and discussed, sexual activity being a means of defying death and asserting life" (201). Post-Freudian psychoanalysis, however, has moved away from this simple opposition of the sex and death drives, which Freud himself problematized when he first proposed the notion of death drives in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" and further in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Halio's conclusion that "Eros successfully defies death in *Sabbath's Theater*" (205) somewhat oversimplifies the complex relation of sex and death in Roth's novel and in psychoanalytic theory more generally.

the process as "brainwashing" (qtd. in Roth Pierpont 80).[6] In an interview for *The New Yorker*, Roth expresses great admiration for Freud's expansion of "our sense of what consciousness is and what lies behind it", calling him "this great tragic poet, our Sophocles!" (Roth and Remnick). The comparison is ironic, however, given that it is precisely Freud's appropriation of Sophocles's Oedipus as a universal paradigm that Roth objects to. For Roth, Freud may have been a great tragic poet but "he wasn't a good novelist" because he "stamped everyone with the same story" (qtd. in Roth Pierpont 80). In *Sabbath's Theater*, a comparable antipathy towards generic psychoanalytic narratives is voiced by a psychiatric patient at the hospital where Sabbath's wife Roseanna is being treated for alcoholism and attempted suicide, attributed to childhood abuse at the hands of her father: "They all say that. The simplest story about yourself that explains everything—it's the house specialty. These people read more complicated stories in the newspaper every day, and then they're handed this version of their lives. […] The answer to every question is either Prozac or incest" (287). The comedy is ruthless but it contains a serious critique of normative and universalising conceptions of human experience.

The Oedipal drama is heavily satirised through the association of Sabbath's mother with Drenka at her most wanton: "Lately, when Sabbath suckled at Drenka's uberous breasts […] with an unrelenting frenzy that caused Drenka to roll her head ecstatically back and to groan […], 'I feel it deep down in my cunt,' he was pierced by the sharpest of longings for his late little mother" (13). The outrageously comic accounts of Yetta Sabbath's ghost make a travesty of his mother-fixation: "Either he was sitting in his dead mother's lap or she was sitting in his. Perhaps she was snaking in through his nose along with the scent of the mountain in bloom" (18). Sabbath's mock castration complex augments the parody; in one of his malicious exchanges of repartees with Roseanna that pepper the book, he challenges her: "It isn't just snip, snip, snip, like you're darning a sock. It isn't just chop, chop, chop, like you're mincing an onion. It's a human dick. It's full of blood. Remember Lady Macbeth? They didn't have AA in Scotland, and so the poor woman went off her rocker" (182-83). Making an inventory of every cutting tool in the house, Sabbath

[6] Unbeknownst to Roth, his analyst published a journal article using him as a case study, which features in *My Life as a Man* (1974). For a detailed account of how Roth's experience of psychoanalysis features in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *My Life as a Man*, see Jeffrey Berman's essay "Revisiting Roth's Psychoanalysts".

concludes: “He would never sleep in that house of scissors again” (184). The novel is filled with this kind of Freudian satire, but it would be a mistake to take such jibes as mere comic interludes, and yet one cannot, as some commentators do, ignore the comedy, which is deeply satirical and betrays Roth’s derision towards schematic generalisations about human relations.[7]

One reading that does move beyond the manifest content to an analysis of the novel’s Oedipal allusions and its relation to death on the level of form is Debra Shostak’s essay “Roth’s Graveyards, Narrative Desire, and ‘Professional Competition with Death’”. Shostak argues that the graveyard is a site of narrative stimulation in Roth’s work. Drawing on Peter Brooks’s account of narrative plotting, she identifies the grave as a site of trauma and loss that, in *Sabbath’s Theater*, is linked to Sabbath’s mother, the primordial figure from whose separation he is forever bound to seek redemption. Her reading of the novel rests on the endless, and therefore endlessly unsated, desire to recover that lost wholeness, and aligns the course of life, the compulsion to revisit and redeem an original trauma, with the course of narrative desire that propels the fiction forward. This reading reckons on the figurative capacity of narrative to represent the progression of life, the postponement of death, and the correlative human propensity for construing life itself as narrative, beginning with birth and circling back to death. The compulsion to revisit the scene of the grave follows the course of the death drive in Brooks’s account, prolonging the course of life in order to bring about a death proper to that life. Roth’s graveyard scenes, according to Shostak, “recur from book to book, holding in suspension the contraries—that a man stands alone in a darkening graveyard telling stories to keep the living alive”. The novel certainly bears this reading, but it does not do justice to the work’s affective potency. Its power lies not in the drive to keep death at bay. Indeed, the darker motivation behind Roth’s late aesthetics is to allow death in. “I wanted to let the repellent in,” Roth claimed.

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[7] James M. Mellard takes the Oedipal scheme at face value arguing that Sabbath eventually resolves his mother-fixation and successfully integrates into the adult world of the symbolic. Ansu Louis offers a more nuanced view of Sabbath’s Oedipus complex is his article “Transgression and Oedipal Politics in *Sabbath’s Theater*”, exposing an ambiguity in the text between Sabbath’s apparent Oedipal entrapment and the novel’s critique of the reduction of psychic life to this universal model. However, Louis casts Sabbath as a victim of his Oedipus complex, which, he argues, leads to his reprehensible cruelty and his replication of “an established dynamics of power in his society”. In my view, this is a mitigation of the transgressive power of Roth’s character, and by extension, of the novel’s attack on Oedipal politics.

"Because we try so hard not to see it" (qtd. in Roth Pierpont 198). Sabbath's lechery is not all that is repellent in the novel; it is motivated by, and is allied with rather than opposed to, his intimacy with death: "Mickey Sabbath doesn't live with his back turned to death the way normal people like us do", explained Roth. "His repellent way of living […] is his uniquely Sabbathian response to a world where nothing keeps its promise and everything is perishable" (Roth and Sandstrom).

To read the cemetery visits that punctuate the novel as traumatic displacements of a primordial wound inflicted by the separation from the mother is to attenuate the explosive power of these scenes. Rather than driving the narrative forward, they mark points of disruption of the symbolic order. Rather than a point in a metonymic chain that leads back to the mother, the grave can be read as an abyss that disrupts the order of narration, an order representative of life story, futurity and meaning. Sabbath's grief-stricken, graveside masturbation, his collapse while visiting his grandparents' grave, when "walls of embitterment were crashing down" (357), and the climactic scene that closes the novel in which he urinates on Drenka's grave, commemorating their most transgressive sexual act, are some of the strongest in the book for their portrayal of Sabbath at his most violently raw. The potency of Mickey Sabbath, arguably Roth's finest fictional creation, is his irrepressibility and his willingness to confront death, to break through the protective barriers of repression and open himself to the very limits of pain as well as pleasure.

In his non-fiction book *Patrimony* (1991), which is about his father's death, Roth writes: "I find that while visiting a grave one has thoughts that are more or less anybody's thoughts […]. At a cemetery you are generally reminded of just how narrow and banal your thinking is on this subject" (20-21). Prefiguring the graveyard scenes in *Sabbath's Theater*, which, rather than repressing the knowledge of death, underline its finality, Roth writes:

> If there's no one in the cemetery to observe you, you can do some pretty crazy things to make the dead seem something other than dead. But even if you succeed and get yourself worked up enough to *feel their presence*, you still walk away without them. What cemeteries prove, at least to people like me, is not that the dead are present but that they are gone. They are gone and,

> as yet, we aren't. This is fundamental and, however unacceptable, grasped easily enough. (*Patrimony* 21)

Similarly, there is no metonymic deferral in the cemetery scenes in *Sabbath's Theater* and Sabbath's aggrieved performances are not symbolic acts. Rather than repressing the knowledge of death and the will to self-destruction, Sabbath opens himself, at Drenka's grave, entirely to the raw experience of grief, to "a flood of straightforward feeling" (65). The metonymic possibilities are abolished abruptly with a Beckettian reductio ad absurdum when he leaves his grandparents' grave: "And no lucidity to be derived from any of this. Rather, there was a distinctly assertive quickening of the great stupidity. If there was ever anything to know, now he knew he never had known it" (371). What makes Sabbath so compelling is his ability to confront the brute fact of death without recourse. He does not suffer Oedipal cravings for a telos of quietude and organic unity but achieves his own dissolution in the living present and is invigorated by it.

Death and the erotic are aligned in Sabbath's necrophilic activities at Drenka's grave, the most bizarre of which sees him covered in the semen of another nocturnal visitor, "licking from his fingers Lewis's sperm and, beneath the full moon, chanting aloud, 'I am Drenka! I am Drenka!'" (78). The novel's aberrant graveyard eroticism links death and the erotic, not in the service of narrative propulsion and the Oedipal desire for wholeness aligned with the death drive, but into narrative breaches, as Sabbath's behaviour becomes increasingly irrational and language dissolves into unfettered flows of hysteria and grief. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva finds in Celine's novels that "the expedient of Oedipal identifications generated by narrative" defer to "much deeper, more remote and riskier probes […] which tamper with vocabulary and syntax", as "inhumanity discovers its appropriate themes, contrary to all lyrical traditions, in horror, death, madness, orgy, outlaws, war, the feminine threat, the horrendous delights of love, disgust, and fright" (137). Similarly, with Roth, the Oedipal reading of narrative desire is not where the force of the work lies, but rather in the violent salvos of rage, insanity, and aphasia, in anaphora and paratactic litanies that spill into madness and joy and abjection.

Sabbath's spontaneity, his audacious impropriety, and his sacrilegious exhibitionism find a corollary in the obstreperous rhetorical force of Roth's writing,

which aims at a disarticulation of meaning, freedom from sense-making, orderliness, and progression. As such, it approaches what is inhuman, inhumane, meaningless, and terror-inducing. The grave marks the horizon of life and meaning, and the power of Roth's art lies in its capacity to portray human life at its limits, to confront the full force of grief and pain as *un*symbolically as possible. Roth is no Celine, however. The constraints of plot and grammatical order are essential for the vitality of his oppositional aesthetic. Freedom is bound by death to its opposite, unfreedom; it is not measured in unchecked metonymic chains and metaphorical drifts that would elevate the imagination from the brute reality of absence. Rather, his violent poetics are rooted in the earthy materiality of the grave, in the emissions of the body that are not bound by the ego. The subject's desire for organic unity does not proceed along the transcendent order of the symbolic or the metaphorical, but erupts in the erotic, ejaculatory force of words that breach, and thereby expand, the limits of the bounded subject.

Sabbath is a retired puppeteer, "a lover and master of guile, artifice, and the unreal" (147), who made his name putting on lewd puppet shows at the Indecent Theater of Manhattan, and who caused a scandal during a street performance when, performing with just his fingers, he seduced a young female spectator into allowing him to remove her bra and caress her nipples. There is an obvious parallel between the dexterous and beguiling manipulations of the puppeteer and the rhetorical allure of Roth's writing, both of which draw their audiences into complicit transgression. Transgression, argues Jenks, is essentially performative in character. The meaning of the transgressive act "does not reside solely within the intentionality of the actor, indeed, in most instances, it resides within the context of the act's reception" (8). It is not merely their obscene content, but the surreptitious glee that both performances, Sabbath's and Roth's, elicit in reception that consummates their transgressions. Roth's prose style is eminently comparable to the puppeteer's "insidious art of giving license to what was already there" (214). In one of the few narrative breaches of free indirect style, a figurative flash of puppet strings, an omniscient narrator counsels: "Not too hard on Sabbath, Reader" (230). There are echoes of Baudelaire here—"*tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre delicat, /—Hypocrite Lecteur, —mon semblable, —/ mon frere!*" (Baudelaire 39-40). Just as Sabbath beguiled and seduced

spectators into complicity on the sidewalk, Roth draws his reader into colluding with Sabbath by simultaneously eliciting aversion and delectation.

It is not only the prurience of Sabbath's puppet shows that affronts and delights, but also their barbaric content. One of his shows concludes, in a gruesome parody of the castration complex, with a finger, pronounced guilty of obscenity, being fed into a meat grinder. It is the inhuman, inhumane and remorselessly cruel aspects of puppetry that appeal to Sabbath: "Nothing like it in the animal kingdom! All the way back to Petrushka, anything goes, the crazier and uglier the better" (244-45). An early performance, for which he came first in a competition when he was studying puppetry in Italy, showed a cannibal puppet: "Eating his enemies on the stage. Tearing them apart and talking about them all the while they were chewed and swallowed"(245). There is an allusion here to Artaud's "The Theatre of Cruelty (First Manifesto)", which advocates a theatre of gesture and mise-en-scène, in which the humanity of actors is suppressed, thereby making manifest modes of subjectivity otherwise inaccessible:

> The theatre will never find itself again—i.e. constitute a means of true illusion—except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior. (Artaud 92)

Even Artaud's barbarous spectacle, however, has a socially redeeming motive, a cathartic purge of the violence in the depths of the collective unconscious. Less purgative is Roth's novel, which keeps in suspension to the end the intoxication of unsynthesised attraction and aversion. Riven in two, aroused to antipathy and elation at once, the reader experiences the joys of self-rupture, comparable to what Barthes termed "the bliss of the text" (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* 30). The transgressive power of the novel lies in its capacity to produce "a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall" (21). This is mirrored in Sabbath's various descents into frenzied abasement in which he experiences episodes of euphoric self-division. The kinship with death is made explicit when he wanders the streets of New York, ranting in

mock-Joycean rhapsodies, the tone shifting back and forth between audacious posturing and elegiac lyricism, and Sabbath, "a caricature of himself and entirely himself", can no longer tell whether he is performing or not: "He was trapped in a process of self-division that was not at all merciful. A pale, pale analog to what must have happened to Morty when his plane was torn apart by flak" ((Roth *Sabbath's Theater* 198, 201).

Avoiding the temptation to redeem Sabbath, and, by extension, to mitigate the offensiveness of Roth's aesthetic, is the novel's implicit challenge. Elaine B. Safer writes that although the reader is asked to suspend aversion, the "redeeming feature of the novel is that everything in it is related to the intense suffering of a human being who is afraid of dying" (67). Such a redemption implies a reconstitution of the reader, a gathering of the self, and a justification for one's enjoyment, whereas what Roth's narrative experiments strive for is to avert justification, to free words "from their daily duty to justify and to conceal" (Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 447). Safer's reading preserves pleasure as a unity of selfhood and denies the bliss that is afforded by its collapse. It diminishes the violent erotics of Roth's novel, its annihilative force and its investment in death, and, crucially, it takes for granted that art should have a redemptive power, that the art experience should be, in some sense, corrective.

One of the most probing critiques of the redemptive view of art is Leo Bersani's *The Culture of Redemption* (1990). Bersani founds the art experience in infantile narcissism, which, following Freud, he associates with the pre-Oedipal stage of infancy, during which the sex and death drives have not yet separated from each other. He contends that the transition in early life from pure autoeroticism, before the ego is formed, to primary narcissism, in which the ego develops but has not yet begun to form Oedipal attachments, is re-enacted in the "pure excitement" of the artistic encounter (37). The artwork, according to Bersani, elicits the erotic without object, a "[s]ublimated energy" that is "inherently nonreferential," the force of which demolishes the self (37). This "unalloyed sexuality" brings about a narcissistic "turning away from others and a dying to the self," the pleasurable desire "to be shattered out of coherence" (37, 45). Bersani rejects what he sees as the Freudian repression of anality, and the crushing of narcissistic desire in the phallic or Oedipal phase. He writes that the "inadequately repressed and inadequately satisfied

desire to renew the ébranlement of the sexual thus repeats itself by turning against itself: self-shattering is turned into rageful aggressiveness, and the excited dismantling of identity is degraded into the longing for a merely biological death" (45). While Bersani's account is useful in drawing out the link between death and the erotic in Roth's art, it is necessary to note that for Roth the distinction between mortal extinction and death as the shattering of identity is not a difference between the psychic and the biological. Rather, it is a distinction between death as life's telos and the joyous expenditure of life force in the erotic encounter which makes manifest the dynamic of death-in-life inherent in creative experience. In *Sabbath's Theater*, the comic tyranny of Oedipal oppression, represented by the mother's scolding ghost "loosed" on Sabbath to take him to his death, is annihilated by the sheer force of Sabbath's narcissism and the alacrity with which he embraces his loss of equilibrium. Sabbath's affinity lies not with the quietus of death as closure, a death that recedes, always remaining oppressively out of reach, but death as self-shattering, which is immanent to experience. This is analogous to the manner in which the movement of narrative desire toward its deferred fulfilment is arrested by the sheer exuberance and rapturousness of Roth's prose, released from its semiotic function into intransitivity and rhapsody.

The differentiation of the joy of self-shattering from death as the cessation of life is a vital one. Sabbath is, by his own admission, "a pseudosuicide" (148). His resolve to take his own life is comically anaemic. He keeps finding new reasons to live: Drenka's grave, the underwear drawer of his friend Norman Cowan's daughter, the prospect of clearing out the joint bank account solely funded by his wife, naked photographs of Norman's wife, the possibility of sex with her, his dead brother's possessions. He wonders, "am I playing at this? Even at this? Always difficult to determine" (363). Sabbath does not want to end his life. Nor is he seriously fighting biological extinction, with which he is incapable of vying in any case. Rather, his feud is with the deadening repression of sexual freedom. What he wants is to experience the joy of self-rupture, the deathly experience afforded by the erotic encounter, which finds a corollary in the joy of Roth's text as affective performance in which language is freed from its merely semiotic function.

With his irreverence and his characteristic chutzpah, Roth has always courted critics, and David Foster Wallace famously tagged him, along with John Updike and

Norman Mailer, as one of the "Great Male Narcissists" of American post-war fiction. It is not an unfair appraisal considering Roth came to fame, and indeed infamy, for the onanistic excesses of *Portnoy's Complaint*, a veritable panegyric to autoeroticism. Wallace's critique came two years after the publication of *Sabbath's Theater* and certainly Mickey Sabbath is a character whose "domineering narcissism" and "self-exalted egoism" reach new heights, even for Roth (Roth *Sabbath's Theater* 91, 125). There is more than a touch of self-mocking irony in Roth's heading one of the more predictable cavils off at the pass by having Norman, a figure of almost caricaturish decency, indict Sabbath as the "discredited male polemic's last gasp. Even as the bloodiest of all centuries comes to an end, you're out working day and night to create an erotic scandal. You fucking relic, Mickey! […] The immensity of your isolation is horrifying" (347). But this is not mere self-caricature on Roth's part. His portrait of Mickey Sabbath as a figure obsessed with death, cruelty and narcissistic eroticism, far from disregarding the horrors of history, might be considered a most appropriate response to the barbarousness of the twentieth century and its demolition of humanist values, precisely because it exposes the very brittleness of those values. The lesson in reading that the novel bestows lies in its rhetorical artfulness, its transgressive power to peel away the façade of social respectability in the very form of narration, to evoke recognition and enjoyment in response to the depravity and cruelty it depicts, and to expose the duplicitous simultaneity of horror and enjoyment realised in the experience of *jouissance*. Mickey Sabbath may be monstrously narcissistic and politically irresponsible, but Roth's novel is political in the manner of Adorno's theory of art, in its autonomy and its opposition to society. Adorno argues: "Art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy" (Adorno 5). Read in these terms, Roth's making manifest the cultural fascination with death, cruelty and the obscene, thereby "giving license to what was already there", is a politically potent gesture (Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 214).

Norman's response to the horror of the irrational, and to life with its impending end in view is either suicide or deadening narcosis: "I was going to buy a gun and blow the top of my head off. Six weeks until the Prozac kicked in" (81). For Sabbath, up against meaninglessness and extinction, there is none of the puerility of horror, but the embrace of disorder: "For a pure sense of being tumultuously alive,

you can't beat the nasty side of existence" (247). The "Sabbathian response to a world where nothing keeps its promise and everything is perishable" is, at least, a response that, although equally impotent, acknowledges the fear, impotence and anguish head-on without the trivialising fantasy of reparation (Roth and Sandstrom). In the novel's closing paragraph, Sabbath refuses the flight from despair and the deliverance of redemption, just as the novel implicitly denies an elopement into a curative art: "And he couldn't do it. He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here" (451). It is not any eleventh-hour discovery of meaning or value or love that gives him a reason to live, but hatred and an anguished joy before the meaningless of existence: "*the perverse senselessness of just remaining, of not going*" (384).

In one of the novel's most euphoric scenes, which Roth selected to recite at his eightieth birthday celebrations, Sabbath searches methodically through the cemetery where his grandparents are buried for their grave. The headstones require "an immersion in them so complete that there would be nothing inside him but these names." He resolves "to drink in the dead, down to the dregs" (364). There follows an anaphoric catalogue of epitaphs, each beginning with the word "beloved", surging for an entire page toward Sabbath's arrival at his grandparents' grave. This is Roth at his most seductive and the elegiac passage that follows, in which Sabbath recalls his childhood, is an exquisitely rendered piece of dreamy nostalgia. However, the incantatory iteration of the term "beloved" echoes an earlier section in the narrative, and sets up a subtle tension that offsets the exalted tone. The suicide note left to Roseanna from her abusive father is addressed to "My beloved children" and the term beloved is repeated throughout the series of sinister letters that he sent in the years leading up to his suicide, which Sabbath had read in an attitude of prurient scorn (250). This internal echo between the episodes enriches the discordance between allure and repulsion that the novel elicits, mirroring the fusion of desire and aggression within the text, and augmenting its transgressive power.

The theatre of cruelty

Puppetry is an art of transgression that is peculiarly associated with death; puppets speak to us of death and of surviving death. Kenneth Gross notes that in many traditions puppets were believed to house the souls of the dead, and that the puppet, in performing its tricks and figuring a form of life impervious to death, can revive otherwise lost or inarticulable modes of subjectivity in the spectator: "If they echo our sense that our bodies are liable to become dead, intractable objects, such puppets also play out a fantasy of surviving so many outrageous forms of death, so much violence, dismemberment, and devouring; they remind us of how inanimate objects themselves may supply what is lost or dead in us" (Gross 35). Roth's narrative, like the inhuman puppet theatre, stirs the primitive pleasures of the unsocialised self: pure narcissism, gleeful cruelty and unabashed joy. Puppets remind us of childhood because of this access to a primitive self, the access to *jouissance* attainable before you "get what you get when you are older, which is something that mocks your opening yourself up to these simple things, something that is formless and overwhelming and that probably is dread" (Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 368). But Sabbath's puppets are not for children. They "did not say, 'I am innocent and good.' They said the opposite. 'I will play with you,' they said, 'however I like'" (96). As in Artaud's theatre of cruelty, the brutal materialism of the puppet theatre, centred on manipulations of the body and material objects, taps into the primitive pre-socialised self, "bloody and inhuman", and beguiles by eluding the superego (Artaud 92). These are the qualities of the puppet theatre extolled by Heinrich von Kleist and Edward Gordon Craig, whereby the human actor is replaced by the puppet, possessor of an uncanny form of life, poised between animation and inertia, between the human and the inhuman, the living and the dead. For Gordon Craig the aim of art was "to catch some far-off glimpse of that spirit which we call Death". To envision art as an imitation of life was, for Craig, as it is for Roth, to participate in "the conspiracy against vitality" (Gordon Craig 36).

The puppeteer John Bell remarks that while actors' theatre can talk *about* death and show human actors pretending to die, puppetry and the theatre of performing objects engages with mortality by playing with dead matter, encapsulating the path of our own lives from inanimate matter to brief animation and back again: "the lifeless object speaks profoundly when manipulated by its

performer. And the profundity of the object, because it is part of the dead world, reaches different, deeper levels of signification than actors can" (Bell 17). Similarly, Sabbath finds the puppet's intractable monism preferable to the duplicity of human actors: "This 'also' in actors drove him eventually back to puppets, who had never to pretend, who never acted. […] There was nothing false or artificial about puppets, nor were they 'metaphors' for human beings" (Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 21). Puppet shows, more than any human performances, sanction the release of primitive, violent energies and open onto an inhuman world, an immoral world, free of the need for everything to make sense. The performance of the puppeteer is not imitation but metamorphosis, conferring the freedom of the unreflective object. The intransitivity of Sabbath's puppets corresponds to the autonomy of Roth's art, its affective power, which exceeds the signifying properties of a merely imitative art.

On one of his cemetery excursions, Sabbath, irked at the glut of significance that a fall of rain lends to his plight, surmises: "More meaning than was necessary was in the nature of things" (353). The idiom preserves a salient point with regard to the centrality of things in the novel, and their resistance to allegorical or symbolic meaning: the almost sacred box of Morty's things, the incriminating sex tape that cost Sabbath his job and the box of similar items stored in shoeboxes, Drenka's intimate diary left behind for her husband to read, Debby Cowan's underwear, hidden envelopes in Michelle Cowan's private drawers, the folder of letters from Roseanna's father. Intimate life is solidified and histories revealed in these inanimate records, and they are important agents of change in the novel. They are endowed with almost magical qualities, and they serve as repositories of forbidden intimacies or conduits between the worlds of the living and the dead. Puncturing the narrative with chinks of revelation, such items, in their dumb thingliness, speak of a hidden world beneath the social performances of selfhood, of secret selves, impervious to deception and palliation:

> It takes more courage than one might imagine to destroy the secret diaries, the letters, and the Polaroids, the videotapes and audiotapes, the locks of pubic hair, the unlaundered items of intimate apparel, to obliterate forever the reliclike force of these things that, almost alone of our possessions, decisively answer the question 'Can it really be that I am like this?' A record of the self

> at Mardi Gras, or of the self in its true and untrammeled existence? Either way, these dangerous treasures—hidden from those near and dear beneath the lingerie, in the darkest reaches of the file cabinet, under lock and key at the local bank—constitute a record of that with which one cannot part. (447)

The underwear drawers of Norman's daughter Debby have a profoundly vivifying effect on Sabbath. Their contents, like Gatsby's shirts, are kaleidoscopic tokens of abundance and excess: "Her *things* […] Brimming! A treasure trove!" (154). There follows one of Roth's signature ebullient litanies as Sabbath undergoes a benediction of sorts amidst the silks, satins and straps. These are fetish objects, possessed of a power of amplification and excess that elevates them from a simple representative function. Peter Pels writes of the fetish: "It is too powerful a presence to be a mere re-presentation of something else" (Pels 113). Subversive and secretive, because socially prohibited, the fetish harbours the darker motives of the human psyche, and marks the limit of the subject's control over the nature of things and their potential meanings. Waking to find the room strewn with Debby's intimate possessions, Sabbath deduces an unremembered midnight spree, a psychic gap. Although he is "[d]eep into self-caricature" (164), the ironic buffoonery does not belie the ungovernability of his mental processes under the spell of the underwear: "I am more of a menace than I realise. This is serious. Premature senility. Senilitia, dementia, hell-bent-for-disaster erotomania" (156). The hyperbole is farcical but it nevertheless augments the tenacious hold that Roth's language maintains on the phenomenal and fleshy world. Things retain a tangible heft, anchoring his language in physical reality. Unlike Gatsby's shirts, Debby's lingerie does not lend itself to a symbolic reading. In its excessive effect on Sabbath's base nature, it can only be, despite its affective magnification, what it is.

It is the abutment of words to things rather than any fugitive linguistic doubleness that is celebrated here. Language is reinvigorated as simple nomenclature: "The word's rejuvenation" (156). Sabbath, "linguistically large", takes great pleasure in language and is rhetorically skilled, but it is the potent capacity of simple nouns to prise open the secrets of things that gives him the greatest enjoyment: "Her bed. Two simple words, each a syllable as old as English, and their power over Sabbath was nothing short of tyrannical" (331, 157). There is a

correspondence between the word and the object here that exceeds the conventions of the sign; the utterance is infused with a singular erotic significance that elevates it from the purely semiotic. It is this libidinal force that, for Barthes, differentiates the text of bliss, which "imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts", from the text of pleasure, which merely satisfies: "The *brio* of the text […] is its *will to bliss:* just where it exceeds demand, transcends prattle, and whereby it attempts to overflow, to break through the constraint of adjectives—which are those doors of language through which the ideological and the imaginary come flowing in" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 13-14). The jubilant invocations of nouns throughout *Sabbath's Theater* repel abstraction and ideology, evoking, instead, enjoyment as *jouissance*, erotically charged, excessive, and engulfing. Bliss should be differentiated here from desire, which is aligned with the ever-receding object and figured in the word's distance from an elusive reality. The language of desire is that of the unrequited word, the word in pursuit of an obscured referent, but *jouissance* depends on the candour of the word, undeferred and undeflected.

The pure pleasure of Roth's language is in revelation and revelry. It finds perfect pitch in Mickey Sabbath's audacious linguistic performances, as Michelle Cowan describes them: "Primal emotions and indecent language and orderly complex sentences" (332). In his attempt to seduce Michelle, it is this dynamic of primitive, violent energies and syntactical order that builds erotic tension. What Sabbath wants is to break rules, smash through convention and exceed limitations, and so boundaries and limits are crucial to him. "As much as he wants to be the Marquis de Sade, Mickey Sabbath is not," Michelle challenges him (332). Sabbath thrives on confrontation, and what he is confronting, what he refuses to turn away from, is death. Mortal awareness is at the core of his appetency. When Michelle fends off his advances with delaying tactics, the pace of the retorts is quickened by an undercurrent of comic urgency: "Today's Tuesday. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday—no, no. Absolutely not. I'm sixty-four years old. Saturday's too late. […] There isn't forever to fuck around" (334-35). His excited anticipation reaches a crescendo in a rapturous pastiche of Joyce's Molly Bloom:

> The substantiality of this woman. The compound she was. The wit, the gameness, the shrewdness, the fatty tissue, the odd indulgence in high-flown

> words […] the poise that is the purest expression of her sexual freedom. And the conspiratorial understanding with which she spoke, her terror of the clock running down… Must everything be behind her? No! No! The ruthless lyricism of Michelle's soliloquy: and no I said no I will No. (335)

"Compound" constitutes a centre of gravity here, a robust weight that moors the language to the substance of the body and its temporal processes. Sabbath's thoughts do not traverse time or space or abscond on metonymic riffs, but stay rapt to the "fatty tissue". Even more carnal and fleshy than Joyce's, Roth's prose abjures the ambiguity of figurative language. Sabbath prefers his pleasures in the ignoble present and so declines the transcendent potentialities of Molly's orgasmic affirmation. Nothing like the pressing matter of death to force the moment to its crisis, and "No!", to Sabbath's mind, carries more defiance and more erotic frisson than mere acquiescence, and more again for the ambiguity of the declension: no to sex or no to death and does no mean no? All this bolsters the force of opposition in Sabbath as he turns his mind to both. If she refuses him on Saturday, he will end it all with one of her dental instruments, although there is much posturing here and little serious resolve: "Let the adventure occur, O Lord Dionysus, Noble Bull, Mighty Maker of the Sperm of All Male Creatures" (337). Death is not so much a serious proposition for Sabbath than a powerful aphrodisiac; it is not the telos of life extinguished that he proposes but the vital expenditure of life in the erotic encounter.

The narrative mode of free indirect style, in circumventing the social filter, is inherently liberating, intended to reveal and, in revealing, to revel in the release of words "from their daily duty to justify and to conceal", to celebrate the sheer joy of language uttered for itself and the affective potency accumulated in rhapsodic momentum (447). Invoking the physical things of his childhood home arouses not mere nostalgia but bliss in Sabbath, plotting an arc from rootedness to exaltation: "The house. The porch. The screens. The icebox. The tub. The linoleum. The broom. The pantry. […] They had January, February, March, April, May […] And then again January, no end to the stockpile of Januaries, of Mays, of Marches, August, December, April—name a month and they had it in spades. They'd had endlessness" (30-31). The iteration of things tethers Sabbath to the physical world of his childhood, to the life of the world, but its sheer proliferation, its bounteousness,

conveys states of intense emotional disturbance that threaten to unmoor him. Crucially, it is not the metonymic connections of words that are the cause of his disturbance but the direct force of nouns to conjure his childhood world. The months are grounded at first by the ballast of substantial things, dissolving, then, into repetition and incantation as the litany draws to a close. The shift from the simple passing of successive months to disorder and on to the past perfect acting on endlessness effects a temporal anomaly and a subsidence of meaning. The innocent endlessness of childhood, as durable as the solid topography of home, subsides into aporia and paradox. With Morty dead and his childhood terminated, death enters the fray, and the bright hope of endlessness is turned into the timelessness of a void.

One way of understanding the potency possessed by things in the novel is to read them as preserving memory, crystallising time, and defeating death, what Bersani, in referring to Proust, calls a "mortuary aesthetic" (7). But this is to elevate them out of immanent presence and into the order of the symbolic, to attribute to them a utopian victory over death that is incompatible with the novel's unrelenting engagement with mortality. James M. Mellard argues that the box of Morty's things indicates a resolution of Sabbath's Oedipus complex because it becomes a symbol of loss that marks his successful integration into the symbolic (122). But the Oedipus complex is satirised throughout the novel, and things have a blunt materiality and an erotic power that cannot be reduced to symbolic value. Contrary to Proust's ephemeral madeleines and lime blossoms, they do not make death vanish, but bring it into sharper, more unrelenting focus. Morty's things have an explosive and brutal impact on Sabbath. Affirming that loss is irrecoverable and total, they strip away the bulwark of his defences, exposing rather than suppressing the annihilative fact of death. It is not life that is preserved in these memento mori but loss, both of the other and of the self:

> There was nothing before in Sabbath's life like this carton, nothing approached it […]. The pure, monstrous purity of the suffering was new to him, made any and all suffering he'd known previously seem like an imitation of suffering. This was the passionate, the violent stuff, the worst, invented to torment one species alone, the remembering animal […]. Just

things. Just these few things, and for him they were the hurricane of the century. (403)

Margaret Gibson associates the possessions of dead loved ones, what she terms "melancholy objects", with Donald Winnicott's concept of the transitional object, that is, the object of play that gives comfort as an infant begins to gain awareness of the self as separate from the mother. Vitally, the transitional object is not a maternal replacement, but consoles the child who, in a state of privation, is able to control and manipulate the object: "It is not the object, of course, that is transitional. The object represents the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate" (Winnicott 14-15). In Gibson's account, melancholy objects aid the grieving process not because of their metonymic connections to the dead, but because "they mediate nothingness" (Gibson 288). They do not stand for or replace the dead, but remain unalloyed, adrift. Like the infant's toy, subject to manipulation, loved and mutilated, and like the puppet briefly endowed with life, melancholy objects exist in order to lose their meaning. Their trajectory is to stand for nothing until such time as they are jettisoned or destroyed like the abandoned or mutilated puppet. Similarly, Morty's things, like melancholy or transitional objects, uncanny puppets, or fetish items, do not signify in the way that textual things commonly do in order to accrue meaning. Rather, they reveal Morty's irremediable absence and the meaninglessness of that absence. Not only do they not replace Morty, they don't even bring *him* immediately to mind, but Drenka: "Drenka. *Her* death" (415). Uniting the first and the latest death, they betoken death itself, and initiate Sabbath's final frenzied descent into despair. Writing on the possessions of dead loved ones, Hallam and Hockey assert: "Notions such as containment – articulated in metaphors of boxes or storerooms – testify to the sense of memory as otherwise fleeting and ephemeral" (60). However, containment does not merely function mnemonically, but also harnesses and keeps secret that which is unsanctioned or obscene. It is death, the "monstrous purity" of absence, obscene and unacceptable, that Morty's things stand for, in their steadfast solidity and their resistance to symbolic meaning (Roth *Sabbath's Theater* 403).

Sabbath's graveside lamentation reaches a climax with the bald proclamation "Here I am" (370), and from this point of raw presence on he undergoes a metamorphosis that sees him begin to resemble one of his puppets. The family grave becomes a puppet stage as he turns to go and turns to stay, unable to control the mechanical back-and-forth: "He could not go and he could not go and he could not go, and then—like any dumb creature who abruptly stops doing one thing and starts doing another and about whom you can never tell if its life is all freedom or no freedom—he could go and he went" (371). Throughout the remainder of the novel, as his despair deepens, his descent into thingliness intensifies. In the book's penultimate sequence, he is wrapped, like a crudely fashioned puppet, in Morty's burial flag with Morty's God Bless America yarmulke on his head. Cast out, he stands at the window of his home watching his wife and her young female lover, with whom he and Drenka had briefly conducted a ménage à trois, play at being gorillas. Their game shifts to lovemaking and the "sublime stink of spoilage" fills the air, what "anger, impulse, appetite, antagonism, ego" would smell like if it smelled (440). Their language becomes an inhuman cacophony, "a language consisting entirely of gasps and moans and exhalations and shrieks, a musical miscellany of explosive shrieks. […] never before had Sabbath heard in any language anything like the speech pouring out of Rosie and Christa" (441). This is a travesty of the song of the sirens signalling the threat of death, irrationality, aphasia, and madness. Sabbath, unhoused, enraged, and impotent, erupts into animalistic howls, and the puppet stage is invoked again in his manic dashes to and fro, the window framing his frenzied performance:

> The hoots, the barks, the roars—ferocious, deafening—and all the while jumping up and down and pounding his chest and tearing out by the roots the plants growing at the foot of the window, and then dashing to and fro, and at last hammering his crippled fists on the window until the frame gave way and went crashing into the room, where Rosie and Christa were screaming hysterically. (441)

The novel's relation to death is established in these scenes when the symbolic order is disrupted, and it reaches a climax when the free libidinal force of Sabbath's

death instinct is unleashed in the last act of his "Indecent Theater" (435). He is back at Drenka's grave, in complete darkness, still clad in the American flag and yarmulke, stumbling and with his arms out, like the crude manoeuvres of a puppet. The permissiveness of the puppet show prevails in this scene, and Sabbath, acting on pure instinct and out of crazed grief, performs his final abject act and pisses on Drenka's grave:

> And then the stream began… a trickle at first, […] then a spurt followed that, and a second spurt, and then a flow, and then a gush, and then a surge, and then Sabbath was peeing with a power that surprised even him, the way strangers to grief can be astounded by the unstoppable copiousness of their river of tears. He could not remember when he had peed like this last. Maybe fifty years ago. To drill a hole in her grave! To drive through the coffin's lid to Drenka's mouth! But he might as well try, by peeing, to activate a turbine—he could never again reach her in any way. "I did it!" she cried, "I did it!" And never had he adored anyone more.
>
> He did not stop, however. He couldn't. He was to urine what a wet nurse is to milk. Drenchèd Drenka, bubbling spring, mother of moisture and overflow, surging, streaming Drenka, drinker of the juices of the human vine—sweetheart, rise up before you turn to dust, come back and be revived, oozing all your secretions!
>
> But even by watering all spring and summer the plot that all her men had seeded, he could not bring her back, either Drenka or anyone else. (444-45)

The language flows here in the trajectory of Sabbath's urinal stream, down into the earth and not along an airy, transcendent chain of symbolic association. A parallel might be drawn with the "bad" therapeutic session, where analysis is potentially interminable. Deleuze and Guattari cite the psychoanalyst André Green: "the language is unfettered, rapid, almost torrential… everything enters", all "without consequence". The outpouring is resistant to analysis, indecipherable in symbolic terms because it isn't a sign *for* anything: "The unconscious does not cause anything to 'stick'" (Green, qtd. in Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 66). In their critique of

capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari oppose the Oedipal schema which relegates social and sexual relations to the symbolic order with the model of the schizophrenic and the free flow of libidinal energy: "flows ooze, they traverse the [Oedipal] triangle, breaking apart its vertices. The Oedipal wad does not absorb these flows" (*Anti-Oedipus* 67). Roth's radically immanent aesthetic similarly eschews abstract or schematic evaluations of human relations and the order of the sign more generally. Sabbath's liquidity breaches generic paradigms just as Roth's language exceeds signification. The potent vitality of Sabbath's character, his willingness to defy stagnancy and risk dissolution, finds apposite expression in the blissful and violent excesses of the prose.

In a parody of the classic puppet theatre, with his phallus in hand like Punch with his baton, he is interrupted by a policeman, Drenka's son Matthew. "What *are* you?" he asks Sabbath, who has, in Matthew's view, transgressed beyond all that is human (445). Sabbath, "fixed in the spotlight", has passed into the licentious theatrical realm of the puppet theatre, "star of the cemetery, vaudevillian to the ghosts, front-line entertainer to the troops of the dead" (447). Clutching his baton to the last, the absurd battle of Eros and Thanatos is comically enacted, but Sabbath, indefatigable, like the ruthless Punch, doesn't conquer death so much as enter into a realm of death-in-life: "I'm a ghoul! I'm a ghoul!" (451). Irredeemable, no longer recognisably human, or perhaps all too human, he exemplifies the way in which Roth's art taps into primitive and pre-moral levels of perception that lie beneath the rational and social self.

Before becoming a puppeteer, Sabbath had been a sailor and a voracious whoremonger on the "'Romance Run': Santos, Monte, Rio, and B.A. […] Whores, brothels, every kind of sex known to man" (99). Later, he was driven to Drenka because "ever since he'd been seventeen he couldn't resist an enticing whore" (98). The essential exchangeability of puppets and prostitutes make them cognates in Sabbath's pitiless games of manipulative play, an affinity made explicit in the coarse delight with which he describes his puppetry: "shoving your hand up a puppet and hiding your face behind a screen!" (244). Replaceability is the fundamental quality of all intimate relations for Sabbath. Delighting in the abundance of Debby Cowan's underwear, he thinks, "Drenka is dead but Deborah lives and, round the clock at the sex factory, the furnaces are burning away" (156). When the prospect of sex with her

mother seems a possibility, he is heartened at the thought: "A new collaborator to replace the old one. The vanishing collaborator, indispensable to Sabbath's life" (336). Drenka, equally indiscriminate in her affairs, makes the perfect partner, Judy to his Punch. She is a version of what Leslie Fiedler identifies as "the Dark anti-virgin" of Hemingway and Faulkner, whose promiscuity facilitates "a kind of homosexuality once-removed, the appeal of the whorehouse" (Fiedler 318). Sabbath's delectation in hearing of Drenka's exploits with other men, an obsession that culminates in the cemetery when he licks the semen of one of her lovers from his fingers, alludes to a similar homoeroticism. But Sabbath does not quite fit the role of the repressed homosexual, even though he admits he "missed his chance with a man" and considers asking Michelle—"she'll tell you. The only other people who fuck men are women" (331). He takes so much delight in breaking taboos that it does not make sense for him to repress any erotic inclination at all. What Sabbath finds most attractive about Drenka is that "she thought like a man", but this has less to do with an attraction to men than a desire for sexual freedom and an appetite for transgression because "the man she thought like was Sabbath" (9). The pleasure that both of them derive from their "countermarriage" is the opportunity to "attack their feelings of captivity" (27), to indulge in liberated, unalloyed erotic pleasure of the kind that Bersani associates with the primary narcissistic pleasures of art and the free, uncommitted sexual encounter.

The novel opens with Drenka's ultimatum, six months before she dies: "Either forswear fucking others or the affair is over" (3). What so distresses Sabbath is not her demand for his fidelity, since he has for many years been unable to interest other women, but the fact that she was "his last link with another world, she and her great taste for the impermissible" (27). It is *her* promiscuity, not his own, that he values most of all, her freedom which foreshadows her death. During one of their encounters, Drenka, having "run roughshod over her own record and come thirteen times" (168), begs an exhausted Sabbath for more, and when he cannot oblige, carries on alone while Sabbath watches:

> This was like nothing he had ever seen before. He thought, It's as though she is wrestling with Destiny, or God, or Death; it's as though, if only she can break through to yet one more, nothing and no one will stop her again. She

> looked to be in some transitional state between woman and goddess—he had a queer feeling of watching someone leaving this world. She was about to ascend, to ascend and ascend, trembling eternally in the ultimate delirious thrill, but instead something stopped her and a year later she died. (168)

This is exemplary of the alliance of death and the erotic that Bersani terms narcissistic not because it is egoistic, but because it belongs to a primitive phase of development prior to the symbolic enactment of Oedipal relations. It is a desire that is not founded in lack but in the pursuit of *jouissance*: "a turning away from others and a dying to the self" (Bersani 45).

Frank Kelleter argues that Sabbath and Drenka's mutual narcissism offers "the promise of sameness over time", and the assurance of a "death-defying home" in the face of "[t]hanological despair" (Kelleter 278, 279). However, Kelleter's description of safety and asylum sounds a lot like a conventional marriage, the escape from which is the driving force behind the affair. This conservative understanding of narcissism as self-enclosure and asylum vitiates the transgressive charge of Roth's aesthetics as well as the erotic intensity of Sabbath and Drenka's relationship. Narcissism is a positive, creative force in the novel precisely because of its opposition to sanctuary, the stasis of Oedipal relations and the arena of the symbolic. Rather than providing a death-defying home, narcissism, understood as the masochistic desire to be shattered out of existence, brings the subject face-to-face with the horizon of death. There is an extratextual moralism at work in a censorious evaluation of Sabbath's narcissistic character, when, reading the novel on its own terms, it is the purity of his narcissism, unimpaired by pretensions to altruism, morality, or social respectability that lends him potency, his willingness to risk social death for the sake of the deathly pleasures of self-annihilation.

Following Bersani, Lee Edelman, in his seminal work on queer theory *No Future* (2004), explores the narcissistic drive as the basis for erotic life. The narcissism associated with homosexual desire, the desire for the same, is, according to Edelman, a pure form of narcissism, which is opposed to a covert narcissism that masquerades as altruism, family values and investment in the future. For Roth, as for Bersani and Edelman, the erotic is not a striving for wholeness, for the redemptive scene whereby the Oedipal union of parent and child is mimetically restored in

marriage, and death overcome in the regenerative project of reproduction and the illusion of a degraded immortality. The erotic is a potent rupturing of the dream of lost wholeness. It is death breaking into the order of life. The inherent cohesion of the Brooks model of the death drive that marches narrative ploddingly on is shattered by the death drive that decimates the will and the ego and drives the subject into oblivion.

Fiedler found the American novel to be essentially gothic in character, preoccupied with death and incapable of portraying adult sexual passion between a man and a woman. For all the sex in Roth's fiction, it does, for the most part, continue the trend, at least in the sense that Fiedler intends, which is mature, monogamous, marital sex. "It is maturity above all things that the American writer fears," writes Fiedler, "and marriage seems to him its essential sign" (338). Ross Posnock asserts that, far from being the sign of a deficiency, immaturity is "an embryo of vitality both within [Roth's] fiction and without" (87), and Mickey Sabbath is a veritable paragon of immaturity. He unapologetically remarks: "you can only be young once, but you can be immature forever" (Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 286). Conventional, mature married life is anathema to Sabbath, and a target for much of his vitriol. It is surely not insignificant that, while writing *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth was embroiled in a messy divorce from his second wife Claire Bloom; as for his first marriage, Claudia Roth Pierpont describes it as "the most painfully destructive and lastingly influential literary marriage since Scott and Zelda" (37). Liberation from marriage has, in both cases, proved an extraordinary creative stimulant for Roth.

One of the most buoyant passages in *Sabbath's Theater* begins: "What did Roseanna hate most about Sabbath? What did Sabbath hate most about her?" (84). There follows an anaphoric litany of mutual marital hatred, piquant and poetically inimical. The marriage was only tolerable to Sabbath because of his "countermarriage" to Drenka, who also almost perished from the deadening routine of *her* marriage, until she met Sabbath (27). "Marriage is not an ecstatic union," contends Sabbath and, with mock concern for his old friend Norman, he resolves to disabuse Michelle Cowan of the "great narcissistic allure of rapture," which she would, in his view, only attain if she succumbed to his own advances (350). The trappings of married life, most notably monogamy and children, do not appeal to

Sabbath. He aspires, as Fiedler noted of Hemingway, to be "not Father but 'Papa,' the Old Man of the girl-child with whom he is temporarily sleeping" (Fiedler 317). The battle against decay is repeatedly enacted in Roth's fiction through the seduction of young women by an aging male protagonist. It is the entire plot of *The Humbling* (2009) and David Kepesh, protagonist of *The Breast* (1972), *The Professor of Desire* (1977), and *The Dying Animal*, is an archetypal lothario. Sabbath is not so discerning as to limit himself to younger women, but there are many such encounters in the novel. In one of the book's more appalling episodes, Sabbath is pondering whether to strangle the tearful Kathy Goolsbee, a student with whom he has been having an affair, or to have her perform oral sex on him. He recalls an old master puppeteer he met in Italy, who boasted that his mistress was fifteen years old but he had known her since she was twelve. "Maestro, what would *you* do?" wonders Sabbath. "To peer down at her head cradled in your lap, your cock encircled by her foaming lips, and to watch her blowing you in tears", before launching into a tirade about the "rectitudinous cunts who tell you children these terrible lies about men, about the sinister villainy of what is simply the ordinary grubbing about in reality of ordinary people like your dad and me" (236-37). This episode is a supreme example of Roth's discomfiting brutal comedy. It is not desire that is at issue but the force of the erotic, not any Oedipal identification that would generate meaning and stimulate narrative but a cruel eroticism, avaricious, ruthless, unmitigated by humane values, and bare of any overlay of moral justification or symbolic meaning.

The forward thrust of progress and futurity is anathema to Sabbath's immature lust for immediate gratification. He is not inclined to hope and aspiration but to the spontaneous, the material present rather than the ethereal future. Desire, which seeks to satisfy an ever-receding lack, is not his métier; he acts out of savage compulsion and seizes enjoyment in the living present. When he is at the window listening to Roseanna and Christa making love, the only object he can see in the room is the green glow of a digital clock, an obvious allusion to the green light in which Fitzgerald's Gatsby believed, the beacon summoning the "orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" (Fitzgerald 171). It is not the future that Sabbath's green light signals, but "the violent misery of everything lost" (Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 440). But this is also an anguished joy, the joy of freedom from the marriage and from the past. Sabbath savours the delirious pleasure of self-loss when he throws

himself into his performance: "Beating a tattoo on his chest he enjoyed the most. All these years he'd had the chest for it, and all these years he had let it go to waste" (441). Futurity, that illusory dream of progress and coherence, collapses in the queer erotics of the scene, permeated by the effluvium of decay that Sabbath takes to be the stench of lesbian sex emanating from the bedroom (441). Language subsides into undifferentiated sound, and meaning—the word's thirsting for consummation—is obliterated. Sabbath, relentlessly corporeal, is a realist, a spontaneous creature of the earth. It is not the dream of the future that he embodies, but the recurring nightmare that prevails in the dark heart of the American psyche: untrammelled freedom as death. For Drenka, dancing with him was dancing with America: "You *are* America. Yes, you are, my wicked boy" (419). A crude puppet travesty of Uncle Sam, Sabbath cuts through the fantasy of the wholesome American dream and its ethos of futurity.

Into the chaos

For some right-leaning critics convinced that Roth was pouring contempt on civilised society, *American Pastoral* was an apparent reprieve from the moral insurgency that had characterised his previous work, and which reached an apogee in *Sabbath's Theater*. The elegiac tone of *American Pastoral*, its pervasive nostalgia for a vanishing America, and its unfavourable portrayal of sixties radicalism led several critics to interpret it as a recantation of, and even a gesture of atonement for, Roth's anti-establishment rebelliousness.[8] The novel's protagonist Seymour Levov—the Swede—is the antithesis of Mickey Sabbath. A classic success story from the great American melting pot, the Swede progresses from high school sports stardom, to overcome anti-Semitism in the Marine Corps, before marrying an Irish-American beauty queen, taking over the successful family glove-making business and leaving the Jewish enclaves of Newark for a pastoral idyll in Old Rimrock, a settlement

[8] The neo-conservative pundit, Norman Podhoretz's response to *American Pastoral* was one of the more extreme examples of a revisionist view of Roth's political leanings. Podhoretz perceived a "born-again Philip Roth whose entire outlook on the world had been inverted". In the academic criticism, Elaine B. Safer calls the novel "a Rothian elegy for the lost American Dream" (80), and Mark Shechner suggests that Roth challenges and re-evaluates his own radicalism through Merry Levov, arguing that the five novels he published between 1995 and 2001 are "'Roth Problem Novels,' telling us more about the man than they do about the nation" (142).

dating back almost to the first generation of settlers. A latter-day pioneer into Waspish America, he "frees himself of the pre-American insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals" (85). What is outstanding about the Swede is his extraordinary normality. He is endowed, in the hearts of his devotees, with a "monumental ordinariness" that makes him an aspirational paradigm for the Jewish immigrant milieu of Weequahiq, New Jersey (81). Whereas Mickey Sabbath lives on the outer margins of society, the Swede is set dead centre as the epitome of Middle America, an incarnation of the American Dream.

The novel is ostensibly a tragedy and the peripeteia occurs in 1968, when Merry, the Swede's teenage daughter and a strident protestor against the Vietnam War, bombs the Rimrock post-office and general store, killing a local doctor, and blowing asunder the seemingly ideal lives of the Levovs. However, taking at face value Roth's apparent volte-face in casting the Swede's tragic fall as an elegy for the American Dream gives rise to certain inexorable obstacles. Apart from the ninety-page prologue narrated in the first person by the writer Nathan Zuckerman, the rest of the novel is a *mise en abyme*. Everything is filtered through the consciousness of Zuckerman, who, as Roth makes clear in *The Facts*, is no mere stand-in for the author but a vehicle for his self-confrontation, and the greater part of the novel, comprising the Swede's story, is almost entirely Zuckerman's invention. Although he seems, for the most part, in sympathy with his childhood hero, it is reductive to presume the narrating consciousness transparently represents the political thrust of the novel.

Moreover, Zuckerman's affinities are not so simple. His idolatrous portrait is problematised within the book's first few pages with the observation that "the love thrust upon the Swede seemed actually to deprive him of feeling […] there appeared to be not a drop of wit or irony to interfere with his golden gift for responsibility" (5). The faint disparagement manifested here turns into a full-blown mix of cynicism and disappointment when, following a chance meeting at a baseball game, Zuckerman agrees to have dinner with the Swede to advise him on publishing a tribute to his late father Lou Levov. At their meeting, the Swede barely mentions his father, instead dwelling ad nauseam on the sporting and academic achievements of his three teenage sons. Zuckerman, finding the conversation almost unbearable, is

struck by the Swede's blandness, his "pointed objectionableness", to the point that he begins to suspect him of being deranged (23). The "monumental ordinariness" so attractive in the youth, indicates in the older man a dull and compromising nature that has turned him into "a human platitude" (81, 23).

Furthermore, the gusto with which Zuckerman goes about embracing his hero in his destruction suggests that behind the narrative lurks a more familiar Roth, who delights in chipping away at wholesome, picket-fence America. However, Roth implicitly cautions against a straightforward reading along these lines by having Zuckerman, after the tedious dinner, admit to a degree of "professional impatience" in "trying to imbue Swede Levov with something like the tendentious meaning Tolstoy assigned to Ivan Ilych, so belittled by the author in the uncharitable story in which he sets out to heartlessly expose, in clinical terms, what it is to be ordinary" (30-31). The inimical portrayal of the academic Marcia Umanoff in the novel's final section as "a militant nonconformist of staggering self-certainty much given to sarcasm and calculatedly apocalyptic pronouncements designed to bring discomfort to the lords of the earth" further thwarts an uncritical reading of the novel as a gleeful demolition of an ordinary decent man (339). "[W]e're not great outlaws like William Burroughs and the Marquis de Sade and the holy saint Jean Genet. The Let Every Man Do Whatever He Wishes School of Literature. The brilliant school of Civilization is Oppression and Morality is Worse," says William Orcutt, berating Marcia, "the professor of transgression" (365). The episode exemplifies Roth's use of polyphony to subvert reductive readings of the novel, especially since Orcutt is having an affair with the Swede's wife and thus, to the Swede's mind, "had transgressed to the utmost by violating the unity of a family already half destroyed" (366). The antagonistic dialogism that characterises Roth's counter-aesthetic is deployed within the frame of *American Pastoral* to undermine not only extremist ideologies—of both the left and right varieties—but all values that are not fluid and contingent.

The prologue culminates with Nathan Zuckerman's forty-fifth high school reunion at which he meets his old classmate Jerry Levov, brother of the Swede and a triumph of Rothian bellicosity. It is through Jerry that Zuckerman learns of the Swede's recent death and of the troubles that blighted his apparently perfect life. Jerry surmises of his brother's misfortunes, in a raging jeremiad worthy of Mickey

Sabbath, that the Swede was "a sweetheart whose fate it was to get himself fucked over by some real crazies" (65), that he "was built for bearing burdens and taking shit" (70), all because he was "[f]atally attracted to responsibility" (72). Apart from a little research into the lives of the Levovs, Jerry's invective is all that Zuckerman has to base his narrative on, and it is the only first-person account of the events. However, unlike Jerry, Zuckerman does not attribute the Swede's misfortunes to fate, but casts his story onto the more complex canvas of history, beginning with their shared origins. The flood of sentimentality that engulfs Zuckerman at the reunion prompts him to write a speech after the event celebrating the American optimism of the forties, when "the clock of history [was] reset" and the "whole community [was] perpetually imploring [the children] not to be immoderate […] to grasp opportunity" (41). A quixotic piece of high-flown rhetoric and a paean to the American Dream, it is pure catharsis, written in an "overstimulated state", as Zuckerman was "groping to understand what had hit" him (44). The seductions of the piece and the general bathos of the reunion narrative build to a crescendo to the tune of Johnny Mercer's "Dream", in an overture that creates a nostalgic backdrop before Zuckerman exits in an emotionally complex dramatic address:

> I lifted on to my stage the boy we were all going to follow into America. […] To the honeysweet strains of "Dream," I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed … I dreamed a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man—and inexplicably, which is to say lo and behold, I found him in Deal, New Jersey, at the seaside cottage, the summer his daughter was eleven, back when she couldn't stay out of his lap or stop calling him by cute pet names […]. (89)

Imagining that the Swede must hold himself responsible for the cataclysmic turn his life had taken, Zuckerman gives him grounds to do so by inventing a transgression, an illicit kiss between father and daughter. What is notable is the ambiguity and nuance of Zuckerman's position in relation to the Swede. He moves from wistful, nostalgic adulation in his childhood reminiscences, through puzzlement and cynicism after their meeting in later life, to the sentimentality and lauding of the

very family values for which the Swede stands in the post-reunion speech, and concludes with the hint of mordant relish in "lo and behold" as he sets the Swede up for his great fall. It is unclear if Zuckerman is rejoicing at the thought of reducing a god to mortal ignominy, or if he sets out to recover his hero from inglorious blandness and restore him to heroism, whether the novel is an elegy for the American Dream or an attack on that threadbare shibboleth. As well as the muddle of conflicting stances in the prologue, the transition from Zuckerman's first-person narration into the seductive immersion of free indirect style shuts down the critical distance of the prologue altogether, collapsing any corrective or ironic space between the Swede, Zuckerman and Roth. Ross Posnock sees this as a deficiency, noting that "the novel, in sum, stakes all on its commitment to immanence, to being so inside the world it creates that it abolishes any transformative possibility" (Posnock 103). However, as I have argued, it is on the level of its literary autonomy, its "immanent movement against society" (*Aesthetic Theory* 227), to borrow Adorno's phrase, that *Sabbath's Theater* enacts its critique. This could equally apply to *American Pastoral* as a demolition of certain conservative ideologies. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the warnings that Roth issues via Tolstoy, Marcia and Jerry of this reading. Even from within a position of immersion the interpretive possibilities are undermined, or at the very least impaired. These shifting frames of reference sabotage interpretations based on the novel's social realism, the manifest opinions of its polemical content as well as its immanent shattering of the American Dream from within.

In addition to introducing layers of nuance into the narrative, the prologue lends the novel a reflexive quality. By placing the Swede's story within a framing story about the genesis of the fiction, Roth makes it, in part at least, about the process of writing novels. It is the Swede's death that gives Zuckerman license to tell his story, and *American Pastoral* is the first of four novels that take the form of Zuckerman bringing a dead subject to life through writing. The novel's prologue is suffused with death, but it is not entirely clear how the extended meditations on death in the prologue relate to the rest of the novel. The references to Proust, and, in particular, to the failure of a Proustian redemption from time and loss, indicate that this is no Penelope-work of deferring death. Unlike Marcel's madeleine, the rugelach, which Zuckerman savours at the reunion, does not afford him a respite

from mortal awareness: "perhaps I'd find vanishing from Nathan what, according to Proust, vanished from Marcel […] 'A mere taste,' Proust writes, and 'the word 'death…[has]…no meaning for him.' So greedily I ate, gluttonously […], in the end, having nothing like Marcel's luck" (47). It is rather the taste of death in the living present that elicits the emotional intensity of the afternoon, the force of which provokes him into his late-night speech-writing: "That the results are in for the class of January 1950—the unanswerable questions answered, the future revealed—is that not astonishing? To have lived—and in this country, and in our time, and as who we were. Astonishing" (44). The past perfect summons the sense of an ending and establishes the point of view firmly in the present. The past, for Zuckerman, is irredeemable but, crucially, not atemporal: "Instead of recapturing time past, I'd been captured by it in the present, so that passing seemingly out of the world of time I was, in fact, rocketing through to its secret core" (45). The switch here from the active voice to the passive undermines the mastery of the artistic imagination to reclaim the losses of history. Zuckerman subverts what Bersani calls Proust's mortuary aesthetic that seeks to recover experience from the ravages of time and embalm life into an art that redeems and perfects it.

In his discussion of death and literary authority, Bersani writes: "art in Proust is, at least ideally, *truth liberated from phenomena*" (13). In Proust's redemptive aesthetic, the phenomenal world is transformed into a mirror of the desiring subject. Desire is covetous, cathectic, and seeks to appropriate experience in the search for its own truth. The death of the other gives license for this appropriation by sanctioning the revival of the past in accordance with the desire of the artist. Death thus becomes "a metaphor for the artist's relation to the world" (14). But Bersani also finds, in certain passages of Proust, a different posthumous aesthetic: "*the possibility of pursuing not an art of truth divorced from experience, but of phenomena liberated from the obsession with truth*" (26). Desire, which seeks to invest objective phenomena with truth-value or symbolic meaning, gives way to "an erotic art independent of the anxieties inherent in desire. […] a mode of excitement that, far from investing objects with symbolic significance, would enhance their specificity and thereby fortify their resistance to the violence of symbolic intent" (28). In this model, death does not authorise the work of art by freeing phenomena from experience so that the artistic imagination might fashion them in accordance with its

own desire. Rather, "the death of the past is […] a liberation from the constraints of anxious desire" (27). Art is our real life, then, not because of its amenability to appropriation by the embalmer artist, but due to its belonging to a different order of phenomenal experience. The objects of art possess a certain autonomy by virtue of being liberated from a chain of desire that posits their meaning as always in relation to a subject. In this way, they are freed from having to have *meaning* or to represent *truths*.

Zuckerman alludes to a comparable abandonment of truth as an artistic objective in favour of the singularity of phenomenal perception. He claims that "getting people right is not what living is all about […] It's getting them wrong that is living" (35), but implies also that art is no corrective: "Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day?" (35). For Zuckerman, truth is elusive in both life and art: "Writing turns you into someone who is always wrong" (63). In the prologue, the "real" Swede is obscured to Zuckerman, his face an "insentient Viking mask" (3). He is "embraced as a symbol of hope" (5), and endowed with tutelary significance: "With the Swede indomitable on the playing field, the meaningless surface of life provided a bizarre, delusionary kind of sustenance, the happy release into a Swedian innocence, for those who lived in dread of never seeing their sons or their brothers or their husbands again" (4). Even his "unconscious oneness" with America leaves no room for subjectivity (20). He is a figure assembled out of other people's desires, his magnificent ordinariness not the great freedom of the modern frontier but a head-first march into the constraints of conformity. Zuckerman's "realistic chronicle" cannot *but* be more real than this conglomeration of masks (89). The "real" Swede is inaccessible, subsumed under the mask of an intractable allegiance to the values of paternalism and progress: "When it comes to illuminating someone with the Swede's opacity, to understanding those regular guys everybody likes and who go about more or less incognito, it's up for grabs, it seems to me, as to whose guess is more rigorous than whose" (77). What Zuckerman's narrative does is deliver the Swede from the symbolic meaning assigned to him in the prologue, as the object of so much deforming adulation, to the life of an "assailable man" (89).

Zuckerman has had two skirmishes with mortality and, having been left impotent after an operation for prostate cancer, the same disease that has killed the Swede, death is a prospect uppermost in his thoughts. His impotence posits him as an artist liberated from the distorting constraints of desire, which, craving fulfilment, neglects the erotic experience of felt life. Desire, unlike the erotic, is always a missed encounter with the world of phenomena, and it is with the phenomenal, not the ideal, that Roth's (and Zuckerman's) allegiance lies. Death is specifically linked, in Zuckerman's post-facto reunion speech, with the raw experience of the world in childhood: "the rich endlessness of detail surrounding you in your young life like the six feet of dirt that'll be packed on your grave when you're dead" (43). It is this faculty of being open to the phenomenal world that Zuckerman (and Roth) seeks in his art, "the unfiltered way meaning comes to children, just flowing off the surface of things" (43). The alignment of the pastoral with childhood is a common trope in Roth's fiction, but what has been taken as social realism and used to support neo-conservative readings of *American Pastoral* is more interesting when considered in terms of the book's reflexivity. The exaltation of childhood in *American Pastoral*, as in *Sabbath's Theater*, does not elevate the child as an emblem for a particular set of values. Roth's fiction is categorically opposed to the concept of moral value and the belief in a universal human nature. Rather, the childhood nostalgia is more compelling, from a literary perspective, as an appeal to the child's discovery of the primary mimetic power and pleasure of naming. The child does not reach for the universal, the abstract or the symbolic, but is enthralled by the literal.

A useful parallel might be drawn here with Walter Benjamin's theory of mimesis, which he defines as the fundamental drive found in all of nature to generate similarities and which finds its highest expression in the human activity of connecting with the world through the power of naming. Benjamin traces the imitative character of children's games to a mimetic faculty and a capacity for mimetic perception, which, he argues, was powerful in primitive peoples but has all but died out in modern humans. For him, the fall of language from the power of naming, as the expression of an affinity between human subjectivity and surrounding nature, into a system of signs, whereby the correspondence between word and world is a matter of arbitrary convention, finds a corollary in the child's integration into the symbolic. What is crucial to both Benjamin and Roth is that the "fall" of language is

not from immediacy to mediation. There is no appeal to an unmediated relation to reality. Rather, the trajectory is from a linguistic subject that exercises linguistic power in order to form connections with external objects, to a subject in which this creative engagement with external objects is suppressed by his entry into the symbolic and his acceptance of conventional, and hence arbitrary, concepts of reality. It is the child's attentiveness to the phenomenal world and to the singularity of experience, and his disregard for the symbolic, that is celebrated in the novel's nostalgic rhapsodies: "Were we ever again to be such keen recording instruments of the microscopic surface of things close at hand, of the minutest gradations of social position conveyed by linoleum and oilcloth […] somehow we even dimly grasped how every family's different set of circumstances set each family a distinctive human problem" (43).

This is not to imply that Zuckerman (or Roth) casts the Swede's allegiance to the familial ideal as the cause of his downfall. Zuckerman's narrative is a counter to Jerry's appraisal that the Swede has carved out his own fate. It is not fate that the Swede has fallen victim to but socio-historical forces far beyond his control. This is why Zuckerman gives him a reason to blame himself, so that he can learn the "worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense", to lead him into the chaos of the contingent, as well as its joys (81). The novel's trajectory is not from the particular to the universal in some obsessive drive for truth. Rather, it begins with this great American archetype, and, by way of a subversion of the tragic peripeteia, ends not with a diminished figure but a man with nothing left but "his fear and astonishment, […] now concealed by nothing", which are of much greater *literary* value than mythic truths that can only be, in literary terms, instruments of the violence of the symbolic (422).

While Benjamin's theory is useful for understanding the importance of naming and phenomenal specificity as it relates to the return to childhood in Roth's novels, it is problematic in that it perpetuates the myth of the fall as irrecoverable as well as the moral implications of the concept of man as "fallen" from a putative innocence. Benjamin draws a line of no return between the mimetic subject and the subject of modernity. As with the Freudian Oedipus complex, the entry into the symbolic is figured as an expulsion from the garden, and the possibility of return remains the preserve of the utopian pastoral. The master narrative is essentially

Edenic: a fall from a state of being connected to nature and an endlessly unsatisfied longing for return. What is occluded in this mythic recovery of an idealised past anticipated as a utopian future is the contingency of the living present. While Roth overtly invokes the myth of the fall in the titles of the book's three parts, "Paradise Remembered", "The Fall" and "Paradise Lost", Zuckerman's disruption of the Swede's allegiance to an ideal image of himself and his recasting of his hero into the "real" life of an "assailable man" constitutes an aesthetic redemption that is the opposite of the redemptive aesthetic that seeks to supplant the real with the ideal. This does not mean utopian return and paradise regained, but rather exposes the paradisiac myth as itself utopian and illusory. Rather than critiquing modernity as a fall, Roth's art, in unleashing the violent will to death at the heart of the modern rational subject, shows us that we have never been modern.[9]

Drawing on Benjamin's account of mimesis, Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* eschew the sharp division between modernity and the pre-modern that underscores Benjamin's account as well as the Edenic pastoral. For them, the mimetic drive is the fundamental human desire toward organic unity and the loss of self. Art, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, has become a refuge for the direct expression of the mimetic impulse in a society that increasingly values the rational over mimetic perception. This accounts for art's opposition to society and its revolutionary potential: "The fear of losing the self, and suspending with it the boundary between oneself and other life, the aversion to death and destruction, is twinned with a promise of joy which has threatened civilization at every moment" (Horkheimer and Adorno 26). It is precisely this unleashing of the death instinct in *American Pastoral* that delivers Zuckerman out of his "willful excursion into mythomania" in the prologue (55), and "into the displacement of another America entirely […] out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk", as he immerses himself in the life of the Swede (86).

The Swede stirs in Zuckerman the mimetic impulse of the child: "the strongest fantasy I had of being someone else" (88). This is not the impossible desire

[9] I borrow the phrase "we have never been modern" from Bruno Latour's book of the same name. Latour argues that we have never lifted ourselves out of nature but have embedded ourselves more deeply within ever more complex networks so that we can no longer maintain the illusion of a division between nature and culture, or between the material world and the realm of ideas.

of wishing himself into the godlike symbol of American idealism, which he describes as "untenable on psychological grounds if you are not a writer, and on aesthetic grounds if you are" (88). The image of the heroic ideal is not an interesting subject for Zuckerman precisely because he is not a psychological and embodied subject that can be inhabited in all the complexity and contingency required of the novel. What incites Zuckerman's creativity is the mimetic drive to "embrace your hero in his destruction, […] to let your hero's life occur within you when everything is trying to diminish him, to imagine yourself into his bad luck, to implicate yourself not in his mindless ascendency, when he is the fixed point of your adulation, but in the bewilderment of his tragic fall" (88). The path he chooses is not that of escape into the simplicity of the pastoral vision, but into the chaos of the contingent, from the stasis of myth and its timeless truths into the flux of the living present, from the symbolic to the mortal, the corporeal and the temporal.

In the name of the father

"Let's speak further of death and of the desire—understandably in the aging a desperate desire—to forestall death, to resist it, to resort to whatever means are necessary to see death with anything, anything, *anything* but clarity" (47). This passage prefaces the banter between old classmates at the reunion in *American Pastoral*, the news of who is dead, and how. Several have died from prostate cancer, and, for Zuckerman, "the truly important thing, the supreme delight of the afternoon, is simply finding that you haven't yet made it onto the 'In Memoriam' page" (55). The other important thing, according to the souvenir booklet, is the family, since beside the names of the attendees are the ages of their children and grandchildren: "Marshall Goldstein ("Children 39, 37. Grandchildren 8, 6") […] Stanley Wernikoff ("Children 39, 38. Grandchildren 5, 2, 8 mo.")" (52-53). The speech that Zuckerman actually gives at the event, very different from the affecting one he composed afterwards, consists of a few bare sentences concluding: "I have neither child nor grandchild, but I did, ten years ago, have a quintuple bypass operation of which I am proud. Thank-you". Enough, he thinks, "to be a little amusing and sit down" (62). Albeit a mild joke, it does figure the child as a defence against death, which, as

Edelman argues, is the essential political model for a conservative politics that exhorts sacrifice and hard work in the present for rewards in the illusory future. The child, claims Edelman, "remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention", and is "the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value" (3, 4). In aesthetic terms, this corresponds precisely to the occluded present of the Edenic narrative and the missed encounter with phenomena of the redemptive aesthetic, the aesthetic of the symbolic that moves away from the material present to the stagnant realm of abstract value. The ideal of the child as bearer of the future and as an embodiment of the American Dream is central to *American Pastoral*, but the ostensible elegy for "family values" and the lamentation for a lost future is implicitly undermined by the critique that Roth exerts of the symbolic and the universal. For Roth, the aesthetic *is* political, and the political is opposed to the ideological and the reduction of the intricacies of human relations to universal models.

The Swede's father Lou Levov thinks himself "the luckiest man in the world […] because of one word. The biggest little word there is: family" (119). The younger Levov is equally wedded to the ideal of the family and the responsibilities conferred upon him by his embrace of paternalism. Third generation American of Jewish immigrant grandparents, he made America his own, realising the dream he had since he was sixteen of the stone house in the rural Jersey hills, land of the Pilgrim fathers, with a little girl swinging in the garden, "just as happy, he imagined, as a kid can be", the child "who was to have been the perfected image of himself as he had been the perfected image of his father, and his father the perfected image of his father's father" (189, 85-6). It is the name of the father that drives the sentence on toward an illusory future and it is the child that legitimates the narrowness of the Swede's perspective by presenting his own desire as altruistic self-sacrifice:

> To his way of thinking it was simple: you had only to carry out your duties strenuously and unflaggingly like a Levov and orderliness became a natural condition, daily living a simple story tangibly unfolding, a deeply un-agitating story, the fluctuations predictable, the combat containable, the surprises satisfying, the continuous motion an undulation carrying you along with the utmost faith that tidal waves occur only off the coast of countries

> thousands and thousands of miles away—or so it had all seemed to him *once upon a time*, back when the union of beautiful mother and strong father and bright, bubbly child rivaled the trinity of the three bears. (413)

The figuration of the Oedipal triangle as an illusory fairy tale that underpins the simple story of duty, predictability and faith in the future is even more radical than Bersani's founding of sexual life and the art experience as an erotic encounter in the pre-Oedipal phase of infantile narcissism in that it undermines the Oedipal schema entirely. The relentlessness of the novel's attack on Oedipal politics demolishes the model of the nuclear family as the holy trinity, and the main instrument of this annihilation is Rita Cohen: "The imp of upheaval. The genie of disaster. […] Kid Mayhem" (146). After the bombing, Merry Levov disappears, and, shortly later, Rita comes into the Swede's life purporting to be Merry's envoy. A radically destructive force, she disrupts the narrative not merely because of her caricaturish persona and her malicious persecution of the Swede, but also because she doesn't make narrative sense. Through her anomalous intrusions into the story, Roth enacts his critique of ideological tyranny and social conformism. This is not an attack on the ordinary "assailable man", but on the political and historical conditions of the individual in contemporary America.

The second section of the novel, entitled "The Fall" opens with Rita's arrival at the glove factory, posing as a student researcher of the leather industry. The Swede conducts her on a tour, taking unexpected pleasure in explaining the minutiae of the glove-making business. He is reminded of showing Merry's childhood classmates around years before, showing them "Merry's magical spot" (122), the steam-heated brass hands on the laying-off table where the gloves were pressed into shape: "The hands were dangerously hot and they were shiny and they stuck straight up from the table in a row, thin-looking as hands that had been flattened in a mangle and then amputated, beautifully amputated hands afloat in space like the souls of the dead" (122). Roth rarely deploys figurative language, and this rare instance of metaphor is mordantly ironic. The image of mangled and amputated hands conjures the symbolic castration of the alienated worker under capitalism, casting them as dead souls, while also figuring the Swede as the malevolent factory boss. The irony is particularly pointed in the context of his reminiscences:

> Merry as a little girl saying to her classmates, 'You want to make five dollars a dozen,' […] Merry whispering to the teacher, 'People cheating on piece rates is always a problem. My daddy had to fire one man. He was stealing time.' […] Merry flitting from floor to floor, so proud and proprietary, flaunting her familiarity with all the employees, unaware as yet of the desecration of dignity inherent to the ruthless exploitation of the worker by the profit-hungry boss who unjustly owns the means of production. (122)

Roth's art is opposed to the symbolic and the ideological, be it the metaphorical castration of the oppressed or the child standing for the national ethos of futurity, Rita's "sadistic idealism" or the ideology of family values (139). Language that departs from singular experience into the transcendence of the universal is scorned throughout the novel in the rhetoric not only of the radical left, voiced by Merry, Rita and the real activist Angela Davis, with whom the Swede has imaginary conversations at his kitchen table, but also that of "Quaint Americana" in Zuckerman's nostalgic speech and in the kitsch clichés of "that outmoded America, that decorous America where a woman had twenty-five pairs of gloves" (68, 277). After Rita reveals her identity, he meets her several times to hand over some of Merry's belongings, while she pours contempt on him. Their final meeting takes place in the New York Hilton, to which the Swede has been instructed to bring five thousand dollars in cash. Rita is waiting for him, wearing garish clothes, lurid make-up and high heels. Singing a song he used to sing to Merry, and adopting Merry's distinctive stutter, she lies on the bed and begins to taunt him: "Let's f-f-f-fuck, D-d-d-dad" (143). The provocation escalates into a preposterous and abhorrent burlesque that culminates with Rita inserting her hand into her vagina and offering it to the Swede. He is painfully rent by "so much uncertainty, so much inclination and counterinclination, he was bursting so with impulse and counterimpulse". On the verge of self-collapse, he flees, reeling from "something that he could no longer name" (147). Later in the novel, when the Swede finally finds Merry, she claims not to know Rita, and not to have received her belongings or the money. Yet Rita had known so much about her. One of them is lying, but we never find out which one, or why. Furthermore, her excessive and seemingly gratuitous cruelty makes little sense.

She is certainly a vehicle for the novel's critique of ideology, behaving "like a mechanism of human parts, like a loudspeaker, human parts assembled as a loudspeaker designed to produce shattering sound, a sound that is disruptive and maddening" (372). Her grotesque sexuality parodies the liberated libido of the Marxist-inspired psychoanalysis of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, with both of whom Roth was aligned after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*.[10]

But even figuring Rita as a caricature of radical leftist ideologies does not account for Merry denying any knowledge of her. It is easy to forget that Rita is Zuckerman's creation, conceived of to teach the Swede the lesson that life makes no sense. By having Rita goad the Swede into the grotesqueries of the incestuous pantomime, he makes a travesty of the Oedipal schema that he set up with the kiss. By casting Rita as a surrogate for Merry, Zuckerman pushes the Swede to the limit of what he can tolerate. The tense changes at this point in the narrative from the past to the present, with the words: "Five years pass" (147). The dream of the future destroyed and the past unbearable to think of, he is forced into the nightmarish present.

When the Swede finally finds Merry in a rancid room beside an underpass lined with vagrants, "he realized she hadn't survived" (263). Having killed three more people, she has converted to Jainism, a faith that advocates total non-violence. She wears a veil so as not to cause harm to microorganisms in the air, and doesn't wash for fear of harming the water. Her state of abjection and her ideological extremism are abhorrent to the Swede: "The monotonous chant of the indoctrinated, ideologically armored from head to foot—the monotonous, spellbound chant of those whose turbulence can be caged only within the suffocating straitjacket of the

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[10] Both Marcuse and Brown base their analysis in the post-Oedipal stage. Marcuse critiques the premature exposure to extrafamilial influences in consumer society, which thwart the development of the individual. For Brown, Oedipal attachments are projected onto social institutions, which makes human culture "one vast arena in which the logic of the transference works itself out. […] Human consciousness can be liberated from the parental (Oedipal) complex only by being liberated from its cultural derivatives, the paternalistic state and the patriarchal God" (155). In both writers, then, the basis for all psychic life and social behaviour is reduced to the universal Oedipal model. For a discussion of Brown's *Life Against Death* in relation to *Portnoy's Complaint* see Patrick Hayes's *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power* (95-98). On a more general point, although Roth shares many of Marcuse's concerns, especially the concern with freedom and its paradoxical relation to death as well as the role of death in the emancipation of the individual from forms of social domination, Marcuse's appeal to the past as a means of attaining liberation in the future is precisely the opposite of Roth's significantly less idealistic aesthetic aims. For Roth, nostalgia for the past and the ideology of progress are instruments of self-enslavement, which devalue the present and perpetuate oppressive systems of social control.

most supercoherent of dreams" (245). Horkheimer and Adorno find a similar destructiveness in the suppression of the mimetic drive by the symbolic order. Suppressed and subsumed, the will to dissolution finds indirect expression as "mimesis of mimesis", which is to say mimesis of death. It emerges in the mania of the pogrom and the clamour of the mob: "The elaborate symbols proper to every counterrevolutionary movement, the death's heads and masquerades, the barbaric drumming, the monotonous repetition of words and gestures, are so many organized imitations of magical practices, the mimesis of mimesis" (152). While Horkheimer and Adorno write, under the shadow of Auschwitz and Stalinism, about fascist mobs and totalitarian regimes, Roth finds the same destructive violence in the insidious self-enslavement of the ostensibly free subject of American democracy to the values and ideals of popular culture and political rhetoric. It is the will to death turned inward. Rather than effecting a breach of subjective boundaries and a reaching out to the world in a relation of affinity, it is expressed as the most radical turning away from the world and the destruction of the self.

The very worst thing for the Swede is that Merry has been raped. This is finally what it takes to loosen the Swede's adherence to his own constraining creed and drive him into despair: "The stupendousness of the rape blotted out everything" (270). The Swede, sitting alone in the factory, trying to comprehend all that has happened, is again thrust into the reality of the moment with another change of tense from past to present. It is only when the Swede is alone and in these moments of despair and self-abandonment when his social façade is loosened, that his narrative is in the present. All his defences are stripped down as he remembers Merry's infant body. The ekphrastic passage that follows is one of the most important in the novel, a sensuous catalogue of the child's body: "Her body when she leaves the earth and leaps into his arms. […] Her bare feet padded like a little animal's feet. New and unworn, her uncorrupted paws. Her grasping toes. […] The cleft, as though an awl had made it—that beautifully beveled joining that will petal outward, evolving in the cycle of time into a woman's origami-folded cunt. The implausible belly button" (270-71). There is an erotic quality to the prose, but this is not incestuous or transgressive; it is not driven by the force of grasping desire, but by a supplicatory awe. The raw mimetic force of mere naming lends it the phenomenal immediacy that Zuckerman celebrates in the child, for whom meaning flows off the surface of

things. This is a fleshy blazon, temporal and alive: "in the neck somehow is the woman to be, there in that building block of a neck ornamented with down. […] The history in her brow of the embryo" (271). This unabashed love for his daughter's body is unsullied by the distorting mirror of the Oedipal structure with its constricting stasis. There is merely a childlike wonder at the extraordinary intimacy between father and daughter that supersedes paternal duty: "And built into it always is the knowledge that he is not going too far, that he cannot, that it is an enormous freedom and an enormous pleasure, the equivalent of her breast-feeding bond with Dawn" (271-72). The Oedipal identifications that generate narrative by way of metaphor or metonymy fall away in this flow of language, which celebrates what Zuckerman realised as he danced with Joy Halpern at his high school reunion: that "the overwhelming spell we continue to cast on one another, right down to the end, with the body's surface" is "about as serious a thing as there is in life" (79). It is through this non-sexual eroticism that the Oedipal triangle is breached and the law of the father abandoned in favour of what can only be called love.

This same sensuous intensity characterises the novel's penultimate sequence, when the Swede has had another call from Rita, has found out that his wife has been having an affair and that the woman who had been his lover after the bomb had harboured Merry without telling him. He pictures Merry walking from the squalid underpass to the house to tell his parents that she had killed not one but four people and imagines his father dying from shock. The ideal of the family shattered, his undoing is complete, and he pictures Merry walking through the countryside toward the house: "'See, Dad, how there's a n-notch at the top of the petal?'—chicory, cinquefoil, pasture thistle, wild pinks, joe-pye weed, the last vestiges of yellow-flowered wild mustard sturdily spilling over the fields, clover, yarrow, wild sunflowers" (419). The recitation continues for almost two pages without a sentence break. If Rita unleashes the chaos, she also ushers in the present, the pure suffering and the unadulterated joy of the moment, which doesn't need to make sense, because it merely *is*. Zuckerman's narrative restores the Swede from his merely biological death into the anguish and the ecstasy of self-loss and a death that is immanent to experience.

The novel's two epigraphs encapsulate its path from the saccharine nostalgia of Johnny Mercer's "Dream", an anthem for all that the Swede symbolises for

Zuckerman in childhood, to "the rare occurrence of the expected", taken from William Carlos Williams's "At Kenneth Burke's Place". Williams's poem is a celebration of immanence, of the earthy and the phenomenal, over the abstractions of ideology, that "orthodoxy of plotted murders" under which the singularity of experience is crushed by the violence of the symbolic and the universal (Williams 28). By the end of the novel, one begins to understand the intimacy between "the rich endlessness of detail surrounding you in your young life" and "the six feet of dirt that'll be packed on your grave when you're dead" (Roth 43). The celebrations of the body and the earth, the immanent rapture of primary mimesis toward the close of the book collapse the apparent distinction between presence and absence, aligning the self-abandonment and the attentiveness to the world of the child with the shattering of the self into pure presence and the experience of death-in-life.

Death is just death

Throughout his fiction, Roth places his characters at the furthest extremes from freedom, subject to historical and cultural forces beyond their control, their lives proceeding along paths unwillingly taken, full of adverse entanglements and contingencies, and subject finally to death. The myth of the self-determining subject is consistently undermined and with it the idea that we require coherence in our fictions. Far from harmony, coherence and the sense of an ending that Frank Kermode attributed to "the erotic consciousness which makes divinely satisfactory sense out of the commonplace person", Roth's novels typically rail against the platitudinous comfort of order and the imposition of meaning on contingency, chaos and chance (Kermode 46). *Everyman*, however, does not—which is not to say that Roth embraces the principle of narrative unity. Rather, he underlines, in this his bleakest novel, the lie that suggests the entropic path towards biological breakdown should be contiguous with a narrative of progress, a narrative that his fiction repeatedly exposes as shutting down possibility and impeding a truly thoughtful engagement with the contingencies of the present. The implicit challenge to resist palliation posed in *Sabbath's Theater* is even greater in *Everyman*, which rejects,

more than any other of Roth's novels, trivialising narratives of redemption in the face of death.

Beginning with the funeral of the protagonist, the cursive sweep of the narrative moves through a highly selective account of his life, told through thirty-three short vignettes, to his death on the final page. The first half of the book charts a long battle against extinction that began when the first seeds of mortal awareness were sown in the nine year old boy hospitalised for a hernia operation, proceeding through his various brushes with death, his illnesses and the operations that turned his body into "a storehouse for man-made contraptions designed to fend off collapse", and his move from New York to a retirement village on the Jersey Shore following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, after which he declares himself "rid of that sense of pointless risk taking that had dogged him every day since the catastrophe had subverted everyone's sense of security and introduced an ineradicable precariousness into their daily lives" (16, 66). Halfway through, the narrative arc turns, and the second half of the book deals with the painful process of turning towards rather than away from death.

Although he was in New York on September 11th, 2001, Roth has not directly addressed the events of that day in his fiction. *The Plot Against America* (2004), his alternative history in which the aviator and Hitler ally Charles Lindbergh defeats Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1940 US presidential election, was the first work of fiction he published after 9/11, and there are obvious parallels between the events of the novel and the ascent of the conservative right, which intensified in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center. *Everyman* and *Exit Ghost* (2007) are both set in post-9/11 New York, and although the latter novel engages more directly with the climate of fear and political disillusionment of the post-millennial years, the attacks are off-stage and Zuckerman, who has returned to the city in 2004 after an eleven-year absence, feels alienated from the political moment. The protagonist of *Everyman*, on the other hand, was in New York on 9/11 and leaves ten weeks later, claiming a "a deep-rooted fondness for survival" (66). But there is a stark difference between living and surviving, and it is precisely this distinction that preoccupies Roth in this book. It would be reductive to make too much of the socio-political backdrop to this rather bare work about senescence and diminished sexual potency,

but Roth does capture something of the mix of fear, defiance and despair that prevailed at the time, and there is a certain sense in which this *is* his post 9/11 book.

His own public reaction to 9/11 was minimal. In an interview for *Le Figaro* the following year, he claimed that for the first time in years New York interested him again. He vehemently disparaged what he regarded as "an orgy of national narcissism and a gratuitous victim mentality" that took hold in the wake of the attacks, citing atrocities that Americans themselves had inflicted, "even if it was for good reasons", adding that he is "not a pacifist". Bemoaning the fact that "[e]ven now, it's impossible to see a baseball match which isn't preceded by singing God Bless America and invocation to the memory of 'our heroes'", he made his contempt for political sensationalism clear. "Language is always a lie," he asserted, "above all, public language" (qtd. in Leith). Claudia Roth Pierpont reports a rather different reaction in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, claiming that Roth is "a patriot", that he hung an American flag in his window, and that he became "furious with people like Susan Sontag who were blaming America and blaming the victims—people who said the deed was a result of American policy in the Middle East rather than a result of the way these people were brought up and abused by their own countries" (271). Given Roth's aversion to trenchant ideological positions, there is no contradiction in his repudiation of both the nemesis account propounded by the radical left and the heroism narratives that prevailed in the popular media, which both obscured the horrific human tragedy and bolstered neoconservative political agendas. Roth has consistently waged a war against ideological extremism, and his deployment of the "everyman" trope in *American Pastoral* and *Everyman*, far from signalling a universalising impulse, performs a scathing critique of uncomplicated, moralistic narratives that underpin political rhetoric.

In declining to co-opt the mass loss of life for the purposes of fiction, Roth makes a political point. However, there may also be subtle lines of commentary on the cultural mythologizing of America-under-threat in the critique that *Everyman* enacts of linear legitimating narratives as well as its portrait of a life constrained by fear and the shadow of death. Given that Roth's "everyman" is the only one of his main protagonists to have directly experienced the events of 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, it is pertinent that his story is about as antithetical as it is possible to get from the public discourses around heroism and American exceptionalism that

prevailed at the time. *Everyman* is the antithesis of a heroic narrative and Roth's protagonist is neither hero nor antihero, villain nor victim. He remains nameless throughout the narrative, and his funeral, with which the novel opens, is one of five hundred "routine, ordinary" services that took place in the state on that day (14). It is, we are told, "the commonness that's most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything" (14-15). Contrary to the "monumental ordinariness" attributed to the Swede in the prologue of *American Pastoral*, this later "everyman" is no paragon of the common man but merely consumed by the brute prospect of extinction.

The writing is overtly controlled and the book is a near-perfect example of the novella form: disciplined, tightly structured and, crucially, closed. It has neither the expansiveness of the novel nor the chink-like quality of the short story. The end is overtly determined from the outset and the narrative circles recall Hemingway's Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, another everyman whose words "Sail on this course and take it when it comes" are echoed in the protagonist's stoical maxim "There's no remaking reality […] Just take it as it comes. Hold your ground and take it as it comes" (Hemingway 80, Roth 5, 78-79). All the antagonistic energy that fronting death brings to Roth's writing of the preceding decade is conspicuously absent here, which is exactly the point, because what is missing, most conspicuously of all, is the vital, animating force of the erotic. The prose is lapidary and epitaphic precisely because it is an everyman narrative, and what makes it one is that, unlike Hemingway's Santiago, Roth's "everyman" is no longer living but merely surviving. The individuating spark of Nietzsche's will to power or Deleuze's becoming, the will to live creatively in destruction and self-overcoming, to enter into contingency and chance and the whole tangle of living is missing. This creative living finds its highest expression in Mickey Sabbath and his insatiable hunger for more of what life can throw at him: "More defeat! More disappointment! More deceit! More loneliness! More arthritis! More missionaries! God willing, more cunt! More disastrous entanglement in everything" (*Sabbath's Theater* 247). In *Everyman*, the implicit chorus is less, less and less. Suffering what he calls "an irreversible aesthetic vasectomy", the protagonist has lost interest in painting, which, having given up the artistic life for a job in advertising, was to have been his great pleasure in retirement (103). Consumed by "the rage and despair of a joyless sick man unable to steer clear

of prolonged illness's deadliest trap, the contortion of one's character", he has alienated his ex-wives, his sons and even his beloved brother Howie, whose rude health he has grown to envy, all "against his intention, *against his will*" (157, 158). His will depleted by the banality of biological breakdown, he is hemmed in by the brutal and inescapable prospect of annihilating absence.

Like *Sabbath's Theater*, this is a book punctuated by graveyard scenes: the funeral scene in the opening pages, the burial of the protagonist's father at the centre of the book, the unremarkable and almost indistinguishable funerals of two women from the retirement village where he lives who died of cancer within a week of each other, and the visit to the cemetery where his parents are buried toward the end of the book. The burial plot is the novel's extended metaphor and the plot drives relentlessly on towards the grave.[11] Each bid for freedom is accompanied by morbid dread. His happiest vacation at the age of thirty-four was tainted by the stars that "told him unambiguously that he was doomed to die" (30). Even the chinks of hope after his move to the shore, scene of his most treasured boyhood memories, are constrained by syntax: "As soon as he moved into the village, he turned the sunny living room of his three-room condo into an artist's studio, and now, after taking his daily hour-long four-mile walk on the boardwalk, he spent most of the remainder of each day fulfilling a long-standing ambition by happily painting away, a routine that yielded all the excitement he'd expected" (64), There is a tone of eagerness in "As soon as" and a measure of optimism in "sunny", but it *is* measured and all the more so for the exacting "three-room condo" and "daily hour-long four-mile walk", as if the life force that remains must be conserved and prudently meted out. The "excitement" is dulled in being routine and expected and the slide from past tense to "now", followed by the fixity of the past perfect, traces the same cursive movement of the book itself towards closure. "He missed nothing about New York except Nancy, the child whose presence had never ceased to delight him, and who, as a divorced mother of two four-year-olds, was no longer protected in the way that he'd hoped" (64). Again, the optimism with which the sentence opens is quashed and contentment turns to powerlessness. Such short-circuits are the grammar of death;

[11] I take the term "burial plot" from David Sherman's *In a Strange Room* (2014). Sherman argues: "A burial plot is not simply a corpse's resting ground, but also its story, the arc of time between its perishing and final disposal" (108). In Roth's novel, however, the burial plot begins much earlier, with the child's first intimations of death, and perhaps earlier still if one takes perishing to be coterminous with life.

the living past is repeatedly obliterated by the interruption of the past perfect. The aphorisms that pepper the novel create a similar sense of constriction through a syntax of enclosure: "Old age isn't a battle; old age is a massacre" (156). The sense of ending is relentless and oppressive, as if there merely is nothing more to say: "Death is just death—it's nothing more" (119). Several of the latter sections of the book conclude with a bitter punchline: "It was time to worry about oblivion. It was the remote future" (161). At a funeral, a woman cries inconsolably, but her grief is not for the dead: "She's like that because she isn't eighteen anymore" (169). The quintessential Rothian catch twenty-two predicament of the quest for freedom and the fear of freedom is wound here into ever decreasing circles of enclosure and entrapment.

The narrative proceeds in Kafkaesque fashion as the construction of a trap, the digging of a hole that ultimately is a grave. The protagonist's first marriage, which he wanted to last a lifetime, "became his prison cell" from which "he began fitfully, agonizingly, to tunnel his way out" (31). At his father's Jewish orthodox funeral, he watches the dirt being shovelled onto the body, too weak himself after a serious heart operation to help. Horrified by the "brutal directness" of the burial, he leaves tasting the dirt in his own mouth, "the mind circling back even as the feet walked away" (59, 61). Then, there is the hole in the behind of his third wife, a model whom he married in an attempt to mitigate the crime when he was caught having an affair with her: "Only in passing did it occur to him that it might be delusional at the age of fifty to think that he could find a hole that would substitute for everything else" (113). And soon after "he discovered that Marete was something more than that little hole, or perhaps something less" (123). Finally, he learns how to dig a hole "flat enough at the bottom to lay a bed on", when he receives a lesson in gravedigging on a visit to the cemetery just days before his own death (180). The cursive movement, the zig-zags and wrong turns, the acts of self-sabotage, the labyrinthine complexities of a life all lead, like the circles of his mind, to a hole in the ground.

Roth surely had Kafka's story "The Burrow" in mind and it is pertinent that in his essay on Kafka, published in *Reading Myself and Others*, he finds "this story of life in a hole" to be "a very unromantic and hardheaded fable about how and why art is made" (290). *Everyman* may well be Roth's own fable about the craft of

writing fiction as he begins to take his leave of it. In a 2014 interview, he reflects favourably on retirement, claiming that his work was not only hard but also "undoable", that he was lucky "that happiness didn't matter" to him and that he had "no compassion" for himself: "The horror of being caged has lost its thrill. It is now truly a great relief, something close to a sublime experience, to have nothing more to worry about than death" (Roth and Sandstrom). Although constraint has been an invigorating stimulant for Roth throughout his career, *Everyman*, a novel of "tight little places", is the book in which the horrors of being caged are most palpable and the relation between writing and death is most ruthlessly interrogated (7). Rather than resorting to psychological speculation about attenuating creative powers or personal sentiments about mortality, the loss of virility and the uncompromising look at death in this novel are more fruitfully interrogated in terms of Roth's mature reflection on the reasons for creating art. In this work, Roth exposes the inadequacy of the idea advanced by Kermode and Brooks that literature's relation to death is primarily narratological and motivated by an inherent human desire for endings. For Roth, writing is linked to death not as an expression of a desire for wholeness, meaning or purpose but as the very expression of life itself, as the expenditure of force. Processes of life and death, destruction and creation, are not only represented in, but are constitutive of, the creative event. *Everyman* takes a harsh look at the difficulty of coming to accept the depletion of force and the harrowing awareness of this in old age. If, as Roth asserts, all language is a lie, one of the implicit aims here, and throughout his fiction, is to expose the lies underpinning public language, especially those that articulate false narratives of progress and order, and to direct his readers towards other modes of reading that attend to the present. In the end, Roth offers more modest aims for the novel than that of arranging reality into an ordered unity and its implicit aspiration toward totalising truths or consolatory fictions—as his protagonist asserts, "there's no remaking reality" (78). The crystallisation of complex emotional states and the liberation of life force are far more important categories in Roth's art, and they pertain not to narrative but to the aesthetic event.

Claudia Roth Pierpont reports that Roth abandoned what was to become *The Humbling* and began writing *Everyman* in the days after Saul Bellow's death in 2005. The Jewish orthodox funeral of the protagonist's father is based on Bellow's and the reaction—"I've never seen anything so chilling in my life"—was Roth's

own. Bellow was a formative impulse on Roth as well as a friend, and in a 2000 article for *The New Yorker* entitled "Rereading Saul Bellow", subsequently published in *Shop Talk* (2001), Roth writes admiringly of how Bellow overthrows "compositional choices grounded in narrative principles of harmony and order", and of how in Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*, "what's blowing narrative decorum to kingdom come [is] the panicky dread of oblivion, the old-fashioned garden-variety Everyman horror of death" (139). Roth's own fiction is animated by the disruption of narrative principles. He repeatedly exposes coherence as deceptive and linear narratives of progress as unrepresentative of the messiness and contingency of real lives.

We have seen how, in *American Pastoral*, Roth critiques ideologies of progress and futurity and how the Swede must come to accept that life makes no sense. This same lesson is exacted throughout the late fiction and particularly in his last series of novels, which all centre on the concept of nemesis and its secular equivalent, the self-determining subject, carver of his own destiny. The latter is most incisively challenged in the novel *Nemesis* (2010), in which Bucky Cantor, who resembles the young Swede Levov in his embodiment of 1940s American optimism and buoyant virility, betrays his "ideals as a man" and leaves his post as a playground director during the 1944 polio epidemic in Newark for a summer camp in Pennsylvania where his fiancée is teaching (135). When the virus breaks out in the camp and he and several of the children are infected, he construes this as retribution for abandoning his responsibilities at home, cuts contact with his fiancée, and consigns himself to a lonely and unrewarding life. Like *American Pastoral*, it centres on the tragedy of adhering blindly to convictions and the narcissism of holding oneself responsible for events beyond one's power to control: "He has to ask why. Why? Why? That it is pointless, contingent, preposterous, and tragic will not satisfy him. […] Instead he looks desperately for a deeper cause, this martyr, this maniac of the why, and finds the why either in God or in himself or, mystically, mysteriously in their dreadful joining together as the sole destroyer" (*Nemesis* 265). *Everyman* exacts a more subtle critique of the nemesis narrative. Unlike Bucky, the protagonist of *Everyman* is not dogmatically wedded to any idealistic image of himself. The novel is structured around his frustrated attempt, with futurity under erasure, to construct a narrative that will explain his predicament. In doing so, he is "swept away by the misery of his limitations yet acting as if life's every incomprehensible

contingency were of his making" (158). The subtlety of Roth's portrait thwarts a straightforward appraisal of his everyman as blameworthy as much as it staves off absolution. The vignette structure accentuates the highly contrived nature of the story and foregrounds the gaps. The shortest of the novel's sections underlines the distorting effect of mortal dread on the narrative:

> Twenty-two years passed. Twenty-two years of excellent health and the boundless self-assurance that flows from being fit—twenty-two years spared the adversary that is illness and the calamity that waits in the wings. As he'd reassured himself while walking under the stars on the Vineyard with Phoebe, he would worry about oblivion when he was seventy-five. (41)

In conferring consonance upon life, narrative omits the force of the competing desires and commitments, the foibles and contingencies of experience, and brings neither comfort nor conformity against which to rebel, but crushing guilt. It is not only diminished futurity that leaves the narrative conception of life wanting, but also a tacit story of moral improvement and a linear logic of purpose that places a burden on ending.

There is an implicit critique of such an imposition of an end-directed temporal order in the way timepieces figure in the novel. Watches and clocks feature throughout the book, but Roth draws his readers away from the obvious metaphorical opportunities toward the material objects. In his graveside eulogy, Howie recalls the pleasure that his brother took from tinkering with the old trade-in watches that were dumped in a drawer in their father's shop, how he "could sit there for hours, spinning the hands and listening to the watches tick, if they still did, and studying what each face and what each case looked like", and how, when their father died, it was his watch that his brother chose as a memento (7). As with the things in *Sabbath's Theater*, it is the tangible object that is prized, not for its symbolic value, but its solid thingliness, and the powerful grip on reality that naming the things of the world affords. The power of the child to assimilate himself into his environment through the activity of naming, which is the very power of life acting through him, makes naming an erotic activity in Roth's aesthetic and it is the memory of this initial power to exert force, to expend the life of the self into the world that grants

comfort to the protagonist of *Everyman* when he is at his weakest and most vulnerable. During the medical interventions that see him on the operating table throughout the novel, he calls up the brands of watches and clocks that his father sold to distract himself, "reciting under his breath the lists he'd first alphabetized as a small boy helping at the store after school—'Benrus, Bulova, Croton, Elgin, Hamilton, Helbros, Ovistone, Waltham, Wittnauer'—focusing all the while on the distinctive look of the numerals on the dial of the watch as he intoned its brand name", before starting on the clocks: "'General Electric, Ingersoll, McClintock, New Haven, Seth Thomas, Telechron, Westclox' […] until finally he heard the doctor announce that the procedure was over and that everything had gone well" (73). It is the connections forged by simple nouns, rather than the temporal ordering of reality into a meaningful progress narrative that is celebrated here, the reliving of that first activity of throwing oneself into the world by naming it.

Ultimately, it is the plot of earth and not the plot of coherence that teaches Roth's "everyman" how to face death, when he makes the acquaintance of an old gravedigger who instructs him in the art of digging a grave. This isn't the Sisyphean effort of Kafka's burrower or Hemingway's Santiago, but the task of extending the self into the world: "I thank you for the concreteness", he tells the man (180). The night before his first operation as a boy, his father had counselled him: "It's just another job of work as far as you're concerned. Do the work, finish the job, and by tomorrow the whole thing will be over" (24). The work of writing is for Roth the exercise of linguistic power, an expenditure of force, and a creative endeavour that correlates to Marx's idea that in work it is not only the materials of production but also the worker that is transformed. To expend the self in creative work—writing or digging a grave—is to live and to die at the same time, where dying is not the cessation of life but the projection of the self into the world. Recalling his own father's death in *Patrimony*, Roth writes: "Dying is work and he was a worker" (233).

In his essay "Community in Death", Alphonso Lingis writes that it "is in advancing unto the exteriority of our environment that we advance unto our death" (160). In youth, we extend ourselves into the world with a joy and a vigour that are lost to us in later life. It is not innocence or unmediated experience or any symbolic value but the memory of this power that is celebrated in the nostalgia for childhood

and early manhood in Roth's art, finding perhaps its most idealised expression in the pages of his final novel *Nemesis*. Dying and living are not antithetical in Roth's aesthetic; to live is to die, and this is the crux that links the surge of power experienced by the child discovering the world for the first time through the act of naming and the return to the earth in the grave. To live is to throw oneself into the world and it is this extension of the self into the exteriority of the world and into the contingencies of relationships and the world of work that is curtailed in the apprehension of fading powers, so that the tasks one sets must be adapted and routinised in order to conserve strength. In ceasing to pursue projects thereby ceasing to project the self into the world, one slows down dying as one slows down life, until "there stirs an immanent anxiety that senses that the place one occupies is empty of oneself" (Lingis 167). It is this sense of emptiness, this depletion of the power of individuation, that makes Roth's protagonist an everyman, and he is most intensely aware of it when his forced abdication from erotic life comes into sharp focus at two crucial turning points in the novel.

The first is the death of Millicent Kramer, a student in the art classes that, in a bid "to enter more vigorously into the world around him" and perhaps meet a woman, he had begun giving at the retirement community (79). The only student he finds any connection with is Millicent, recently widowed and suffering from constant chronic back pain, which becomes so bad that she often has to leave the class and to lie down in his bedroom. On one of these occasions, he finds her inconsolable from pain and loneliness and the attendant humiliations, and his attempt to comfort her intensifies his awareness of the reduced circumstances of his own life: "They were all embarrassed by what they'd become. Wasn't he? By the physical changes. By the diminishment of virility. By the errors that had contorted him and the blows—both those self-inflicted and those from without—that deformed him" (91-92). It is a cruel parody of a romantic tryst where it is not the erotic body but the "horrible grandeur" of her pain that exposes itself to him and before which he is powerless (92). Ten days later, Millicent kills herself and he cancels his classes. It is at this point that the narrative direction changes from fighting death to facing it. On the eve of his visit to the cemetery a few days before his own death, he dreams that he is holding Millicent's dead body in his arms and tries to imagine her state of mind when she took her own life. It is her death that finally helps him to face his own

inevitable demise, but it is not an abstract ethics of alterity that is at stake here. Rather, what is revealed to him is the extent of his diminishment and the painful knowledge that the only way that is left for him to extend himself into the world is in death.

The second turning point comes when he makes a pass at a young jogger he has been watching on his morning walks. Humiliated and all too aware of the madness of the venture, he propositions her, gives her his phone number, feeling, momentarily and for the last time, "that sharp sense of individualization, of sublime singularity, that marks a fresh sexual encounter or love affair and that is the opposite of the deadening depersonalization of serious illness". She never phones and he never sees her jogging anymore and his hope is quashed for "the last great outburst of everything" (134). It comes, however, not by way of a sexual adventure but in the novel's final sequence, as he slips under the anaesthetic for the last time, and he is transported back to swimming the bay as a boy, "buoyant and indestructible". The final expulsion of life is allied here with the child's vitality, which "[n]othing could extinguish", in an ecstatic return to the earth: "Oh the abandon of it, […] day after summer day of that daylight blazing off a living sea, an optical treasure so vast and valuable that he could have been looking through the jeweller's loupe engraved with his father's initials at the perfect, priceless planet itself—at his home, the billion-, the trillion-, the quadrillion-carat planet Earth!" (181, 182). Roth rarely allows himself such lyrical moments, unless in high irony, and even here he does so through the conceit of narcotic anaesthesia. In *Patrimony*, he recalls dreaming, after his father's death, of an old warship, empty and abandoned, drifting to shore, which, upon waking, he realised was his father. Admitting that this was not a picture "that my wide-awake mind, with its resistance to plaintive metaphor and poeticized analogy, was ever likely to have licensed", he recalls how aptly "this childishly simple vision so rich with truth" crystallised his pain (237). This same sense of consolatory solidity marks the last passage of *Everyman*, and it runs counter to the redemptive artifice of coherence. It is the final fulfilment of the mimetic drive to be subsumed into the matrix of all life, a homecoming and a gorgeous concretion.

4. **Starting with Nothing: Coetzee's Death Works**

"The question is, What will it be like not to live but to die? Dead, we will be without memory, without history. How will we be able to bear that?"

J. M. Coetzee, Letter to Berlinde De Bruyckere.

Deaths of the author

"We should make due preparation for death, or else be struck down where we stand" (Coetzee, "He and His Man" 19). So says an ageing Robin Crusoe in the story that J. M. Coetzee read as his Nobel Prize lecture (2003). Coetzee's eschewal of the standard acceptance speech format was in keeping with a general reticence during that period of his career to speak publicly in his own voice. Ostensibly, from the mid-nineties until recent years, he became the author of his own disappearance.[1] However, the alliance of writing and death in his work is no structural metaphor, but is aligned with a thematic concern with mortality that has come increasingly to dominate his fiction in the post-millennial period. Roland Barthes famously claimed that in writing "the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death" ("The Death of the Author" 142). Similarly, Michel Foucault insisted that in the modern world writing has become allied to death to such an extent that "it is a voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes

[1] Exceptions to this are his essays, including reviews for the *New York Review of Books*, introductions to other writers' works and occasional academic pieces, all of which are written in the critical, i.e., the impersonal, voice. Coetzee did grant occasional interviews during these years, including one, upon winning the Nobel Prize, to the scholar David Attwell with whom he had published *Doubling the Point* (1992), a collection of his critical essays interspersed with interviews. Given his stature in the literary world, however, interviews were few and, for the most part, rather guarded. In recent years, Coetzee has re-entered the public domain without the mask of fiction, publishing *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011* (2013), a series of letters exchanged with the novelist Paul Auster (2013), and *The Good Story* (2015) a book of exchanges with the psychologist Arabella Kurtz. The dialogue was the mode he turned to in *Doubling the Point* as, he asserted, "a way of getting around the impasse of my own monologue" (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 19).

place in the everyday existence of the writer" (Foucault 117). But where Foucault and Barthes gloss over the alliance of death qua mortality and writing, and focus on the more abstract question of disappearance, Coetzee, always critical of purely abstract modes of thinking, refuses such semantic slippage.

Coetzee's engagement through the mode of fiction with questions of authorship and authority see him deliberate upon Barthes and Foucault on the so-called "death of the author", and his experiments with voice and rhetoric seem to align his fiction with Barthes's view that "it is language which speaks, not the author" ("The Death of the Author" 143). Coetzee's use of third-person, present-tense narration in his fictionalised memoirs *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002) establishes a discontinuity between the John that is the subject of the books and the writing subject, dramatising Barthes's breach of the author-as-origin paradigm, and his collected correspondence with the novelist Paul Auster most likely borrows its title from Barthes's essay which argues that "every text is eternally written *here and now*" (145). Coetzee's rejection of the role of the public intellectual and his portrayal of the *dead* writer John Coetzee in *Summertime* (2009) also signal a withdrawal of the author and a reluctance to lay claim to the authority bestowed upon him by contemporary conceptions of authorship, which, despite the sceptical stance toward authorial intention in academic criticism, has retained its prophetic aura. But we should be cautious not to disregard the literal by taking Coetzee's engagement with death as purely a question of disappearance. The apparent endeavour to write an authoritative voice out of his work is ironically convergent with the manifestation of an authorial *presence* in his later novels. In this chapter, I argue that the crux upon which this ironic alliance of distance and proximity turns is a profound commitment to writing with authenticity—that is, in the face of mortality.

Given the exploratory and recursive nature of Coetzee's writing, and the manner in which he revisits and re-evaluates his own work, particularly in his late fiction, the first half of this chapter spans a broad spectrum of his fiction and non-fiction in order to interrogate his engagement with questions of authorship and authority as they relate to the thematic preoccupation with mortality in latter years. I then focus more closely on *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), Coetzee's most experimental novels, which interrogate the work of writing in the face of the impending death of the central characters, both of whom are writers

who share biographical details with Coetzee. Although they are profoundly eschatological, they are not last novels, and they expand on Coetzee's long engagement with the question of how to write *without* authority, which, paradoxically, emerges in Coetzee's late work as the way to *earn* authority. In the final section of the chapter, I explore how Coetzee employs the post-mortem voice in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). In this novel, Coetzee abandons the anti-illusionism and the fragmented experiments of the post-millennial novels and turns to an idealist aesthetic, as if finally he feels he has earned the authority to do so.

The question of authority is a central preoccupation of Coetzee's work from the nineties on, and it is impossible to do justice here to all of the scholarship in this area, but the collection of essays *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction* (2011) is an important contribution. In his introduction, Chris Danta describes literary authority as Janus-faced, "turned outward towards his or her community, but also inward towards the higher authority of his or her own conscience" (xv). The latter becomes increasingly important and urgent in the face of mortality, and the more intimate tones of Coetzee's late novels indicate a profound personal struggle for self-reconciliation. There is also a sense in the late novels, especially in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, of an acute awareness of the humilities brought on by ageing and the encroachment of death: an enforced sense of apartness, of being out of date, or, as Elizabeth Costello puts it, "excluded from the game" (58). But standing outside the fray, as Patrick Hayes notes in *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* (2010), figures throughout Coetzee's oeuvre as a "paradoxical kind of strength in weakness" (252).[2] In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the protagonist JC writes: "Authority must be earned; on the novelist author lies the onus to build up, out of nothing, such authority", and authority is derived in this novel from subjecting the imagination to the fact of death (149). This is not, however, the authority of Walter Benjamin's storyteller, for whom it is the experience of looking back on the totality of life on the verge of extinction that lends form to experience, but the authority of the one who looks forward, who is destitute before death. The alliance of writing and death in Coetzee's work is not a figure for authorial impersonality. In fact, it is the signs of the author's presence and of the purpose and urgency that

[2] This is a central argument of Hayes' *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics After Beckett*, which he develops from Coetzee's 1992 essay "Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry" collected in *Giving Offense* (1996).

confronting death lend to the quest for an authentic writing which grant these late works their power.

Mike Marais has written extensively on Coetzee through the lens of Maurice Blanchot's conception of the space of literature as the space of death. While I focus similarly on death as the source from which Coetzee's late voices emerge, I differ from Marais in that my focus is not on the "trope of death", which is something that belongs to language, but on the spectre of actual mortality, which is palpable in all of the late works.[3] Coetzee's interrogation of "the death of the author", which underscores his late novels, has the weight of real death and of the destitution that is entailed in addressing the fact of death on a level that is not abstract but personal, corporeal and political.

The metafictional impulse is strong throughout Coetzee's oeuvre and particularly so in the late fiction. Consequently, a body of criticism has begun to emerge that attends to what Carrol Clarkson calls "the scene of writing" (14). Clarkson's *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009) combines stylistic analysis with close attention to Coetzee's studies in linguistics, pioneering a shift in the landscape of Coetzee studies toward a new focus on the author and the practice of writing. The opening of the Coetzee archive at the Ransom Center in 2013 promises a wealth of illuminating research into Coetzee's working processes, some of which has already begun to emerge, most notably David Attwell's literary biography *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015), which reveals with acuity and sensitivity the extent to which the life is manifest in the work, as well as several of the essays in a special issue of the journal *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (2016). While my reading focuses on the ways in which Coetzee's work controverts certain aspects of the "death of the author" hypothesis, this is not a matter of resurrecting the author in the mode of self-expression, and interpretation along biographical lines is not the goal of this analysis. Neither, however, is it my intention to pay sole attention to the novels as linguistic artefacts cut off from their mode of production.

Where I see Coetzee departing from Barthes is in his implicit refusal to submit entirely to the view that language speaks the subject. In "Remembering

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[3] See Marais's "Death and the Space of the Response to the Other in J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*" in which he refers to "the trope of death" (85, 88, 89). For more readings of Coetzee's work that invoke Blanchot's conception of literature's relation to death see Marais's "The Incurious Seeker" and "J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination", and Mike Piero's "Coetzee, Blanchot, and the Work of Writing".

Texas" (1984), a short reflection on his time as a graduate student in linguistics during the 1970s, Coetzee recalls beginning to suspect "that languages spoke people or at the very least spoke through them" (*Doubling the Point* 53). This Whorfian view is still apparent in a 2009 letter to the novelist Paul Auster, published in *Here and Now* (2013), in which Coetzee comments on the monolingual character of public life in Australia, where he has lived since 2002. He remarks that "relations to reality are mediated in a notably uninterrogated way through a single language, English", and reports growing more sceptical of "the Anglo weltanschauung, with its inbuilt templates of how one thinks, how one feels, how one relates to other people, and so forth" (73). As a linguist and translator, Coetzee is acutely aware of how grammatical and semantic structures determine conceptions of reality. However, there is no Barthesian triumphalism here and the restrictions that monolingualism places on imaginative life as well as social relations is a crucial concern in *The Childhood of Jesus*.

Coetzee's language is notoriously spare and austere, and this derives from his scrupulous alertness to the relations between language and power. The rhetorical experiments of his post-millennial period endeavour to expose, and thereby attenuate, the forces of power consciously or unconsciously exerted in discourse. *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* are anatomies of power, force fields of competing discourses, dialogically staged so as to undermine themselves from within. In *Doubling the Point* (1992), Coetzee claims that writing "shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago", and the thematic concern in the late fiction with letting go of desire thematises the way in which the fictions are constructed to disclose and debilitate the desiring forces within them (18). It is a reflexive project that entails two opposing activities, the first of which is what Foucault describes as a voluntary effacement of the author, the second a return of the author as rigorous self-scrutiniser. Subjecting language to this degree of scrutiny provides a way of exploring how cultural and historical values are engrained, and thereby unconsciously appropriated, in discourse, for instance, the rhetoric of the politician and the public intellectual, the ideologies of liberalism, individualism and rationalism, religious values regarding moral law, altruism, transcendence, and so on. It grants perspective on the ways in which language *does* speak the subject and makes way for a more authentic form of

writing. However, it also entails exposing the self-interest and the defence mechanisms that are at work in the production of meaning. At a fundamental level this amounts to a radical anti-illusionism that exposes the writing subject to the most rigorous self-critique and to a confrontation with mortality without recourse, without transcendence.

According to the Foucauldian thesis, there is no possibility of a writing—or a subject, for that matter—that is free of inherited values and internalised ideologies, and the drive for purity taken to its logical extreme ends with either erasure, silence and death, or the consolations of language games and formal play. For Foucault, the author is a subcategory of the subject, and his analysis is founded on the claim that "the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse" (Foucault 138). The text, he claims, is not a reflection of the author's self but of all the discourses that replace the author qua subject. At the end of "What is an Author?", Foucault addresses the relationships that reading establishes between the author, the text, the reader and the variable social contexts of the text's emergence and its reception. These relationships comprise the inhabitation of spaces left by the author's absence. What is important is the text's position within a matrix of discourses, and meaning is produced through a work of appropriation.

But Coetzee's writing, particularly in his most recent works *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), demonstrates an obstinate drive for a pure mimetic power, a mode of discourse cleansed of cliché and rhetoric and a poetic truth that exceeds received values and ideologies, a form of truth beyond what Nietzsche termed a "mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms" (*The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* 146). Showing the stalling of the creative consciousness resigned to the consolations of form is a played-out metafictional gambit, an anti-illusionism about which Coetzee claims: "there is only so much mileage to be got out of the ploy", calling it "a marking of time, a phase of recuperation, in the history of the novel. The question is, what next?" (*Doubling the Point* 27). All of Coetzee's post-millennial fiction can be seen to grapple with the question of what is next for the novel, beyond the shattered enlightenment illusions of freedom and transcendent rationalism, as well as the nihilism and disavowals of authenticity implicit in postmodern conceptions of language. His experiments in

novelistic form are driven by the ethical and metaphysical challenges entailed in a writing that is increasingly underscored by subjecting the literary imagination to unfreedom and the fact of death. Death in Coetzee's late fiction marks a limit to what is appropriable. The solitude of death, the fact that one cannot be accompanied beyond its gate, is stressed in his novels. If preparing for death is a motivating factor for Coetzee's writing, it is not its end. Rather it is the preparation for death through writing that opens up new possibilities for the novel.

There is a passage in *Boyhood*, the first of Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs, that implicitly refutes the Foucauldian thesis while also directly indicating the alliance of mortality and self-interrogation that will come to the fore in his later fiction:

> In this silence he tries to imagine his death. He subtracts himself from everything: from the school, from the house, from his mother; he tries to imagine the days wheeling through their course without him. But he cannot. Always there is something left behind, something small and black, like a nut, like an acorn that has been in the fire, dry, ashy, hard, incapable of growth, but *there*. He can imagine himself dying but he cannot imagine himself disappearing. Try as he will, he cannot annihilate the last residue of himself. (112)

The structural impossibility of imagining oneself out of existence unavoidably leads to the infinite regression of the reasoning consciousness, but to imagine oneself dying is not a logical impossibility, and it is for Coetzee the more interesting pursuit, in both ethical and aesthetic terms. In his late fiction, facing death is increasingly posited as the source of truth. However, even given the hypothesis that there is a residue of absolute truth behind or within the work, beyond what Foucault terms the "author function", there is little profit to be had from attempting the impossible and dubious critical task of exhumation—impossible because the facts are inaccessible, but also because this is precisely what Coetzee claims to be aiming for in his writing: seeking the truth of the self, not in terms of biographical accuracy or universal truths, but the poetic truth or the kind of truth that can come from making up stories to find out where one's blind spots lie. Self-interrogation and an ethical concern with truth-

telling is a constant motivating factor throughout his fiction. Truth, he claims, "is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing". He describes the activity of writing as an interplay between "the push into the future […] and a resistance", which is two-fold: the "psychic" resistance, that is, the tendency to resist unpalatable truths, and "an automatism built into language" (*Doubling the Point* 18). Language may certainly speak, but the question of authenticity remains open, if only because the struggle to find a form of truth in language is precisely the subject of the work. It is this endeavour rather than the truth itself that finds its way onto the page. He claims: "It is not the theme that counts but thematizing. What themes emerge in the process are heuristic, provisional, and in that sense insignificant" ("Thematizing" 289). This focus on praxis is evident in the highly reflexive novels of the immediate post-millennial period, which are characterised by dialogism and traversals of fictional planes, movements that do not merely bring about the work but are the very substance of the fiction.

Despite his reticence in latter years to explain his work, there are insights to be gleaned from his readings of other writers about what is important to him in his own fiction. His review of William Gass's translation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* reveals his attention to art as praxis rather than production: "What we lose, as Gass tightens up Rilke's terminology and oils the joints of his syntax, is the drama of a poet at the height of his powers striving to find words for intuitions at the limit of his grasp" (*Stranger Shores* 86). Similarly, the power of Coetzee's work lies in the evidence on the page of the drama of the writer's grappling. This is a wrestling with language but also with mortality. For both Rilke and Coetzee, it is in addressing the frontiers of life itself that the limits of language are tested and expanded. Of the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's epilogue to Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "The Chandos Letter", he maintains: "Elizabeth, Lady C, claims to be writing at the limits of language. Would it not be insulting to her if I were diligently to follow after her, explaining what she means but is not smart enough to say?" (Coetzee and Attwell). Of course, it is Coetzee who is placing himself at the boundary of his own life and writing at the limits of language. The text is thus figured as the traces of a katabasis, which commands a certain reading practice, an Orphean pursuit, following and tracking the paths of resistance through the movements of language, as the mind strives for the true words. Through their processes of self-scrutiny and self-critique,

Coetzee's post-millennial fictions implicitly repel the critical appropriation of spaces left by authorial absence.

Coetzee enters directly into dialogue with Barthes and Foucault in *Diary of a Bad Year*. In one of the short essays that comprise part of the book, entitled "On authority in fiction", the protagonist JC writes: "Announcements of the death of the author and of authorship made by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault a quarter of a century ago came down to the claim that the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks" (*Diary of a Bad Year* 149). The phrasing here is resonant of Nietzsche, particularly as he was taken up by the deconstructive school. In *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man cites Nietzsche's comments on rhetoric: "language is itself the result of purely rhetorical tricks and devices. … Language is rhetoric, for it only intends to convey a *doxa* (opinion), not an *episteme* (truth)" (105).[4] Nietzsche is cited several times throughout the novel and Paul Patton notes a similarity with Nietzsche's view that our opinions are not our own but that without them we are nothing, "not unless we belong to that exceptional class of individuals who really are the authors of their opinions" (Patton 60). Patton finds in JC a spirit of resignation to the fact that he is not exceptional and a renunciation of his youthful disengagement "from the mass" and of an art "that lacks generosity, fails to celebrate life, lacks love" (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 170). But it would be problematic to draw too strong a link between Nietzsche's aesthetics and Coetzee's. Although both writers embark from positions of epistemological relativity, Coetzee's aesthetic is in many ways contrary to Nietzsche's. While Nietzsche declared a transvaluation of all values, and embraced style as the pure expression of the will to power, what is manifest in Coetzee's late work is a gradual renunciation of the will and an attempt to write *without* style. Implicit in Coetzee's aesthetic is the idea that it is not by exerting the will that one learns to live with the limitations of human knowledge, but by confronting the desolation of one's own mortality. Only then can truth emerge, where truth entails not epistemic certainty but *commitment*, to the self and to the other, at the point when opinions and beliefs are tested *in extremis*.

Against the figure of the writer as rhetorical trickster, JC pits Tolstoy, whose authority, "[n]ow that the dust has settled" on Barthes and Foucault, "remains

[4] This is Paul de Man's own translation of a section taken from Nietzsche's "Lecture Notes on Rhetoric" collected in *Gesammelte Werke* 5:300.

untouched" (150). Coetzee examines questions of authority and authenticity in Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky in his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts" (1985), in which he speculates that Tolstoy had exhausted the "novelistic motions that must be gone through before truth may emerge", the cycles of doubt and self-interrogation. He finds evidence in Tolstoy's late novel *The Kreutzer Sonata* of "a (rash?) decision to *set down the truth*, finally, as though after a lifetime of exploring one had acquired the credentials, amassed the authority, to do so" (*Doubling the Point* 293). Framing his observations on authorship and authority in a voice not his own signals a declension on Coetzee's part to claim comparable authority. It is a reflexive gesture, and, ironically, given the commentary on Barthes and Foucault, a rhetorical trick. By foregrounding rhetorical devices and polemical arguments in these late novels, Coetzee neutralises, or, at the very least, slows down rhetorical momentum. This discloses the ways in which language is wielded as an instrument of control, laying bare ulterior motives of desire and competitiveness in JC's discourse. It reveals the ways in which language speaks the subject by exposing discourse as an instrument not of truth or dialogue but of power. The respective trajectories of both *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* trace a gradual renunciation of power that ends at the verge of death, which is the point, for Coetzee, where writing begins.

Authority, claims JC, must be earned by learning to speak without it. He disparages authority of the variety that an author might acquire by winning prestigious prizes, the kind of authority extraneous to the writing. This is the authority that Foucault attributes to the author's name as designator of the status of a set of opinions. Ironically, this is the very sort of authority conferred upon JC whose essays are for a collection entitled *Strong Opinions*, the premise of which is that "[s]ix eminent writers pronounce on what is wrong with today's world" (*Diary of a Bad Year* 21). JC jumps at the "opportunity to grumble in public" (23). The language used here betrays Coetzee's distaste for this form of proselytising, evident from his own refusal to take the public platform as an author with all the baggage that the term bears; instead, he adheres to the role of storyteller. In another essay, JC writes of Harold Pinter's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he censured Tony Blair for his involvement in Iraq: "When one speaks in one's own person – that is not through one's art […] using the rhetoric of the agora, one embarks on a contest

which one is likely to lose" (127). The names Elizabeth Costello and JC are fictional markers, dispelling the claim to authority that Foucault finds in the author's name. The name "remains at the contours of texts—separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence", that is, their endowment with the author function, the mark, according to Foucault, of the text's status and authority based on the person of the author (Foucault 123). Despite their many similarities to Coetzee's own views, the arguments are fictionally framed so as to mitigate their authoritative thrust. Rather than a voluntary self-effacement or an eschewal of authority, such strategies might also, and more fruitfully, be construed as emerging from a process of intimate self-interrogation and thereby seeking a different kind of authority that increasingly underscores the late fiction: the authority of the one who stands before death.

Patton comments on the aphoristic quality of JC's opinions and their consequent existence "in an open-ended field of interpretive possibilities", and notes that by placing them within a fictional frame, Coetzee provides them with "a context internal to the book itself" and thus places them within a dialectical relation that limits, or at least directs, the range of possible interpretations (56, 57). In an early essay on Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Coetzee writes that "having incorporated into itself all possible interpretations of itself, the work of art has, like a closed system of mirrors, shut itself off forever from interpretation and become a monument of unageing intellect" (6). Although one cannot say the same for Coetzee's novel, there is a manifest desire to direct the interpretive possibilities, and it is perhaps not incidental that Coetzee borrows the title *Strong Opinions* from a book of Nabokov's collected interviews.[5] Just as Coetzee eschews the authority of the author as sibylline orator or diagnostician of culture, he is equally condemning of the "birth of the reader" in some of its more intrusive and distorting manifestations. In fact, the very strategies that indicate authorial withdrawal can also be seen as ways of controlling

[5] A similar drive for control might be noted of his fictional autobiographies, especially *Summertime* which David Attwell describes as "pre-emptive evasive action", noting the natural anxiety of writers about biography in general and more specifically what will be made of it after death (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 22).

the possible meanings that might be drawn from the novels and of intercepting certain readings.[6]

At a fundamental level, Foucault's and Barthes's respective analyses are premised on the notion that language generates meaning, both internally within the text and simultaneously in its reception, rather than the author determining the meaning of the text externally and antecedently. Neither of these formulations seems to fit with Coetzee's late fiction, due to the evidence of the author's experimentation and struggle with questions of authenticity and truth, his manifest refusal to allow meanings to settle, and the consequent manner in which the late novels resist appropriation. In the companion volume to his book on Coetzee, Derek Attridge writes that "what we respond to when we respond creatively and responsibly is the enduring event of literature that the labor made possible, not to the labor as such—to the work as working rather than as worked" (*The Singularity of Literature* 103). In Coetzee's post-millennial novels, however, with their mingling of autobiographical elements, polemic and stylistic experimentation, such a claim cannot be upheld.[7] It is the writer's engagement with the conventions of fiction, his interrogation of rhetoric and discourse and his exposition of the coercive strategies at play in writing, that are, for the most part, on the page in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. Where the meaning of the work manifestly lies, at least partly, in its making, one cannot focus purely on language itself, without asking questions—questions that may, in a certain light, be considered naïve—about motives. Yet, these questions arise because of the waywardness, the deliberate incoherence and the difficulty of the fiction, as well as the way in which the novels throw into question the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction.

Testing the protean possibilities of language and setting metaphorical lures are classic Coetzeean manoeuvres, and there is often a sense that Coetzee is setting riddles for his readers. In his *Observer* review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, Benjamin

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[6] See Katy Iddiols's essay "Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies", for a discussion of how Coetzee "*uses interpretation as a device in his writing* in order to illuminate it", and to disrupt readings that seek to "overpower the text's own voice" (185, 186).

[7] This is not so much a critique of Attridge's book, but rather a remark on Coetzee's late work as exceptional in respect of this interrogation of literary praxis, which cannot be ascribed to postmodernist metafiction because it comprises a genuine striving for authenticity. In his more recent book *The Work of Literature* (2015), Attridge, while still arguing that the "work" of literature is realised in the experience of reading, acknowledges that "creative labour is not something left behind but something sensed in the reading" (5).

Markovits writes: "He knows what he's doing but he's not going to tell you what that is, and I spent much of [the novel] trying to figure it out". However, this cryptic quality to the work is likely not entirely determined. Coetzee's fiction is exploratory, asking questions to which, if they are proffered, answers are tentative and provisional. The question mark is a ubiquitous lexical item in the late fiction and it is not always rhetorical. Even where questions are rhetorical their function is often not to underline a manifest point but to deliberately disrupt argumentative force and emphasise the interrogative nature of the writing. Here is JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* on the question of whether, writing in his "mother tongue" of English, it is really he who is controlling the discourse:

> At the end of the day of writing-work I emerge with pages of what I am accustomed to call *what I wanted to say*. But in a more cautious spirit I now ask myself: Are these words, printed out on paper, truly what I wanted to say? Is it ever good enough, as a phenomenological account, to say that somewhere deep inside I knew what I wanted to say, after which I searched out the appropriate verbal tokens and moved them around until I had succeeded in saying what I wanted to say? Would it not be more accurate to say that I fiddle with a sentence until the words on the page 'sound' or 'are' right, and then stop fiddling and say to myself, 'that must be what you wanted to say'? If so, who is it who judges what sounds or does not sound right? Is it necessarily I ('I')? (196)

Questions of truth and agency, particularly as they relate to the English language and its imperial and poetic associations, are central to Coetzee's late writing, which seeks to get beyond second-hand proselytising and the weight of the canon and strives for a purified idiom where a form of truth might emerge. In *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, this quest takes the authors within the novels, and one might speculate Coetzee himself, to the point of facing mortality. It is the very act of self-interrogation and the undermining of discursive arguments that we find on the page, so that the production of meaning cannot be solely contained in the figure of the author, or that of the reader, or in language itself, but in the network of relations that the questions generate.

Issues of miscommunication and conflict between individuals and between modes of discourse mark this late work, and resolution is often not possible, or even sought. This is particularly true of *Elizabeth Costello*, in which debates are staged between various disciplines: literature and gender and racial politics in "Realism" and "The Novel in Africa"; poetry and philosophy in "The Lives of Animals" chapters; literature, religion and the classics in "The Problem of Evil" and "Eros". In each case, the lesson ends in uncertainty and confusion. In the final lesson, "At the Gate", Elizabeth finds herself in a parody of Kafka's "Before the Law". She is petitioning at a gate, apparently the gate of death, but the way is blocked. She is not permitted to pass without providing a statement of belief, which must be approved by a panel of judges. When faced with imminent death, she finds herself unable to commit to any belief; all conviction and rhetorical commitment fail her. "*I am a writer, a trader in fictions*," she writes in her petition "*I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way*" (195). The petition fails and, at a loss for what will suffice to gain passage beyond the gate, Elizabeth interrogates the word "belief", only to find that "she lives, in a certain sense, by belief", passing from one belief to another "pausing, balancing, then moving on", to which she ascribes the less totalising and more intimate term "*Fidelities*" (222, 224). In this parodic literalisation of the death of the author, it is the fact of death qua mortality that places a demand for more than a writing in which the author disappears behind the text, where, according to Barthes, "the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without the need for it to be filled by interlocutors" ("The Death of the Author" 145). The gate at which Elizabeth stands is "evidently her gate and hers alone", her preparation for death a singular endeavour (223). Her passage is not certain and the fiction ends in impasse. Death, if it indeed occurs, is off-stage; it is not appropriable. The death of the author, if it is to exceed mere linguistic elision, must take place within the intimacy of the *I*, even if that means—and in Coetzee's fiction it does—an *I* without authority, a *he* or a *she*.

Fidelities and betrayals

As death becomes more central to the fiction, however, *depictions* of death, which were present in his early work, become notably absent. It is as if, with growing mortal awareness, the *obscenity* of death comes into focus. *Age of Iron (1990)* and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) mark the beginning of a profound preoccupation with death in Coetzee's oeuvre, and, crucially, they are the first of his novels in which death is not directly represented. In his notes for *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee wrote: "A story is like a road. What do we hope to find at the end of the road? Oneself. One's death" (qtd. in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* 31). This idea of writing as a preparation for death dominates the fiction of the nineties and the decade after the turn of the millennium, but in *The Master of Petersburg* the focus is not primarily on the death of the author, Coetzee's fictionalised Dostoevsky, but the death of his step-son. Although not an autobiographical text, it was written only a few years after the death of Coetzee's own son in 1989, and it marks the beginning of a more personal and introspective quality to the fiction.[8]

The Master of Petersburg charts a fictional Dostoevsky's attempt to imagine the final moments of his stepson Pavel before he fell to his death.[9] Near the beginning of the novel, he sits down to write: "But the writing, he fears, would be that of a madman – vileness, obscenity. […] What flows on to the paper is neither blood nor ink but an acid, black, with an unpleasing green sheen when the light glances off it" (18). Victor Brombert argues with acuity for an association between guilt and writing, particularly writing about death, in Coetzee's work.[10] However, toward the end of *The Master of Petersburg* it is apparent that the source of that shame lies not in the fascination with death per se, but in the act of betrayal that is appropriating another's death for the work of writing. In the final chapter, Coetzee's Dostoevsky thinks "nothing to do but fall", and he prepares his materials for writing,

[8] For an account of how Nicholas Coetzee's death influenced the writing of *The Master of Petersburg* as manifest in the notes and drafts of the novel, see David Attwell's *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (194-206).

[9] In reality, Pavel outlived Dostoevsky. However, Dostoevsky three-year-old son Aleksei died while he was working on *The Brothers Karamazov*.

[10] See "J. M. Coetzee and the Scandal of Death" in *Musings on Mortality* (2013), in which Brombert detects "undercurrents of guilt associated with the performance of writing" (139)

admitting to himself that it is "[n]ot a matter of fidelity" but of "betrayal – betrayal of love first of all. […] *Perversion*: everything and everyone to be turned to another use, to be gripped to him and fall with him" (235). He sits for a long time unable to write, and it is only when he finds the courage to "go naked as a babe into the jaws of hell" that the block lifts: "An image comes to him that for the past month he has flinched from: Pavel, naked and broken and bloody in the morgue […]. Nothing is private any more" (241). The vision gives him license finally to write, and he pens two stories, not of Pavel's death, but anecdotes taken from Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* based on Stavrogin, a character of such evil that Coetzee must imagine Dostoevsky so poisoned with grief as to conceive of him. In "Confession and Double Thoughts", Coetzee reads Stavrogin as a figure for the perverse pleasures of self-abasement that are engendered in confession. The end of confession must, he argues, entail a process of spiritual self-forgiveness that would "have to remain unarticulated" (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 291). *The Master of Petersburg* ends not with self-forgiveness and silence but with the work of fiction writing and a confession of the betrayals he has committed in that act of appropriation. The price of those betrayals, for Dostoevsky, and perhaps for Coetzee in this, the darkest of his novels, is "that he had to give up his soul in return" (Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* 250). The scene of death remains utterly central but off-stage for all subsequent novels.

In his reading of *The Master of Petersburg*, Mike Marais asserts that Coetzee uses the myth of Orpheus as an analogue for writing, and claims: "Writing is inspired by a desire for that which is beyond representation: it originates in a desire for death" ("Death and the Space of the Response to the Other in J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*" 90). However, it is not so much a desire for death that the myth, or indeed Coetzee's novel, figures, but a desire for the dead beloved. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, JC asserts: "The story of Eurydice has been misunderstood. What the story is about is the solitariness of death. […] She believes that Orpheus loves her enough to come and save her. And indeed Orpheus comes. But in the end the love Orpheus feels is not strong enough" (159). Marais draws on Blanchot's reading of Orpheus to claim that the representation of the dead Eurydice is a betrayal of her radical alterity and reads this as a figure for a necessary betrayal inherent in writing which seeks "to reveal […] that which revelation destroys" (92). In my reading,

however, it is not the radical alterity of death that bars authentic representation. Rather, it is representation of the other's death that is inauthentic, because it cannot be inhabited. To declare that the writer breaches an abstract law of representation by deploying "the trope of death", which stands as a figure for writing in general, seems a betrayal of the singularity of the work. Coetzee's writing implicitly refutes this kind of abstraction. What is at stake here, in this most harrowing of Coetzee's works, is a breach of privacy, both that of the self and of the dead. The betrayal is not of an ontological nature but an ethical one.

Coetzee first deploys free indirect style with pronounced use of the third person in *The Master of Petersburg*, a mode of narration that distinctively achieves a simultaneity of intimacy and distance. It comes to dominate his writing from this point on and is underlined in "He and His Man".[11] This mode of narration, with its effect of proximity at a distance, is concomitant with a more autobiographical or, to adapt a term of Coetzee's, *autre*biographical, phase in his oeuvre.[12] Its deployment, together with the present tense, in the first two of his fictionalised memoirs *Boyhood* and *Youth*, where first-person, past-tense narration is standard to the genre, is disconcerting. The writing self is kept at a remove from the fictional self to pry open a space for the work of self-scrutiny and overtly distinguishes the author function from the writer—although this is not to say that both are not present. The configuration is dramatised in *Summertime* (2009), the third of his trilogy of memoirs, which recounts five years in the life of the *dead* writer John Coetzee pieced together by a fictional biographer from notebooks and interviews with figures from that period of his life. Taken at face value, such strategies, along with his use of

[11] This form of narration is used in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), *Boyhood* (1997), *Disgrace* (1999), *Youth* (2002), "He and His Man" (2003), in most of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and the related stories published separately, and in *Slow Man* (2005). Early works are, for the most part, narrated in the first person. Third-person free indirect style is employed in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), but the name K, resonant of Kafka's novels, rather than the more impersonal "he" is used throughout. *Diary of a Bad Year* (2009) and *Summertime* (2011) are exceptions, but they are characterized by distancing strategies of their own. Coetzee returns to free indirect style in the third person in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016).

[12] At the close of *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee writes of the pivotal place that the essay "Confession and Double Thoughts" (written in 1982-83) occupies in his intellectual life. He begins by referring to himself in the third person but this morphs into first person towards the close of the passage. On his studies in linguistics he asserts: "The discipline within which he (and *he* now begins to feel closer to *I: autre*biography shades back into autobiography) had trained himself/myself to think brought illuminations that I can't imagine him or me reaching by any other route. But the essay on confession, as I reread it now, marks the beginning of a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world, his situation and perhaps still mine" (394).

alter-egos in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, gesture towards an avoidance, by dialogic means, of the circularity of self-interest and self-doubt that first-person narration risks. However, beyond this, Coetzee's mingling of fiction and non-fiction, his problematizing of first-person narration, and his implicit critique of the novel of development, representative of progress and self-fashioning, also carve out a critical space from which to explore the legacies of individualism and idealism associated with the genre of the novel.

Coetzee is especially sensitive to the genre's imperialist associations, its legacy as primarily an invention of occidental modernity. Terry Eagleton describes the novel as "a sign of our freedom", claiming: "In the modern world, the only rules which are binding are those which we invent for ourselves. […] It is we who give form and meaning to reality, and the novel is a model of this creative act" (*The English Novel* 17). A comparable view is voiced by the African novelist Emanuel Egudu in "Lesson 2" of *Elizabeth Costello*, "The Novel in Africa", to underline the malleability of the term and its amenability to adaptation and subversion: "the word *novel*, when it entered the languages of Europe, had the vaguest of meanings: it meant the form of writing that was formless, that had no rules, that made up its own rules as it went along […] The African novel, the true African novel is an oral novel" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 44-45). The problematics of cultural appropriation and the question of embodiment as a site of resistance to Enlightenment rationalism are opened to debate without resolution. Elizabeth disagrees that there can be such a thing as an oral novel and yet she also argues for a form of writing that is embodied, particularly in "The Lives of Animals" sections of the book.

At the end of "The Novel in Africa", a cluster of allusions guards against an unproblematic privileging of the body, as well as an abstract valorisation of alterity. Elizabeth is about to embark on an excursion to Macquarie Island from the cruise ship on which she and Egudu are travelling as guest lecturers. The ship is surrounded by penguins, and Elizabeth thinks of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* and the flights of Poe's imagination to a world he had never encountered, populated with "dark islanders" who "seemed ordinary folk *just like us*, but when they smiled and showed their teeth the teeth were not white but black. It sent a shiver down his spine, and rightly so" (54). But Poe's imagination did not have so far to travel to encounter the dark *other*, considering the racial tensions

that were escalating in America at the time he was writing. Elizabeth is helped ashore by a sailor whose blue eyes and blonde hair juxtapose sharply with Poe's islanders and in whose arms "she rides as safe as a baby" (55). These allusions to imperial conceptions of otherness are coupled with the alterity of the animal, implicitly drawing a correspondence between practices of cruelty and oppression. She recalls reading about the penguin industry that flourished on the island in the nineteenth century: "Hundreds of thousands of penguins were clubbed to death here and flung into cast-iron steam boilers to be broken down into useful oil and useless residue" (55). The problem of how to live under the weight of shame that awareness of, and hence complicity with, regimes of death-dealing is a crucial one throughout Coetzee's oeuvre, and particularly so in *Disgrace* (1999), which was published in the same year as "The Novel in Africa" first appeared as a journal article.[13]

Disgrace deals with the problematics of atonement and implicitly critiques the spectacle of confession with its abstract economy of sin and expiation, whereby the wrongs of the past are symbolically offset by the abjection of the guilty. There are obvious parallels with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings that took place between 1996 and 1998, after the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. David Lurie, the novel's protagonist, refuses to plead guilty to allegations of abuse in the aftermath of an affair with one of his students, citing "the rights of desire" (89). However, the novel charts Lurie's relinquishment of those rights and his confrontation with his own mortality, when he and his daughter are the victims of a brutal attack. At a point of spiritual destitution, Lurie dedicates himself to disposing of the corpses of dead dogs. This incongruous and partial solution to living under the weight of disgrace is crucially linked to Lurie's own growing awareness of ageing and his coming to terms with mortality, and it sets forth an ethic grounded in mortal confrontation will underscore all of Coetzee's postmillennial fiction. Toward the end of *Disgrace*, David's daughter Lucy gives up the deeds to her land claiming: "perhaps that is a good point to start from again. […] To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. […] Like a dog" (205). If, as Barthes asserts, writing begins when the author enters into his own death, for Coetzee this is not an abstract proposition but rather entails a real acknowledgement of mortality,

[13] Occasional Paper no. 17 of the Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California at Berkeley, 1999.

the bodily mortality that belongs to humans and dogs rather than an abstract disappearance.

This ethic of mortality is also reflected at the end of "The Novel in Africa" when Elizabeth is exploring Macquarie Island and is confronted by an albatross, Coleridge's potent symbol of guilt. At the same time, she encounters the cruise ship singer who she had spotted leaving Egudu's cabin that morning. Feeling unusually uninhibited due to the island setting, she asks the singer what she finds attractive in Egudu, and the women replies that his voice makes her "shudder" (57). This is almost certainly a reference to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, and the idea of art as an encounter with the new, the radically *other* or the "cryptically shut", especially given the references to Poe, whose art Adorno particularly associates with the shudder (Adorno 20).[14] Recalling her own tryst with Egudu when she was a young woman, Elizabeth recalls teasing him flirtatiously and asking him to show her "what an oral poet can do", upon which "he laid her out, lay upon her, put his lips to her ears, opened them, breathed his breath into her, showed her" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 58). As Stephen Mulhall points out, the phrase "laid her out" evokes an image of a corpse rather than a living body (Mulhall 192). The merging of death and the erotic in this image presents the encounter with the *other* as exotic, alluring and dangerous, but it is this constellation of otherness, eroticism and death that Coetzee's work implicitly denies. His late work eschews rhetorical passion, the eroticisation of death and the Adornian shudder in favour of a writing that strives to begin from a point of *bare life*, to borrow Giorgio Agamben's phrase for life exposed to death. Elizabeth's nomadic existence in this novel and in *Slow Man* (2005), and the figure of the refugee in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *The Childhood of Jesus*, align Coetzee's aesthetic with Agamben's theory of bare life presented in *Homo Sacer*, where it is the figure of the refugee who stands testament to the crisis of modern sovereignty.[15] In Coetzee's fiction, it is only by relinquishing all authority, by shedding the fiction of sovereign subjectivity, that the authority to write can be assumed. It is the older Elizabeth, "excluded from the game" of desire, who

[14] Adorno cites Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* as a pioneering work that heralded modernity's "freedom from normal referentiality" (19). He finds Poe's aesthetic exemplary in its capacity to provoke the shudder of the new (20, 298).

[15] In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben argues that if refugees "represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state, this is because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*, they put the ordinary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis" (131).

approaches the ethical position of destitution before death from which writing can begin (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 58).

Daniel Defoe's Crusoe might be read as the very antithesis of bare life, the classic exemplar of the myth of the sovereign, self-determining subject, under which the realist novel prospered. In *Foe* (1986), Coetzee appropriates Defoe's story to critique the patriarchal hegemony and Western-centrism of the canon, and he exerts a comparable critique in "He and His Man". Published in the same year as *Elizabeth Costello*, it also deals with the ethics and aesthetics of writing and death. The story finds Crusoe, called Robin in Coetzee's text, older now than Defoe's Robinson and returned to England from his island after the successful publication of his adventures. He awaits reports from "his man", who dashes "hither and thither across the kingdom, from one spectacle of death to another (clubbings, beheadings), sending in report after report" (18), but he is also the author of "his man", making him first a businessman fleeing the floodwaters of the Thames, then a saddler touring London during the plague. Drawing on Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and his *Tour thro' the whole Island of Great Britain*, Coetzee dramatises the public and private aspects of writing by splitting the author of the tales into "he" and "his man", the latter a man of the world, the former a solitary man living out his days alone "for he finds no joy in society, having grown used to the solitude on the island" (18). The fictions of the authors Defoe, Coetzee, Robin ("he") and "his man" are arranged within each other like a set of Russian dolls. What moors the story is death. This is what keeps Robin, "his man" and presumably Coetzee too, tied to the text. All the tales of death that "his man" sends are figures for the solitude of Robin's island. Death is the source of all the tales and, finally, it is what limits the freedom of the self-determining subject. In using the shortened name of Defoe's character, Coetzee makes an allusion to Robben Island, the prison off the coast of Coetzee's native Cape Town, where Nelson Mandela, who had stood before a Nobel audience ten years previously, was held for much of his time as a political prisoner.[16] The ideal of the free self-determining subject could not be upheld in Apartheid-era South Africa, where the freedom of the individual was routinely curtailed, and Coetzee's fiction is

[16] Robin is the name by which Crusoe's parrot, mimicking Crusoe himself, refers to him in both Defoe's novel and Coetzee's text.

committed to dispelling an unproblematised liberal humanist notion of the subject.[17] Through the allusion, the ideals of individualism and self-fashioning that find expression in the imperialist form of the realist novel are checked by the reality of incarceration and exposure to death. Death is the stay that keeps the story from crumbling into abstraction and regressing to the unconscious idealism of the imperialist novel.

The complexities of Coetzee's irony are such that he uses a metaphor, or certainly a metaphorical lure, to destabilise metaphorical thinking. Often in his writing, it is the literal sense of what is written that is both the most important and the least obvious. The first of the reports that Robin receives from his man, which forms the opening sequence of the story, is an account of the "decoy ducks" of Lincolnshire: tame ducks sent to Holland and Germany to lure foreign ducks back to the English fens, where they are herded into nets and clubbed to death (16). In this succinct tale of exploitation the metaphorical possibilities abound, but the anecdote also gives the reader/auditor a clue as to how Coetzee's story works. The invitations to allegorise that are offered throughout the story work as decoys that cover up the very real suffering and death meted out in oppressive regimes, as well as the suffering of animals (including ducks) that are farmed inhumanely for commercial gain, a crucial issue in *Elizabeth Costello*. In his essay "Zbigniew Herbert and the Figure of the Censor", Coetzee writes that: "what the interpreter/censor desires from Herbert and looks for in him is second-order writing (metaphor / allegory) that will open itself to interpretation—to interpretation as belief in a heavenly abstract order". But this is a level of abstraction or doubleness that is not there: "Herbert's fidelity remains to first-order language, the language of the flesh" (*Giving Offense* 161). Coetzee has also professed his allegiance to the language of the flesh. In *Doubling the Point*, he reflects: "If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels" (248). Here, Coetzee explicitly counters an abstract aesthetics of absence and deferral with the vulnerable

[17] Examples include the protagonist's struggle in *Life and Times of Michael K* "to stay out of all the camps", the Magistrate's fight, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), to "live outside the time of history that Empire imposes on its subjects", and, in *Age of Iron*, Elizabeth Curran's acknowledgement of the necessity of turning one's back in order not to be paralysed by shame, until, on the threshold of death, one cannot turn one's back anymore. The problematics of discursive freedom are also explored in his non-fiction book on censorship *Giving Offense*.

body. The mortal embodied subject is at the centre of his aesthetic and, in the late work especially, this is not the vital desiring body but the body on the verge of death.

Extreme anti-illusionism, however, which finds its acme, as Coetzee sees it, in Beckett's post-Trilogy residua, proves for him a dead-end, both literally and figuratively. There is a commitment from very early on in Coetzee's writing, stemming in no small measure from the stylistic analysis he undertook of Beckett's English fiction for his doctorate, to circumvent the deadlock of the self-enclosed consciousness. Despite his stylistic, even mathematical, focus on Beckett, pure form did not interest Coetzee, and he later abandoned his interest in technical stylistics. In a 1973 essay, he writes that the subject of Beckett's late works "is strictly the annihilation of illusion by consciousness. They are miniature mechanisms for switching themselves off […]. Like a switch, they have no content, only shape" (*Doubling the Point* 49). Fictions that buckle under the weight of the massacres of the mid-twentieth century, corpses of would-be fictions, they put seriously into question the viability of the novel to represent contemporary experience. Coetzee's own writing is committed to finding a way out of the impasse of novelistic representation after the demise of the self-determining subject and to seeking a way forward for the novel. In latter years, Coetzee writes admiringly of Beckett's very late short fiction of the 1980s in which he finds "a new element of the personal, even the autobiographical" and "a sense that individual existence is a genuine mystery worth exploring" (*Inner Workings* 171). Citing one of Beckett's letters, he writes, "the true words at last, from the mind in ruins" (172). A comparable autobiographical shift is evident in Coetzee's post-millennial period, in which he ventures to negotiate the pitfalls of both the idealism of the realist novel and the extreme anti-illusionism of Beckett's work of the 1960s and 1970s.

With *The Childhood of Jesus*, he turns to Cervantes and the novel's hybrid origins. In his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech of 1987, he drew on Don Quixote's return to La Mancha and death, representative of "the capitulation of the imagination to reality", as a figure for denying that quixotic idealism could be upheld in South Africa, where "there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (*Doubling the Point* 99). In latter years, since his move to Australia, he has summoned Cervantes again, from a more optimistic standpoint, most significantly in *The Childhood of Jesus*, but

also in a 2005 essay on Gabriel García Márquez in which he claimed: "one cannot ignore the quite sophisticated assertion [Alonso Quixano] makes about the power a dream may have to anchor our moral life" (*Inner Workings* 266).[18] Coetzee's late period is marked by a tentative idealism, not unqualified, that emerges from the unflinching self-interrogation that characterises his work from the late nineties on. Coetzee's late style is, as Edward Said (citing Adorno) writes of Beethoven's late work, "what happens if art does *not* abdicate its rights in favor of reality", that is, when "confronted by the dignity of human death" (Said 9, emphasis added).

The final lesson of *Elizabeth Costello* stages, with Kafkaesque absurdity, the obligation to make an account of oneself before death. Death is the final ultimatum that forces an end to the cycles of doubt, but Elizabeth finds herself in a "purgatory of clichés" (206), a "kind of literary theme park" (208). This is suggestive of the death of the author as Barthes conceives it, whereby the text is a "space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" ("The Death of the Author" 146), and "the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred" (147). But Barthes's utopia of simulacra is a bleak and unimaginative space in Coetzee's novel and infinite deferral a futile waiting. When Elizabeth is permitted a glimpse through the gate, she sees the proverbial light which is "merely brilliant, […] but not of another order" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 196). Still awaiting a verdict on her appeal for passage at the close of the novel, she has a vision of the far side of the gate, of an old lion-coloured dog sleeping and "[b]eyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity" (224). She doesn't trust the vision, particularly the GOD-DOG anagram. *"Too literary"*, she thinks (225). The image is resonant of Shelley's "Ozymandias" or Yeats's "The Second Coming", and indeed the entire episode seems a "tissue of allegory", a conglomeration of literary confrontations with mortality. The GOD-DOG formulation also brings to mind the self-cancelling structures of Beckett's *Watt*, and the impasse of the secular reasoning consciousness confronting its own demise. The limit that one's own death presents for language is, for Coetzee, precisely what forces an exit from Barthes's empty enunciation and places a demand on the writer to surpass second-hand opinions and poetic associations.

[18] Coetzee left South Africa and settled in Adelaide in 2002, becoming an Australian citizen in 2006. However, his biographer J.C. Kannemeyer suggests that he had been considering the move as far back as 1995 (Kannemeyer 536).

In *Foe*, Coetzee addressed the predicament of death's resistance to language via the Tolstoyan route of enforcing an ending. In that novel's final enigmatic section, the unidentified narrator speaks: "This is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs" (157). But in the utterance the impossibility rears up. Death is "not a place of words"; it is ostensibly out of the reach of language, except perhaps obliquely and ambiguously. But writing as absence is by now a tired trope, and the final lesson of *Elizabeth Costello* epitomises Coetzee's dissatisfaction with abstractions of trace and indeterminacy, and his preoccupation with endings. There must, for Coetzee, be an end to the *mise en abyme* of reflexivity, or an end must be enforced. "However peremptory the ending of *Foe*, it is at least an ending, not a gesture toward an ending", he writes. "The last pages of *Foe* have a certain power. They close the text by force, so to speak: they confront head-on the endlessness of skepticism" (*Doubling the Point* 248). Resignation before the eternal regression of the reflexive consciousness is a retreat into disappearance, and to halt before the limitations of language is to concede that it is indeed language that speaks. This is the situation of Elizabeth Costello, forsaken before the gate, without beliefs. She claims to be "a secretary of the invisible", an ambiguous appellation that suggests the Romantic ideal of the artist, the mystery, as her son puts it, "of the divine in the human", but it might also describe the dead author as conceived by Barthes and Foucault (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 199, 28). In the light of this latter conception, the critique that the book performs of the artist as oracle of culture comes into sharper focus. The book as a tissue of textuality from which the author is absent, a medley of discourses, none original, is an impoverished formulation that precludes forms of agency inherent in the work of writing, as well as reading. In one of her "trials" before the judges, Elizabeth asserts, "beliefs are not the only ethical supports we have. We can rely on our hearts as well" (203). The ending of the novel is ambiguous. One can read it as signalling a crisis of faith in the capacity of literature to respond to human suffering, or as evidence of a personal creative crisis in the face of mortal awareness. But the question remains: who are the judges to whom Elizabeth must answer? It is not only the self that the writer is answerable to, and the panel of judges here bears resemblance to Herbert's interpreter/censor or indeed to a certain kind of critical reader. In this instance, it may not be literature that Elizabeth

is despairing of but rationalistic modes of reading enshrined in the institution of academic criticism. Death demands a singular response that cannot be appropriated within a rational matrix of discourse; it is holding oneself answerable to this obligation that, for Coetzee, is required not only of the writer but of the reader too.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee refuses Tolstoy's "rash" decision by slowing down the rhetorical force of the work, but the rhetorical trickery and experimentalism of these late novels are not mere formal experiments. Rather they are marks of a personal struggle, comparable to what Coetzee finds in Dostoevsky, whose dialogism, he claims, "is a matter not of ideological position, still less of novelistic technique, but of the most radical intellectual and even spiritual courage", growing "out of Dostoevsky's own moral character, out of his ideals, out of his being a writer" (*Stranger Shores* 145, 145-46). Coetzee's apparent disappearance acquires meaning only because it gives form to a real confrontation with mortality. We ignore, to our detriment, this difference between the *idea* of disappearance and the *reality* of death. The clash of illusion and reality is held in suspension in Coetzee's late work, as it is in Beethoven and the very late Beckett, and the fiction acquires its power from the courage to interrogate the self through one's art before the fact of death. Coetzee states it aptly in *The Good Story* (2015), a book of dialogues with the psychologist Arabella Kurtz about the stories we make of our lives in fiction and in psychoanalysis: "What ties one to the real world is, finally, death. One can make up stories about oneself to one's heart's content, but one is not free to make the ending. The ending has to be death: it is the only ending one can seriously believe in. What an irony then that to anchor oneself in a sea of fictions one should have to rely on death!" (Coetzee and Kurtz 69).

But death is always one's own death, and the act of appropriating the death of the other is presented in *Elizabeth Costello*, as in *The Master of Petersburg*, as a betrayal of the other. In response to the account of the execution of the July plotters in (the real novel) *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* by Paul West, Elizabeth condemns the author for what she views as the indecency of his portrayal: "What arrogance to lay claim to the suffering and death of those pitiful men! Their last hours belong to them alone, they are not ours to enter and possess. […] Death is a private matter; the artist should not invade the deaths of others" (174). To open out

the significance of this for Coetzee's late fiction, it is useful to look at his reading of Herbert's "Five Men" in *Giving Offense* (1996).

Herbert's poem, like West's novel, is about the last hours of a group of men about to be executed by firing squad. The first two sections of the poem describe, much as West's novel does, the hours leading up to executions of the men:

> they would gladly escape
> like rats from a sinking ship
>
> before the bullet reaches its destination
> the eye will perceive the flight of the projectile
> the ear record the steely rustle
>
> the nostrils will be filled with biting smoke
> a petal of blood will brush the palate
> the touch will shrink and then slacken (20-27)

Coetzee's focus in the essay is on the third and final section of the poem, in which the poet questions the relevance of poetry in the face of such barbarity: "so why have I been writing / unimportant poems on flowers" (37-38). The lines that follow are devoted to the talk of the five men of everyday mundanities, on the night before the executions:

> of how vodka is best
> after wine you get a headache
> of girls
> of fruit
> of life
>
> thus one can use poetry
> names of Greek shepherds
> one can attempt to catch the colour of the morning sky
> write of love

and also
once again
in dead earnest
offer to the betrayed world
a rose (47-60)

Coetzee asks: "What is the logic that allows the word 'thus' to come out so decisively?" (*Giving Offense* 158). Acknowledging the more obvious reading that appeals to the ordinariness of the men, the preciousness of their lives, and the transcendent autonomy of poetry, Coetzee proffers another way of reading the poem. There is no logic to the leap that "thus" stands for, he claims: "the move from the *because* to the *therefore* belongs not to logic but to rhetoric […]. Virtually anything could occur after the words 'thus one can use in poetry'" (158). The poem, he claims, "[i]f it is about anything […] is about power: about its own power to compel a logic upon art and history, but also, by implication, about the power that would be required to compel a rival logic upon art and history" (158). This is the power of rhetorical manipulation, that of the poet, but also the power of the interpreter/censor, particularly the communist censor who would surely condemn such poetry as decadent and, therefore, politically seditious. By exposing the rhetorical possibilities of representation and interpretation, Herbert, according to Coetzee, undermines any interpretation of the poem other than the critique it embodies of the act of interpretation. Coetzee's own rhetorical experiments in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* work similarly to mitigate both the rhetorical force of the novels and the narrow, systemic readings to which they are susceptible, and thus to fortify them against what Susan Sontag called the "philistinism of interpretation" (Sontag 8). Coetzee revisits this argument in *Elizabeth Costello*, ostensibly in relation to West's novel, but also, one might speculate, revisiting Herbert's poem but focusing this time on the ethics of representation and appropriation. Applying the argument Elizabeth makes about West's novel to Herbert's poem brings into sharper focus the crude neutralization of the first two sections of the poem describing the executions by the final third section. The "thus" now hinges on a putative redemptive power of poetry to "offer to the betrayed world / a rose" (Herbert 59-60). In this reading, it is the very

offering of the rose, as an intrusion into, and a poetic mitigation of, the deaths the five men, which constitutes the betrayal.

There is a profound concern throughout *Elizabeth Costello* with the ethics of (mis)representing death, and, like Herbert's poem, Coetzee's novel is about the power of rhetoric and its potential abuses, as much as it is about the violence of interpretation. In "The Philosophers and the Animals" section of the novel, Elizabeth refutes Thomas Nagel's claim that human consciousness is such that it is possible to imagine what it is like for a human being to be a bat but that knowledge of what it is like for a bat to be a bat is barred to the human. Although the complex structural ironies of the novel intercept a reading that takes Elizabeth's embedded polemics at face value, Coetzee makes a similar assertion in his own voice in *The Good Story*, but with an important qualification. Although one can have a fleeting insight into what it is like for a bat to be a bat, he contends that "this does not amount to the claim that one can have intuitions of what it is *really* like for a bat to be a bat. […] such knowledge may be true, but its truth is the truth of fictions" (Coetzee and Kurtz 136). Returning to Elizabeth, there is a vital flaw in her line of reasoning, which pivots on the claim that human beings can conceive of their own death. She asks: "if we are capable of thinking our own death, why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat?" (*Elizabeth Costello* 77). This is not a logical argument but a rhetorical one. There is no logical connection between the two propositions. In fact, the argument rests on the human capacity for modes of thinking that do not adhere to the laws of logic. This underlines one of the central preoccupations of the novel: that fiction can open us to ways of understanding outside of the narrow sphere of logical reason, which Elizabeth suggests is "not the being of the universe nor the being of God", but of "human thought", or, more specifically, "the being of a certain spectrum in human thinking" that does not exhaust the thought capacities of human beings (67). The differentiation that Coetzee makes between the *real* truth and the truth of fiction underlines the singular capacity of literature to respond to the question of mortality when rational intellectual debate breaks down. But with this discursive freedom comes responsibility, and it is a crisis of responsibility that is at issue throughout the novel. To assume responsibility is what lends one the authority to write, but how is responsibility to be assumed?

Elizabeth admits to herself that she too "knew how to play with words until she got them right, the words that would send an electric shock down the spine of the reader. *Butcherfolk in our own* way" (179). This is comparable to the critique that the poet Abraham Stern makes in his letter to Elizabeth, condemning her for what he perceives as her rhetorical distortion in comparing the commercial slaughter of animals to the Nazi concentration camps: "If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horror of the camps in a cheap way" (94). A similar point is made by Elizabeth's son John, who is familiar with—and weary of—her standard response, which he calls the Plutarch response, to the question of why she became a vegetarian. The Plutarch response is an expression of astonishment that others "do not find it nasty to chew hacked flesh and swallow the juices of death wounds". John surmises that: "it is the word *juices* that does it" (83). To return to Elizabeth's critique of Nagel, for her argument to be logical, the contention should revolve around the possibility of thinking the *other's* death rather than one's own death. But this is precisely the limit that Elizabeth refuses to cross.

Coetzee surely had Derrida's *The Gift of Death* in mind here, which develops Heidegger's assertion that one becomes responsible by assuming one's own mortality as one's own singularity. Discussing Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, Derrida argues that responsibility, and hence mortality, might be more authentically assumed under "the name that is more *naming* and *named* in the pseudonym than in the official legality of the public patronym" (58). The pseudonym, for Derrida, goes some way towards avoiding the inauthenticity that he perceives as implicit in the entry into language. "Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique," he argues. "It is a very strange contract—both paradoxical and terrifying—that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secrecy" (60). But, as we have seen, Coetzee is dissatisfied with strategies of negation and absence and the deconstructive appeal to trace, and his fiction is committed to escaping the Derridean aporia and the retreat into silence. The proposition implicit in Coetzee's late fiction is that it is precisely through assuming one's own mortality that one might find a language that *is* uniquely one's own. *Elizabeth Costello* is a work of uncompromising self-scrutiny, marking the beginning of Coetzee's late style, which is marked by a slow

waywardness that arises not only from the resistance of death to language but from the utter singularity of one's own death.

Slowing down

There is a passage in *Diary of a Bad Year*, in which JC contemplates a section from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Moved to tears, he tries to establish the particular power that the writing has over him: "it is not as if I am in sympathy with Ivan's rather vengeful views", he thinks (224). It is not a question of agreeing or disagreeing with the ethical or political sentiments expressed by Ivan, but a matter of being moved by the rhetorical force of Dostoevsky's writing:

> Far more powerful than the substance of his argument, which is not strong, are the accents of anguish […] It is the voice of Ivan, as realized by Dostoevsky, not his reasoning, that sweeps me along.
>
> Are these tones of anguish real? Does Ivan "really" feel as he claims to feel, and does the reader in consequence "really" share Ivan's feelings? The answer to the latter question is troubling. The answer is Yes. (225-26)

The Master of Petersburg is charged with the kind of "accents of anguish" that JC identifies in Dostoevsky, as indeed is much of Coetzee's earlier work, but in the later fictions, with their interruptions of the realist illusion and their disjointed structures, there is a new coolness to the writing that also has to do with rhetoric, or, more precisely, a gradual eschewal of the kind of rhetoric that exerts overt control over the reader's beliefs and sympathies. As the work becomes more reflexive, the emotional tone is notably more subdued.

Elizabeth Costello gets off to a halting start, with momentum interrupted in the very first sentence, as if the authority to begin must be summoned. The first of the novel's eight lessons commences: "There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank" (1). The lesson is on realism and the far bank, if we are to take it literally, is the fictional world, that is, the realist illusion. Yet the annunciation shatters the

illusion, drawing attention to the space that "there is" opens up, a space which, according to the conventions of realism, a reader might expect to be filled at once with a subject: "There is a woman at the gate", for instance. The dummy pronoun leaves a gap, and the subject of this opening sentence is merely the problem of establishing a subject within the novelistic space. This is an opening in the most capacious sense of the word. It effects a pause on the near side to make manifest the "bridging problem", before the Gordian knot is severed, and the gap is forced shut: "Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done" (1). The imperative acting upon the past perfect here shifts the narrative off the immanent plane and into the transcendent fictional frame. The embedded clause, however, betokens that the passage is enforced. An end has been put to the cycles of doubt, the vacillations of self-consciousness, and the interrogation of that pause is the concern of the entire novel.

When, after this initial hiatus, "[w]e are in the far territory, where we want to be" (1), the narrative voice switches from the proximity of the first person plural, indicative of a self-conscious fiction, into biographical mode and objective third person narration: "Elizabeth Costello is a writer, born in 1928, […] She has written nine novels […] She has been married twice. She has two children, one by each marriage", and so on, relating facts and informing the reader that she is accompanied on her visit to the US by her son John (1). But the narration barely gets going in this mode before the first person plural breaks through again, explaining the text: "We skip. […] In her room a dialogue takes place" (2). After a brief dialogue between Elizabeth and John, another switch, this time into Coetzee's familiar free indirect style in the third person. The narrating consciousness is John's, but there are regular deviations into explanatory mode: "The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves" (4). Such instability in the narration is compounded on a hermeneutic level by the provocation, in the first sentence, to seek second order meanings. The "far bank", in the context of the fiction we are being invited to enter into, which, on the level of the realist illusion, is about an ageing woman facing her mortality, and which, in the last of the novel's "lessons", takes her to that very precipice, is also an invitation to allegorise. It is a figuration familiar from *Age of Iron*, in which the novel's dying protagonist, Elizabeth Curran, declares, "I stand on

the other side. But on the other bank too, the other bank of the river. On the far bank, looking back" (140). She tells Vercueil, the vagrant who turns up with his dog on the very morning of her cancer diagnosis and becomes her unlikely stalwart in her last days, "All the days you have known me... I have been standing on the riverbank awaiting my turn" (164). The opening of the later Elizabeth C's eponymous narrative, read in these terms, might be read as the space of death, and so we ascend to the second order of language, the "heavenly abstract order" of allegory (*Giving Offense* 161).

Ontologically too, *Elizabeth Costello* is a highly unstable text. In the first of the novel's "lessons", Elizabeth is visiting Altona College, to receive an award and to present a lecture, entitled "What is Realism?". This is a simple *mise en abyme*, but the mirror effect is multiplied in the fact that in 1996 Coetzee delivered the entire lesson as the Ben Belitt Lecture at Bennington College, under the title "What is Realism?". Furthermore, Coetzee also delivered a lecture entitled "What is a Classic?" in 1991, centred on a lecture T.S. Eliot gave in 1944, also entitled "What is a Classic?". The ironies multiply. In the 1991 lecture, which was subsequently published in *Stranger Shores*, Coetzee describes Eliot as a man who "had targeted London as the metropolis of the English-speaking world, and with a diffidence concealing ruthless singleness of purpose had made himself into the deliberately magisterial voice of that metropolis" (*Stranger Shores* 1-2). It is not hard to see the ironic mirroring of Eliot, an American posing as an Englishman, Coetzee speaking as Elizabeth Costello, as well as Kafka's ape, Red Peter, in Elizabeth's lecture, addressing an academy—as a man or an ape? We don't know, claims Elizabeth, "whether it is about a man speaking to men or an ape speaking to apes or an ape speaking to men or a man speaking to apes (though the last is, I think, unlikely) or even just a parrot speaking to parrots" (*Elizabeth Costello* 19). Given the allusion in Coetzee's titles to Foucault's "What is an Author?", the question of who is speaking is a pertinent one. Here is a passage from Foucault's essay in which he anticipates that before too long such questions will be deemed immaterial:

> No longer the tiresome repetitions:
> 'Who is the real author?'
> 'Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?'

> ‘What has he revealed of his most profound self in his language?’
> New questions will be heard:
> ‘What are the modes of existence of this discourse?’
> ‘Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?’
> ‘What placements are determined for possible subjects?’
> ‘Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?’
> Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference:
> ‘What does it matter who is speaking?’ (314)

The authorial masquerading in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* are indeed exercises in debunking the authority of authorship in terms of the quasi-divine conception of the author as originary genius, as well as that of the author’s name as a marker of prestige or status. But this is not to suggest that it does not matter who is speaking. As a close look at Coetzee’s “What is a Classic?” shows, it matters very much who is speaking. The latter constitutes an obvious rejoinder to Foucault. The lecture, begins: “In October 1944, as Allied forces were battling on the European mainland and German rockets were falling on London, Thomas Stearns Eliot, aged fifty-six, gave his presidential address to the Virgil Society in London” (*Stranger Shores* 1). This first sentence is important, given that Coetzee goes on to note that Eliot barely mentions the war in his address, except to say that it caused him difficulty in acquiring books to prepare the lecture, a reminder to his audience, Coetzee speculates, “that there is a perspective in which the war is only a hiccup, however massive, in the life of Europe” (1). Coetzee’s argument hinges on challenging Eliot’s motivations for claiming Virgil’s *Aeneid* as the originary classic of what he perceived as the single civilization of Western Europe, a “civilization” whose barbarities are highlighted throughout Coetzee’s oeuvre. Using a personal anecdote to support the argument, Coetzee recalls the first time he heard Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, describing it as revelatory: “for the first time in my life I was undergoing the impact of *the classic*” (10). Looking back, almost four decades later, he wonders whether the impact was down to the pure aesthetic experience or a covert wish to escape his socio-cultural status in the former British colonies. The conclusion he reaches is that the answer lies in the question, or rather in the act of

questioning: "It is the essence of this sceptical questioning that the term *Bach* should stand simply as a counter for European high culture, that Bach or *Bach* should have no value in himself or itself – that the notion of 'value in itself' should in fact be the object of sceptical interrogation" (18). The stressing of the name here as designator of the value of a work of art brings into focus the real subject of the lecture that is hidden in its title, which is not primarily Eliot or Virgil or Bach, but Foucault.

The test of the classic, Coetzee argues, is not a matter of determining the genius of its creator, nor is it down to the prestige of the name, but lies rather in the work itself, more specifically in its survival of this form of scepticism. Coetzee draws on Zbigniew Herbert, for whom, he claims, "the opposite of the classic is not the Romantic but the barbarian" (19). But who is the barbarian? Coetzee merely offers, "Herbert writes from the historical perspective of Poland, a country with an embattled Western culture caught between intermittently barbarous neighbours" (19). In the light of Coetzee's essay in *Giving Offence*, which stresses Herbert's allegiance to the first, that is, the non-metaphorical, order of language, language that does not open itself to interpretation by the "interpreter/censor" who seeks "second-order language", upon which it is easier to hang incriminations, it becomes evident that the barbarian is the reader who wants to appropriate the work by seeking to make the text mean whatever he or she desires it to mean. This sceptical semiotics is the domain of the deconstructionist critic, preoccupied with meaning, but for whom meaning is always elsewhere, an approach that Terry Eagleton described as "reading the text against itself" (*Literary Theory* 132). It is this *against* that aligns the critic with the interpreter/censor. It is possible now to see that the target of Coetzee's critique is not only Foucault's essay but also the kind of literary criticism that developed in the wake of stripping the artist of his creative role, which, by 1991, had virtually taken over university literature departments. Coetzee closes the essay/lecture with a paragraph of such subtle irony that it merits quoting in full:

> One might even venture further along this road to say that the function of criticism is defined by the classic: criticism is that which is duty bound to interrogate the classic. Thus the fear that the classic will not survive the de-centring acts of criticism may be turned on its head: rather than being the foe of the classic, criticism, and indeed criticism of the most sceptical kind, may

> be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival. Criticism may in that sense be one of the instruments of the cunning of history. (19)

The sting in the tail of Coetzee's essay reveals his contempt for the kind of parasitic criticism that stems from the putting to death of the author, which is not an appeal to a perceived enigmatic spark of genius nor to the cultural weight of the author's name, but rather to the immanent affect of the classic work of art and its resistance to criticism that is oriented *against*.

Coetzee's unsympathetic reading of Eliot's lecture adds another dimension to the essay. He argues that Eliot's appropriation of the *Aeneid* may have been motivated by his conservative political vision for a Europe of nation states and by his own wish to cast off his immigrant status and align himself with a perceived high cultural tradition descending from Ancient Rome. Parenthetically alluding to Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Coetzee writes that Eliot imported "the yardstick of impersonality into criticism", in spite of what he calls the "compulsiveness - just the opposite of impersonality" with which Eliot appropriates Virgil for his own ends (3, 4). Although he offers several alternative readings of Eliot's lecture without settling on one, his comment that Eliot may have been evading "the reality of his not-so-grand position as a man whose narrowly academic, Eurocentric education had prepared him for little else but life as a mandarin in one of the New England ivory towers", read in the light of the essay's opening sentence, certainly points to an unfavourable conclusion (8-9). It is, perhaps, not merely the treachery of an impersonality masking self-interest that is Coetzee's target, but the kind of criticism that ignores the reality of suffering and death in favour of the transcendent abstractions of language, epitomised in the ivory towers of the late-twentieth century academy. Indeed, it does matter who is speaking, and from what privileged vantage point that voice emanates. This is true for the critic as well as the writer, and the birth of the reader at the expense of the death of the author merely reverses an old paradigm rather than overthrowing it. The "lessons" that make up *Elizabeth Costello* are lessons in various senses: lessons as in lectures, lessons that Elizabeth learns, but they also are lessons in reading. The complexities of the novel's ironic frames and the invitations to allegorise together with the implicit thwarting of allegorical readings deliberately frustrate attempts at *interpreting* the text. They are

impediments to the kind of reading practices that seek to appropriate the text, and they pose counter-challenges to Foucault's. It is not clear who controls the production of meaning in the text; its circulation, given its composite structure and hybrid origins as discrete lectures or essays, is complex. Coetzee's rejoinder to Foucault is to throw into question the mode of existence of the text as a conglomeration of free-floating signifiers, and to expose the appropriation of the classic cut off from its mode of production as a repetition of the assumption of freedom under which the liberal humanist subject prospered. Throughout his post-millennial period, Coetzee seeks to determine alternative answers to the question of the mode of being of the text.

Modes of being

Accepting Coetzee's metaphorical ruse by reading the "far bank" as the space of death takes us into the abstract transcendence of second-order language. The critical tension exerted throughout *Elizabeth Costello* is the manifest struggle to get beyond this and confront the real fact of death, and the failure of Elizabeth to escape the order of allegory and achieve death in the final lesson signals that this is, if not impossible, then certainly an ongoing task. The fragmented structure of the novel, as well as the disruptive shifting between fictional planes in the first lesson, in which the narrative scaffolding is held up for display and the conventions of realism spelt out and thereby subverted, stymies the kind of bodily projection that might stimulate the "sympathetic imagination", to which Elizabeth appeals (80). There is no eliciting of sympathy for Elizabeth. Now that, as she asserts in her lecture on realism, "the word-mirror is broken" the text can no longer operate as the mirror in which a reader finds reflected an image of him or herself as *other* in a relation of identification. The fragmented linguistic subject behind the illusion of coherence in the Lacanian mirror is exposed, the chimera shattered. To die, Elizabeth must be properly embodied, securely instantiated in her fictional world, but for all her virulent anti-Cartesianism and her proselytizing about the body, the fictions in which she features are curiously

disembodied.[19] She pleads to be taken at her word, that is, according to the first order of language: "I say what I mean. I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean" (62). She claims to say what she means, but might it not be that she *wants* to say what she means, wants to find her footing in a language so protean that it cannot find solid ground? She seeks clarity and solidity, to gain purchase on the world and the flesh; but the language of fictional realism is no anchor, and her grip eludes her until in the final lesson she ends up in "a tissue of allegory" and the prison of her self-conscious fiction (196). Elizabeth's insistence on the preeminence of the body is perhaps the expression of a desire for occupation of a body, for solid existence, an appeal perhaps, on Coetzee's part, to have her read according to the first order of language, not as an allegorical figure or an oracle of culture but as a dying body.

The closure of the rift between bodies and signs, between the world and the word ends, as in the final section of *Foe*, in silence and death. This pure annihilating immanence is the death drive that belongs to language and that is initiated in writing as the pen scrabbles to contain the thought. But the more torsions and ellipses the writer makes, the more metaphors and allegories he invents, the further he ascends from the world and from death into an illusory transcendence. Writing is figured as a limbo, a kind of homelessness, throughout the late work. Elizabeth Costello is in transit for much of her eponymous novel: in hotels, on board a cruise ship, passing through airport gates, visiting family. Trapped in the pages of a novel, she is suspended between a desired immaculation, a pure language that will reconcile the ideal and the real, and the elusive and refractory path towards that mirage. This is also the predicament of Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*, held captive as he in turn detains Elizabeth in the *mise en abyme* of the text. She complains to Paul: "I do not know how much longer I can support my present mode of existence. […] Life in public. Life on the public squares, relying on public amenities. Life in the company of drunks and homeless people, what we used to call hoboes. Do you not recall? I warned you I had nowhere to go" (159). This textual limbo is comparable to Blanchot's conception of literature as a "double death", whereby writing begins in

[19] Julian Murphet, in his article "Coetzee and Late Style: Exile within the Form", surmises that Elizabeth protests too much against taking her language as second-order, and argues insightfully for an unresolved disjunction between the immanence that Elizabeth demands and a degraded abstract transcendence, both exhausted, that leaves the fiction exiled within the broken shell of novelistic form.

death while at the same time seeks a death it can never achieve (*The Space of Literature* 103). However, whereas for Blanchot this is interminable and abstract, for Coetzee it represents a rigorous phase of interrogation, a preparation for writing that is also a preparation for death.

The novel has been theorised by Bakhtin and Lukács as characterised by homelessness, and Coetzee is critically engaging with the history and theory of the genre through his fiction. His is not, however, Bakhtin's linguistic homelessness, a revelry in the playroom of language, and it is quite the inverse of Lukács's notion of transcendental homelessness, the wish to be at home everywhere, to make a transcendental home in the figural world of fiction. Elizabeth wants out of the fiction. She seeks the immanent, the corporeal and the quietus of death. Hers is an eschatological homelessness, a kind of *nostalgie de la boue*, a yearning for the earth, for the mud, for the real primal slime, finally to escape her ideal nature.[20] She admits, finally, to a belief in mud frogs: "there is something about them that obscurely engages her, something about their mud tombs and the fingers of their hands, fingers that end in little balls, soft, wet, mucous. She thinks of the mud eating away at the tips of those fingers, trying to absorb them, to dissolve the soft tissue" (219-20). Elizabeth's homelessness is characterised by desolation and solitude in the face of a death that her entrapment in novelistic discourse makes ungraspable, and the creative tension of the work arises out of the quest for words that will close the gap between the real and the ideal, words that are their own signs. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the failure to escape transcendent language is figured in the horizon of perception that the animal makes manifest. In his gloss of Rilke's Eighth Elegy, Coetzee writes:

> Its subject is the sundering of man from the natural world; its project, a paradoxical one, is to find words that will take us back to before words and allow us to glimpse the world as seen by creatures who do not have words, or, if that glimpse is barred to us, then to allow us the sad experience of standing at the rim of an unknowable mode of being. (*Stranger Shores* 84)

Coetzee's concern for animal life is inextricably bound up with the question of death

[20] The phrase "*nostalgie de la boue*" comes from Coetzee's uncollected Elizabeth Costello story "As a Woman Grows Older" in which Elizabeth describes it as a material state of being rather than a mood: "A death drive deeper than thought".

on two important levels: the level of the body and its pain, which we will call the *real*. But the animal is also a source of fascination for the horizon it presents, the limit it demarcates to human perception due to the barrier erected by language. In the later story "The Old Woman and the Cats", which Coetzee first read at the Jaipur Literary Festival in 2011 and subsequently published alongside the work of the Belgian artist Berlinde de Bruyckere for the 2013 Venice Biennale, Elizabeth Costello reappears, now living in a mountain village in Spain and taking care of stray cats. Her son John, exasperated by his mother's eccentricities, questions her on her dedication to the cats, to which she replies: "I am preparing myself for the next move […] I am accustoming myself to living in the company of beings whose mode of being is unlike mine, more unlike mine than my human intellect will ever be able to grasp" (*Cripplewood / Kreupelhout* 10). This is the approach to death on an *ideal* level. Coetzee's fiction unites the real and the ideal through a series of psychopompic figures, including animals, that awaken his protagonists to modes of self-understanding that are not intellectually verifiable. In *Age of Iron*, Vercueil is figured as an angel of death who, along with his dog, accompanies Elizabeth Curren in her dying days, and Bev Shaw acts as a guide for David Lurie in *Disgrace* as he comes to terms with the ageing process and under whose tutelage he himself becomes a dog-psychopomp. Such figures are angelic in the mode of Wallace Stevens's angel of earth, in whose sight "you see the earth again, / Cleared of its stiff and stubborn man-locked set" (14-15), and of Rilke's angel too, who desires praise of *this* world.[21] Earthy figures, they appeal to the immanent and their guidance is toward surrender to the limitations of the intellect and engagement in other modes of understanding that privilege compassion over calculation, and care for the finite over abstract idealist notions of transcendence.

The psychopomp is also a figure for the work of writing as a preparation for death, and Coetzee's rhetorical experiments in *Diary of a Bad Year* move from the

[21] I refer to Rilke's Ninth Elegy, specifically the following lines from the Leishman and Spender translation:

> Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one,
> you won't impress him with your glorious emotions; out there,
> where he feels with more feeling, you're a novice. Rather show him
>
> some common thing, shaped through the generations,
> that lives as ours, near to our hand and in our sight.

aggressive idealism of polemic and calculation to a form of discourse that is underscored by the immanent fact of death. The novel is centred both thematically and structurally on the relationship between the writer JC and Anya, his young, attractive neighbour whom he has employed as a typist and about whom he wonders: "is she the one who has been assigned to conduct me to my death? If that is so, how odd a messenger, and how unsuitable!" (60-61). It begins with JC's essays on the upper section of the page, and below this his private thoughts about Anya, "an apparition", for whom he feels "an ache, a metaphysical ache" (3, 7). The essays at the top of the page quickly acquire the rhetorical force of a diatribe while underneath, in the more conventionally novelistic narrative, a chain of desire is set in motion, as JC pursues Anya and coaxes her into accepting the secretarial position with an exorbitant hourly rate and the veiled blandishment that she should have "an intuitive feel" for the work. He privately reasons: "What self-respecting woman would want to deny she has an intuitive feel?" (19). This seductive rhetoric is no less artful than the treatise in the upper section of the page; both are contrived to convince and manipulate. When the job offer is accepted, JC's interior monologue moves to the centre of the page, and Anya's thoughts occupy the lower section, a structure that is maintained throughout the first section of the book. JC's desire for Anya, albeit of the "post-physical kind", soon begins to take the form of a mimetic desire to have what Alan, Anya's unscrupulous boyfriend, possesses (13). The rhetorical force of this is mirrored in the bellicose tone as well as the subject matter of the essays on the upper section of the page which are polemics on atrocities and issues of conflict: the social contract, warfare, terrorism, the slaughter of animals, Guantanamo Bay, competitive sports.

As the narrative progresses and a friendship develops between them, and JC's essays, at first truculent, begin towards the end of the first section to soften, with more use of the first person and the introduction of biographical details. The tone becomes mellower, even wistful in parts, as when he contemplates the value of the arts: "The eyes of the artist are, finally, not on the competition but on the true, the good, and the beautiful" (119). On Australian political history, he surprises himself by "feeling elegiac about a past one never really knew" (122). It is increasingly apparent that since the tapes JC dictates are for Anya to transcribe, that they are motivated at this level by desire. He begins to wonder if Anya was "the

natural mother" of his "miscellany of opinions?" (124). He brushes the idea aside, surmising that the opinions "were by now so strong – that is to say, so settled, so rigid – that aside from the odd word here and there there was no chance that refraction through her gaze could alter their angle" (125). Nevertheless, at Anya's suggestion he starts recording a set of gentler, less trenchant opinions.

JC's monologue breaks off along with the essay on authority, in which he defends Tolstoy's authority against Barthes and Foucault, and suggests that authority, far from the ability to perform tricks of rhetoric, might be attained by "opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically" (151). This is followed by an essay "On the afterlife" taking up the entirety of the next two pages, in which JC argues that the notion of the afterlife in Christian religions "fills a lack—an incapacity to think of a world from which the speaker is absent—that religion ought simply to note such incapacity as part of the human condition and leave it at that" (154). The essay ends with a question that will come to the fore in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*: that of the "persistence of the soul in an unrecognizable form, unknown to itself, without memory, without identity", which he deems "another question entirely" (154). The distinction here between the self as a coherent identity formed of memories and beliefs and opinions, which in JC's case he believes are so firmly entrenched that they are beyond alteration, and the ambiguous category of the soul is a crucial one in Coetzee's late work. The trajectory of *Diary of a Bad Year* is not the aporetic one of thinking the self out of existence or of a radical disconnect of the self in writing; rather, it aims at transcending discourse that emanates from a synthesised self to a more spontaneous, even "vatic", mode of inscription, that increasingly posits language as a mode of reaching out to the other.

The second part of *Diary of a Bad Year*, entitled "Second Diary" begins with the three-section structure, the upper part of which is dedicated to JC's "soft opinions", which are short personal essays in the first person. The middle section is blank and Anya's thoughts continue at the bottom of the page. The blank space indicating JC's absence, following on from his commentary on Barthes and Foucault, indicates a "death of the author", but he is still present at the top of the page and peripherally in Anya's thoughts. What this blank section does, however, is indicate the precariousness of the dying writer's presence. Just before JC's

monologue is reintroduced, there is a short section entitled "Insh'Allah", which brings into focus the alliance of writing and death, not only in this work but in all of Coetzee's post-millennial fiction:

> "Under the sign of death." Why should not our every utterance come accompanied by a reminder that before too long we will have to say goodbye to this world? Conventions of discourse require that the writer's existential situation, which like everyone else's is a perilous one, and at every moment too, be bracketed off from what he writes. But why should we always bow to convention? Behind every paragraph the reader ought to be able to hear the music of present joy and future grief. *Insh'Allah*. (167)

JC's presence is fleeting in the middle section of the page. Anya is leaving and they have a farewell embrace: "this shrunken old man and this earthly incarnation of heavenly beauty". He admits he considered holding onto her for another minute but thought: "*Enough is enough*, and let her go" (190). For the remainder of the novel JC's section of the page is taken up with a letter from Anya. Her own thoughts continue at the bottom, ending with a promise to return and accompany him as far as the gate. "All that I will promise him, and hold his hand tight and give him a kiss on the brow […] Good night, Senor C, I will whisper in his ear: sweet dreams, and flights of angels, and all the rest" (227). JC's soft opinions at the top of the page praise *this* world, his intimate thoughts on subjects such as art, the writing life and compassion in words that speak of the joy of the world and the grief that it causes him to leave. Anya's promise to JC harks back to the ending of *Disgrace*, in which David Lurie decides to give up the young dog that he has grown fond of: "(perhaps he will carry him in his arms, perhaps he will do that for him) and caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle" (219). There are numerous quotations from Yeats embedded in *Disgrace* and the final scene offers another lure into the mode of pastiche and second-order meanings in its implicit reference to Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium": "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" (Yeats 21-22). To abstract the scene in this

way, however, seems a betrayal of its singular power; the dogs impending death is, in the end, more affecting than the metaphor.

From *Disgrace* on, the waning of desire emerges as a central theme in Coetzee's writing. Elizabeth Costello, "excluded from the game", thinks to herself: "Strange how, as desire relaxes its grip on her body, she sees more and more clearly a universe ruled by desire" (191). And in *Diary of a Bad Year*, JC, almost certainly with Said and Adorno in the background, writes in one of his soft opinions:

> Growing detachment from the world is of course the experience of many writers as they grow older, grow cooler or colder. The texture of their prose becomes thinner, their treatment of character and action more schematic. The syndrome is usually ascribed to a waning of creative power; it is no doubt connected with the attenuation of physical powers, above all the power of desire. Yet from the inside the same development may bear a quite different interpretation: as a liberation, a clearing of the mind to take on more important tasks. (193)

The focus on death entails a certain detachment, a letting go, but also an intimacy, which invests the work with the weight of mortal awareness. *Diary of a Bad Year* is a novel about letting go, and it marks a culmination of an extraordinary period of fictional experimentation and interrogation of the writing process, a clearing of the mind perhaps for the task of writing from beyond the gate.

Diary of a Bad Year and *Elizabeth Costello* may seem to embody the kind of "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" that Said finds in late works, but the fractiousness of these novels cannot be attributed to the refracted appearance of death in the mode of irony, as in Said's account (7). On the contrary, Coetzee's dismantling of rhetorical tropes, including irony, and his mingling of fictional and polemic discourse yields works that, far from being marked by opulent complexity, are stripped of the force of rhetoric and the thrust of argument. The refusal of closure and coherence in these novels can be read as a quest for a purified language that issues from mortal confrontation. In a 2009 letter to Paul Auster, Coetzee asserts that the rationalist ideal of a pure language, cleansed of poetic associations and double meanings, is "not ignoble", and draws parallels with

Beckett's switch from English to French as well as Joseph Conrad's frustration with the imperial connotations pervasive in the English language. He continues: "It is not uncommon for writers, as they age, to get impatient with the so-called poetry of language and go for a more stripped-down style ('late style')" (*Here and Now* 88). Coetzee's own late style develops out of a scrupulous endeavour to expose and undermine the received ideologies and the mechanisms of power, including those of imperialism, paternalism and human exceptionalism, inherent in discourse, especially literary discourse. At the same time, it displays a turn inward and evidence of an uncompromising and profoundly personal confrontation with mortality. In another letter, written some weeks later, he opposes his own view of late style to Said's, asserting that, for him, late style "starts with an ideal of a simple, subdued, unornamental language and a concentration on questions of real import, even questions of life and death", adding that "once you get beyond that starting point the writing itself takes over" and the results "may be anything but simple, anything but subdued" (*Here and Now* 97). The emphasis on starting here is pertinent. The exposure of the writer to his own mortality is, for Coetzee, what grants the authority for writing to begin, and it is the point from which *The Childhood of Jesus* embarks.

Beyond the gate

In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee refers to the post-mortem voice in Beckett's late fictions, and claims: "I am not there yet. I am still interested in how the voice moves the body, moves in the body" (23). In later works he draws closer. Elizabeth Costello reaches the gate of death, and JC, who almost gets there too, muses, "An intriguing idea: to write a novel from the perspective of a man who has died" (158). In his latest works, Coetzee does enter into post-mortem territory, positing his own death in *Summertime* and apparently using the after-death voice in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Although *The Childhood of Jesus* was hailed by some critics as a return to the allegorical form of his early work, particularly *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), after the experiments of the post-millennial period, it does carry over much of the concerns of the later more experimental novels, particularly in terms of Coetzee's eschewal of rhetoric and his dismantling of metaphor and

irony.[22]

The opening sequence is reminiscent of both the beginning and the end of *Elizabeth Costello*. There is a crossing to be made, but this time there is no hesitation, no division between fictional planes. A man, Simón, and a child, David, not father and son, arrive at a gate. Whether this gate is the same kind of gate Elizabeth stood before is not made clear, although the suggestion is established and reinforced later in the novel when we learn that, in this fictional world, "After death there is always another life" (133). Narrated in Coetzee's familiar free indirect style in the third person, the central consciousness is Simón's. "*Centro de Reubicación Novilla*, says the sign. *Reubicación*: what does that mean? Not a word he has learned" (1). It is the Spanish word for relocation, but for the English-speaking reader it elicits the almost-homonym "rubicon", a proper name that has acquired an idiomatic meaning, that is, a double or transcendent meaning. And indeed the harbourmaster (Charon?) is very strict: "No return" (261). The layers of resonance are even greater in a South African context calling to mind P. W. Botha's infamous 1985 "Rubicon Speech", which was widely anticipated to put an end to apartheid, but Botha refused to budge and reinforced the policy. The layers of meaning in the dead metaphor and the calcified rhetoric are exposed, the protean possibilities proffered, only to be quashed. Simón sees no doubleness; it is not a word he knows. The lack of ambiguity is one of the novel's distinctive features: the prose has the quality of the flat encephalograph, rendering a world without irony, without desire, where people generally do not see "any doubleness in the world, any difference between the way things seem and the way things are" (64).

Simón, we later learn, is not an English-speaker. He has "worked hard to master" Spanish in Belstar, the camp through which all new arrivals pass, but there is no indication of what his native language is (1). This is a place where arrivals have "washed themselves clean of old ties" (20). De-historicised subjects, they are allegedly "washed clean of the past", "washed clean of memory, more or less" (80,

[22] Theo Tait in *The Guardian* and Roger Bellin in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* both find the novel a return to the allegorical mode of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Joyce Carol Oates writing for *The New York Times* claims that it is "clearly an allegory". Benjamin Lytal also describes it as "a return to form" in *Newsweek*. In the academic criticism, however, opinions are more mixed: Yoshiki Tajiri notes that "the deceptively obvious allegorical mode […] leads us nowhere" (73), Ileana Dimitriu finds it a postmodern allegory "qualified by its own postmodern language games" (78), and Vincent P. Pecora argues convincingly that it is, like all of Coetzee's novels, an allegory of the author's spiritual quest (152)

208). The beginner's Spanish, which is the language in which Simón converses, is putatively transcribed not into a broken, disordered patois but into a precise and rather flat English, ostensibly cleansed of ambiguity. It is not an unusual conceit in a novel for the narrative language to be different from the language of the action, and it is, of course, entirely normal in a translated work, yet it jars, particularly given that certain words—the words that Simón is not familiar with—are in Spanish.

Beckett switched from writing in English to writing in French in an attempt to write *without* style, only to end up, as Coetzee asserts, marching "with eyes open into the prison of empty style" (*Doubling the Point* 49). In the pared-down English, purportedly a translation of elementary Spanish, of *The Childhood of Jesus*, Coetzee comes close—closer by far than Beckett—to writing without style, or at least with a style so sparse that it is almost transparent. The endeavour to write without style, or at least without the accoutrements of irony and rhetorical force, is itself a stylistic choice, and Coetzee's reticence is carefully cultivated.

There appears to be no gap between the posited world of the novel and the language with which it is posited. It is a Spartan place where nomenclature is simple and functional. Simón and David are mostly referred to as "he" and "the boy". Residents are accommodated in municipal housing pragmatically named East Blocks and West Blocks or the more salubrious La Residencia; brothels are Salón Confort and Salón Relax, reflecting the utilitarian approach to sex, severed from desire; night classes are held at the Institute, and fruits and vegetables, to supplement the staple bread and water diet, can be bought at the synecdochically titled Naranjas. However, this is not simply an Adamic language, and there is plenty of Babel-like confusion. The child, David, complains of having to speak Spanish. Reciting a verse of Goethe's *Der Erlkönig* in German, he claims it is English. He doesn't like Spanish, and wants to learn English, but Simón says he doesn't know English. Language courses are offered at the Institute but only Spanish classes of various levels, no Spanish literature and no other languages. David wants to know if they will have to speak Spanish in the next life, to which Simón replies, "Definitely not. On the other hand, we may have to learn Chinese" (158). This perplexing situation makes language a central issue, and draws particular attention to the linking of word and world.

At the beginning of the novel, they are confronted with the Kafkaesque

bureaucracy of the relocation centre, and acquiring a key for the room they are allocated proves difficult. Simón enquires about a "*llave universal*", a universal key, only to be corrected: "*Llave maestra*. There is no such thing as a *llave universal*. If we had a *llave universal* all our troubles would be over" (4). This is entirely unmetaphorical within the fictional plane, and Coetzee is patently playing on the fact that the word key in English has the double-sense: a key that opens a door, and a cipher. In Spanish there are different words for these senses: *llave* and *clave*. In English, the double meaning offers an obvious metaphor with regard to both language and the production of meaning, and points to the linguistic instability of the text and the interpretive difficulties it poses. It is worth taking Coetzee's bait and considering the patent allusion to a universal language, and what such a language might look like. It is clear that it would need to be properly transparent, that is, it would need to be an image of the real, of the world *in itself*. Already, in imagining linguistic transparency, it is necessary to posit a reality beyond subjective perceptions of nature; it is necessary to entertain the notion of universal truth, or at the very least mass conformity.

Coetzee addresses the question of linguistic transparency in his essay "Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language". Using Newton's scientific writings on gravitational theory to test the Whorf hypothesis, namely that one's native language determines one's worldview, he finds in Newton a struggle to find the words to fit the theory, "to bridge the gap between the nonreferential symbolism of mathematics and a language too protean to be tied down to single, pure meanings" (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 194). The problem lies in the passage from the ideal figures of mathematics to the real physical world as represented in language. It is not too far from here to a refutation of the Barthesian doctrine that language speaks the subject. In fact, when setting out the terms of his inquiry, Coetzee implicitly casts doubt upon Barthes's theory by asking: "are there signs of a wrestling to make the thought fit into the language, to make the language express the thought, signs perhaps even of an incapacity of language to express certain thoughts, or of thought unable to think itself out because of the limitations of its medium?" (184). If certain thoughts, as Coetzee speculates, exceed the words to express them, thoughts that seem to require an expansion of language, then the assertion that "it is language which speaks, not the subject", cannot be considered a general rule of

language, but rather a matter of habitual and uninterrogated language-use. Of course, in everyday speech where there is no resistance of language to thought, it may appear that language is, as Barthes argues, "an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors" ("The Death of the Author" 145). The writer, however, grappling, as Coetzee finds in Rilke, and presumably in his own writing too, to find words for intuitions that defy effortless expression, sees where language covers over the gaps that certain thoughts open up. This, for Coetzee, is the point of resistance, the precipice where writing begins.

The struggle manifest in Newton's writings together with the rejection of the theory of gravitational force by his contemporaries Leibniz and Huygens on the grounds of the animistic, agential content of the terms "attract" and "repel", and the acceptance of the theory in the eighteenth century merely because it worked rather than because it was understandable, suggest to Coetzee, that the reason the theory of gravity became unquestionable may very well be down to changes in language, specifically to the attrition of the animistic content of the words "attract" and "repel". But this, he admits, is to embrace "the most radical idealism: […] that there exists a pure concept of attraction toward which the mind gropes via the sideways process of metaphoric thinking, and which it attains as the impurities of secondary meanings are shed and language becomes transparent, that is, becomes thought" (*Doubling the Point* 193). In the "Eros" chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee dramatises this suggestion of a cosmology emerging from dying metaphors. The passage is worth quoting at length:

> Strange how, as desire relaxes its grip on her body, she sees more and more clearly a universe ruled by desire. *Haven't you read your Newton*, she would like to say to the people in the dating agency (would like to say to Nietzsche too if she could get in touch with him)? *Desire runs both ways: A pulls B because B pulls A, and vice versa: that is how you go about building a universe*. Or if *desire* is still too rude a word, then what of *appetency*? Appetency and chance: a powerful duo, more than powerful enough to build a cosmology on, from the atoms and the little things with nonsense names that make up atoms to Alpha Centauri and Cassiopeia and the great dark back of beyond. The gods and

> ourselves, whirled helplessly around by the winds of chance, yet pulled equally towards each other, towards not only B and C and D but towards X and Y and Z and Omega too. Not the least thing, not the last thing but is called to by love.
>
> A vision, an opening up, as the heavens are opened up by a rainbow when the rain stops falling. Does it suffice, for old folk, to have these visions now and again, these rainbows, as a comfort, before the rain starts pelting down again? Must one be too creaky to join the dance before one can see the pattern? (191-92).

This reads much like a parody of the notion of a universal language sought by Newton. The transcendent tones and the metaphorical hyperbole, the mingling of discourses, and the reference to Yeats's "Among School Children" underline the sheer mutability of the language. And yet, read in the light of the Newton essay, this is not far off Coetzee's suggestion of how Newton's theory of gravity would have sounded to his contemporaries. It may well be that the pure concept of attraction which Coetzee refers to in the Newton essay is fundamentally singular, that what is being alluded to is not a Platonic metaphysics or an abstract absolutism, whereby "attraction" might be replaced by any other concept, but rather that it is "attraction" or "desire" or "appetency" or, ultimately, "love" towards which the mind moves. According to this reading, language is driven not by a desire for referential transparency, but by more idealist aspirations. "Not the least thing, not the last thing but is called to by love": the syntax of weakness here is reminiscent of the plaintive works of Beckett's very late period, admired by Coetzee. There is no subject, the voice is passive, and yet it exerts a certain power that captures Coetzee's late aesthetic: an aesthetic of letting go that involves a renunciation of the will to power and that is borne out of that privation.

What we find in *The Childhood of Jesus* is a positing of the thinking subject with only the rudiments of language to speak his thoughts. Simón and David are in a similar privative predicament to Kafka's ape Red Peter, or Elizabeth Costello in "At the Gate". They all find themselves in a world into which they have been thrown and to which they don't have a key. They are dehistoricised, plunged into a new language, seemingly (and impossibly) without an old one. In this peculiar linguistic cosmopolitanism, they must negotiate their new world from the ground up, as it

were. This is not a mere problem of moving from one language to the other, as in translation, but the intransitive project of discovering the world anew, constructing a new worldview. This is precisely the predicament of the monolingual *other* in Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*, with which Coetzee was familiar, and which is undoubtedly an important source text for *The Childhood of Jesus*.[23] Derrida describes his own situation as a French-speaking Algerian Jew as being "thrown into absolute translation, a translation without a pole of reference, without an originary language, and without a source language". The monolingual other has only target languages, which "no longer know where they are coming from, what they are speaking *from* and what the sense of their journey is". He must chart his own journey out of his desire "to invent a *first language*" (61). Derrida extrapolates from this a theory of language in general, claiming that language can never be possessed, and that even those who speak several languages do so "with a view to an absolute idiom […] in the promise of a still unheard-of language" (67). This promise which, for Derrida, is present in every utterance, is the "opening up of speech by something that *resembles* messianism, soteriology, or eschatology" (68). It "heralds the uniqueness of a language to come" (67), which is akin to the groping of the mind in Coetzee's Newton essay, or what JC describes in *Diary of a Bad Year* as "beginning to speak vatically" (151). Coetzee, like Derrida, sees the project of truth seeking as an expansion of language, as future-oriented rather than a quest for a source or origin. Truth is not an absolute origin, but emerges from striving for a language that will articulate one's journey. Crucially, this is not a universal language but a language that is uniquely one's own and that emanates from the assumption of one's mortality, that is, one's utter singularity.

Simón repeatedly fails to find words for things: for the nature of his relationship to the boy, David; for David's specialness that goes beyond mere cleverness or precocity; for something in the boy's eyes. The figuring of David as a messianic figure is indicated in the novel's title and in the allusions to the biblical story of the annunciation. Simón, relying on some mysterious intuition, has taken on the task of finding David's mother who he claims he will know, although he has never laid eyes on her. He chooses a woman he happens across while out walking with the boy,

[23] David Attwell notes from his archival research that Derrida's book inspired certain sections of *Diary of a Bad Year* and the comments on monolingualism in *Here and Now* (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (35).

whose name is Inés. Toward the end of the book, when he, David and Inés and their dog Bolivar abscond to find a new life toward the end of the novel, Simón declares: "Spanish doesn't have a word for exactly what we are, so let us call ourselves that: the family of David" (260).

Jesus, figured in John's Gospel as the word made flesh, is the embodiment of the promise of language, its immanent presence. And David is increasingly figured as the novel progresses as a messianic figure, but he is also, in many ways, a typical child. Impetuous, imaginative, literal-minded and naïve, he vehemently rejects the abstract and the transcendent. His resistance to Spanish is not culturally motivated but is a defiance of linguistic systems in general, including the numerical language of mathematics. He wants to speak his own language and to read stories rather than words. He claims to know "all the numbers" but refuses to learn to count in sequence, and his teacher diagnoses a "specific deficit linked to symbolic activities" (149, 205). Because of his trouble at school, he is sent to a reformatory school, from which he escapes. By this point, Simón has begun to consider that David may be a special child. He tries to see the world through David's eyes:

> It is as if the numbers were islands floating in a great black sea of nothingness, and he were each time being asked to close his eyes and launch himself across the void. *What if I fall?* – that is what he asks himself. *What if I fall and then keep falling for ever?* Lying in bed in the middle of the night, I could sometimes swear that I too was falling – falling under the same spell that grips the boy. *If getting from one to two is so hard,* I asked myself, *how shall I ever get from zero to one?* From nowhere to somewhere: it seemed to demand a miracle each time. (249)

He thinks, "what if we are wrong and he is right? What if between one and two there is no bridge at all, only empty space? […] What if this boy is the only one among us with eyes to see?" (250). In gesturing to the Christian messiah, Coetzee also sets the child up as a saviour figure. Simón's friend advises him to persist with Spanish: "One day it will cease to feel like a language, it will become the way things are" (12). In following David, however, Simón refuses to make that transcendent move from the world to the linguistic system, and the linguistic cosmopolitanism begins to

look like totalitarianism, not a universal language at all, but a master language. Coetzee, glossing Walter Benjamin's theory of mimesis, writes that language has undergone a long fall since the days of Adam, when "the word and the gesture of naming were the same thing", and a gradual weakening of the mimetic faculty of the human mind: "Today only children preserve, and respond to the world with, a comparable mimetic power" (*Inner Workings* 52). The child, who is discovering the world through naïve eyes, who is literal-minded and whose imaginative capacities are not dulled by systemic thinking is figured here as the herald of a language to come.[24]

However, this is no abstract lionisation of innocence. There is a very real context within which Coetzee is writing that is indicated in *The Good Story* when he refers to Elizabeth Costello's dismay in being the only one to find appalling the routine slaughter of animals for their flesh. It is a horror that Coetzee shares and not only in relation to meat eating but also to institutionalised cruelty in general. "I write not in a cool, scientific spirit but under the sway of feeling," he claims. "Specifically I write in the aftermath of a decision by the Australian parliament to revise its legislation on asylum seekers. The new legislation threatens the draconian penalty of indefinite detention on some hellhole of an island for people who fail to follow the prescribed procedure for claiming asylum" (88). In this light, *The Childhood of Jesus* begins to appear less like an allegory and more like a response to the most pressing crisis facing us today, the very nature of which rests on a refusal to acknowledge the exposure to death of the branded "other". Coetzee speculates that generations to come will be as adept as we are today in "doublethink", which enables us to attribute the wrongs of the past to a zeitgeist from which we, the enlightened, have exited. This "doublethink" facilitates a moral relativism that eradicates historical guilt, and mitigates acts of barbarism by turning their perpetrators into "children of their times", followers of the law (89). The child, David, who eschews the law and insists on a literal, naïve engagement with the world, represents the antithesis of "doublethink". Throughout Coetzee's fiction, it is the figures who stand apart from the law, from the zeitgeist—the holy fool, the child, the dying—who are the guides:

[24] Benjamin's theory of mimesis is invoked more explicitly in *The Schooldays of Jesus*, in which David enrols at a children's academy of dance, the philosophy of which centres on the unique capacity for anamnesis possessed by the child, who "still bears deep impresses of a former life, shadow recollections which he lacks words to express. He lacks words because, along with the world we have lost, we have lost a language fit to evoke it" (67).

those for whom the word is not the law but the flesh, for whom language is summoning, learning, teaching and sharing.

Don Quixote is a framing text for *The Childhood of Jesus*, and David is ostensibly the quixotic figure, Simón his Sancho Panza. They find a children's abridged copy of the novel in the library and it acquires an almost biblical status for the boy who refuses to be parted from it. Alonso Quixano might be regarded as a master of "doublethink", living in an ideal fantasy world that he is forced to relinquish only in the face of impending death, but it can also be argued that Quixote is an exemplary figure for taking things literally. His naïve fidelity to the stories he reads in books might be set against the dangerous abstractions of the sceptic who is always thinking in doubles. The distinction that Coetzee draws out between these two ways of understanding Quixote provides an important insight into his late turn from the anti-illusionism of *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* towards the uninterrupted illusions in his most recent works. In his essay on García Márquez, Coetzee opposes Quixote's idealism not to anti-illusionism but to self-interest. Underlying the comedy of Cervantes's novel, Coetzee finds moments when, far from being naïve and deluded, Quixote betrays a level of self-awareness and commitment that suggests his idealistic worldview is an ethical choice, where he "seems to claim that dedicating oneself to a life of service can make one a bettter person, regardless of whether that service is to an illusion" (*Inner Workings* 266). He cites Quixote who, when challenged on the non-existence of his Lady Dulcinea, dismisses the importance of whether she is imaginary or not: "these are not the kinds of things whose verification can be carried through to the end" (267). Quixote seems to allege, according to Coetzee, that "if we accept the ethical superiority of a world in which people act in the name of ideals over a world in which people act in the name of interests," then such ontological questions might not be so important (267). The ontological difference between truth and fiction here is of much lesser significance than the truth of Quixote's actions and his fidelity to his ideals.

We have seen how Coetzee undermines dualistic structures such as metaphor and allegory throughout his work and how he repeatedly expresses allegiance to the first order of language, which in the trajectories of *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* allies the exposure to death with a stripping down of language and a forfeiting of illusion. *The Childhood of Jesus*, on the other hand, proceeds in the

opposite direction, beginning with death and a remarkably stark idiom and moving through a process of accretion to the building of a world. Here the eschewal of linguistic doubleness seems to suggest an even more radical *idealism*, an experiment in seeing where language takes one and a renewed faith in the novel.

In his book *The Value of the Novel* (2015), Peter Boxall foregrounds the relationship between the ideal and the real in the history of the novel and reminds us of how central and how fraught this relationship is. "It is only as a certain gap opens between word and thing," he argues, "only as narrative crafts a critical distance and freedom from the world that it seeks to describe, that the world yields itself up to novelistic language" (60). But as Boxall further remarks, "our conception of the relationship between ideas and material is entering into a state of transition" (74). In our age of virtuality, this very distinction is challenged, so that Quixote's downplaying of the question of whether Dulcinea is real or merely an ideation opens up a pertinent question for contemporary political consciousness. In the post-industrial world it is information rather than the circulation of material goods that increasingly defines our society, so that the ontological distinction between actual material existence and ideas is becoming less significant. The important questions for our times rest rather on the impact that the immaterial currents of information have on the material conditions of people's lives. This opens up a new way of understanding the value of the novel in our contemporary world. Drawing on Bruno Latour's concept of nonhuman actors, Rita Felski makes the point that the things made of words in novels are not merely signs of an absence, that their presence, even if it is ideational, makes things happen: "The import of a text is not exhausted by what it reveals or conceals about the social conditions that surround it. Rather, it is also a matter of what it sets alight in the reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what changes of perception it prompts, what bonds and attachments it calls into being" (*The Limits of Critique* 179). Considered in this light, *The Childhood of Jesus* might be considered not in terms of the image it presents of the world, but in terms of the kind of attachments and questions that it instigates.

The starkness and strangeness of Coetzee's fictional world in this novel, the bafflement that it elicits among readers, evident from the reviews and academic responses, fortifies it against the kind of suspicious reading practices of the interpreter/censor/critic. Its sheer flatness implicitly demands an attitude of trust

from the reader, if only because it is difficult to know what to make of it. We are forced to attend to what is on the page because it presents no doubleness, and hence no easy opportunities for interpretation, no crevices in which suspicion and doubt might take root. In the difficulty that it presents for interpretation, it implicitly demands a singular response to what is on the page. The reader is placed in the same predicament as Simón and David, Red Peter or Elizabeth Costello before the gate. We find ourselves in a world without a key, a text without a discernible law. The work of responding elicits the kind of anxiety that David, and after him Simón, feels: what if I fall?

It is a world that begins from nothing, a little like Crusoe's island, except for one important distinction: it has no model. If Crusoe epitomises the coloniser who establishes a model of home on distant shores, and imports his language and his *Weltanschauung*, the figures of Coetzee's novel, who are thrown into absolute translation, have no such reference points. Coetzee's late idealism, like Quixote's, is not a question of naïveté or self-delusion. On the contrary, it is the expression of a profound commitment to becoming true to oneself and it demands a comparable response. It has nothing to do with verifiability or the binary oppositions of truth and falsity but more complex ethical questions and an allegiance to an idea of the good that can be traced throughout Coetzee's oeuvre and which in the late work is inextricably allied with death. *The Childhood of Jesus* is not so much an allegory as a fictional literalisation of this ethical imperative of becoming responsible through becoming mortal. The after-death voice is the voice that begins with nothing, without memory or attachments, and must navigate the world through intuition or anamnesis. What Coetzee seems to be striving for in his post-mortem fictions is a vatic language, a language that is washed clean of historical and poetic associations and that is uniquely one's own. It is, I think, not too much to say that this is language that gropes towards the good or, as I speculated in regard to the "Eros" section of *Elizabeth Costello*, towards love. It is the very antithesis of a universal language that seeks to close the gap between word and world; rather it is the enunciation of a singular voice, outside of any law or zeitgeist.

Coetzee's alliance of mortality and ethics, in its positing of responsibility as something immanent to language, crucially controverts Derrida's formulation set forth in *The Gift of Death*. Derrida traces the genesis of modern ethics from a pre-

Christian understanding of the sacred as "orgiastic or demonic mystery" through the development of Christianity as a history of responsibility, whereby the experience of the sacred as infinite love, which is incalculable and forgetful of itself, renounces itself "in order to *become finite*, becomes incarnated in order to love the other" (2, 51). For Derrida, this is characteristically aporetic since, for him, to become responsible is to acknowledge the mortality and hence the absolute singularity of the self and the other, which necessitates a betrayal of the irresponsibility inherent in the sacred experience of infinite love. Furthermore, as we have seen, as soon as this love for the incarnate other is expressed in language, it becomes, for Derrida, inauthentic because language suspends the absolute singularity of the self. In Coetzee's late aesthetic, on the other hand, it is *in* language that mortality, and hence singularity, is assumed, where language is increasingly posited as reaching towards the good and towards love. As Peter Goldman observes, the figure of Jesus, the most obvious incarnation of infinite love, is strikingly absent from Derrida's account, in which "the humanity of Jesus is displaced by gnostic mystery" (Goldman). By invoking Jesus in his latest works, Coetzee eschews Derrida's appeal to sacred transcendence in favour of an immanent ethic that finds incarnate expression within language. In this formulation, language is not a betrayal that attempts to represent the unrepresentable but is rather an expression of fidelity to an idea of the good and to an embodied ethic of care for the finite. In this respect, it can also be said that Simón is a quixotic figure, who, although he is not bound by the law of the father, dedicates himself to the service of the child out of what appears to be, or certainly develops into, love.

The copy of *An Illustrated Children's Don Quixote* in Coetzee's novel is authored not by Cervantes but Benengeli, the fictional chronicler of the adventures of Don Quixote within the novel. So, like *Elizabeth Costello* who winds up remanded between the pages of a book, Simón and David are also in a literary limbo, but the outlook is more propitious. Theirs is no purgatory of clichés. They also find themselves before the law when, toward the end of the novel, a pair of uniformed officials attempt to send David back to the reformatory school. But Simón declares, "there are higher considerations than obeying the law, higher imperatives" (256). In a rather brighter, more hopeful mode than most of Coetzee's previous novels, the book ends as they decide, rather than submit to the law, to go into exile. Simón, Inés,

David, their dog Bolivar move on to start a new life. They pick up a hitchhiker whose name is Juan, of whom David says: "He is my brother, he must come too" (275). The novel is dedicated to D.K.C., Coetzee's brother David who died in 2010, and this late inclusion gestures towards a personal preparation for death, which, as Coetzee wrote in his notes for *The Master of Petersburg*, is what one hopes to find at the end of a story. The quasi father-son relationship at the centre of the novel and David's constant fear of falling—through cracks in the pavement, into the sea, into the gaps between things—suggest a revisiting of *The Master of Petersburg*. Here, however, the idea of following the dead as a stimulus for writing has a more positive character, not as an appropriation, and hence a betrayal, but as an accompaniment and a work of love. This is, perhaps, what it means to write vatically: to let oneself fall. One thinks of Teresa Guiccioli crying out for the dead Lord Byron in the libretto that David Lurie writes in *Disgrace*, while he dedicates himself to the service of dead dogs. It is the intransitivity and the quixotic fidelity of both endeavours that makes them figures for Coetzee's own late aesthetic.

Among other things, *The Childhood of Jesus* is a book about reading and specifically about the value of quixotic reading as opposed to the sceptical questioning of the censor/interpreter/critic. In his review of the Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom's novel *Lost Paradise* (Eng. trans. 2008), which draws on a theatrical performance art event called the Angel Project, Coetzee writes: "Through his fable Nooteboom may well be suggesting that the hunger of the soul does not require direct experience of the transcendent to be satisfied, that complicity in an aesthetic illusion can take the soul surprisingly far". Coetzee's own late fiction is likewise answering to the hunger of the soul and implicitly entreats us to see where illusion might take us.

Closing Remarks

"There are moments and, as it were, sparks of the brightest, most ardent fire in whose light we no longer understand the word 'I'; there, beyond our being something exists that in those moments becomes a here and now, and that is why we long with all our hearts for bridges connecting the here and the there."

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations*.

To attempt to conclude too neatly here would defeat the premise of the thesis. It would contradict everything I have been arguing to suggest that this research goes toward setting a paradigm, or that its findings can be projected on to other works. This is not to say that they cannot be of any interest outside of their context, but rather to make a point about paradigms and projecting them onto literary texts. The relation of writing to death cannot be developed into a framework that can then be applied to the reading of other texts. If death is that which defines us in our singularity, then it follows that texts which address mortality on a serious level will be utterly singular. On the other hand, if death is that which dissolves singularity, as one might take from Banville or Roth, then one is not left with very much with which to form a theory. Once we unpick the ideas, we have a very unsingular and uninteresting template that is not particularly valuable. I have not attempted here to make philosophical claims about death per se. What I set out to do was to attend to the ways in which death has been interrogated in particular texts by authors who, late in their careers, have made mortality the central focus of their art. I did not want to impose a frame of enquiry or to forge one out of my responses to the three bodies of work addressed in the thesis. What I would hope is that this research helps to dislodge a prevailing idea, imported from the sciences and social sciences, that the academic study of literary texts should be oriented towards the development of interpretive templates that must have wide-reaching applications. Literature is about affording new ways of seeing and about opening ourselves to new worldviews; it is an arena of independent thinking that necessarily has its place outside the fray. It is not about following or developing ideologies. If, as critics, we are to aspire to a commensurate independence of thought we must also resist the systematisation of

ideas implicit in methodological approaches. We must begin from nothing and seek out our own voices in response. As I argued in my introduction, this does not mean limiting our readings but rather relinquishing preformed concepts and seeing where the work takes us. Hence, I don't offer a conclusion as such but instead some closing comments to iterate my own stance in relation to the material covered within the chapters.

I chose the quotation from Nietzsche on the value of culture and the arts as an epigraph to this closing section because it constellates many of the ideas that have emerged out of the readings in this thesis. It captures a particular relationship between art and death that is pertinent to all the novels I discuss in the preceding chapters: a compulsion to exceed the self, to become other than oneself, a demand that is at the core of creative work. It is receptiveness to the new that draws us to art, the willingness to let ourselves fall. This confrontation with, and surmounting of, limits, this becoming other, is where the art experience converges with death. This can be very tiny. It can arise from being borne along on a flood of torrential prose, from confronting a strange book that refuses to open itself to easy understanding, or from a heightened or distorted sense of time. What the novels in this study have in common is that they procure an ontological disturbance that undermines the ostensible stability of individuated being and necessitates thinking beyond the bounds of discrete selfhood. The thematic focus on death in each case thematises the ways in which the novels bring into focus the limit condition on an experiential level, how they afford an apprehension of death in the present. Death, in these works, is not a distant horizon of possibility that stretches out before us like Gatsby's green light and that encloses us within our subjective perspectives. It manifests in the here and now of reading and intensifies our experience of being alive, which is as much as we can ask of works of literature.

Novels cannot act as mirrors of society or teach us how to live. They can, however, teach us how to read. We have seen how Banville directs our attention to the affective experience of his novels by making their content almost disappear, how Roth awakens us to the duplicitousness of discourse and the sheer erotic force of language as an expenditure of the self into the world, how Coetzee debilitates rhetorical momentum and makes his language almost impervious to scepticism. These are all lessons in reading that confront us with forms of truth that do not

conform to the binary logic of verification or falsification. Crucially, they also posit meaning as emergent from connections and attachments that are established through language rather than as an a priori state of affairs that might be discerned behind language. The modes of reading towards which these novels direct us run counter to the relativism of post-structuralist reading practices where meaning is always posited elsewhere, and where language negates the world and destroys a putative authenticity, which hence can only be alluded to in silence. It is through these lessons in reading, and not through any image presented of the social, that these works postulate a conception of reality that departs from the idea of an unmediated self or a world in-itself. They all draw our attention to the surface of language rather than its slippery depths. This shifting vantage point leads us out of the temporality of an irretrievable past to the here and now, to the moment of potential where the new comes into being. It is this moment of creative potential, in which we are confronted with the limitedness of our subjective perspectives and enjoined to exceed them, that makes intimations of mortality central to the art experience.

Works of literature, in this account, are not only representations of the world—although they do, of course, have a representative function. They are also part of the world. They unfold into temporal events that have real consequences in affecting who we become as readers. In conceiving of novels as participants in, rather than merely representations of, being, we make questions of ontological difference less important than other questions that are perhaps of more aesthetic and even ethical import. We might, then, dispense with asking what image does the work present of the world? Is it a "true" image? What prejudices does it betray? Such interrogations inevitably plunge us into relativism, since no work of art can constitute an accurate reflection of a reality that is immeasurably various and mutable, so that an infinite amount of prejudices and omissions can viably be posited. The more interesting questions do not seek absences or occlusions, which are innumerable, but look to what the work makes present and what we may in turn bring into being through answering a demand that necessitates response. We might ask not what the work means but what happens in our encounter with it. What hidden corners of experience does it bring to light? How does it impact upon our sense of time? How does it take us out of the enclosure of our subjective perspectives and even out of our human perspective?

These are the questions I have attempted to address in my readings, but they are not questions that I began with. Rather, they arose out of attending to the novels and answering to their demands. I do not claim to have provided definitive readings but to have sought out challenges that are implicit in the works. Finding the questions has been my central concern, reaching that point where recognition fails and necessity creeps in. It is in making the boundary condition manifest in the here and now that art poses its challenges, by confronting us with impediments to possibility. When our horizon of possibility is an abstraction that expands before us, we are not held accountable, not held hostage. Art performs its violence by confronting us with our limits, in which our mortality is implicit. This is the peculiar pleasure that is derived from Banville's late works and from Roth's novels of the nineties, which exert their power in affording a melting or shattering of the *I*. Reading these novels solicits an exhilarating sense of self-loss that makes manifest the contingent and relational character of being, where death is not a horizon of closure but a process intrinsic to life. It is a process that for the individual will cease and *Everyman* (2006) is a work about accepting that fact, but it is a book as much about art as death and a reflection on the way in which art and death are inextricably yoked to one another. It is a remorseless portrayal of the costs of creative endeavour, and of approaching a point where the sheer exertion of the self in the work of writing and the constant confronting of limits cannot be sustained. Coetzee's late aesthetic is very different to the sensory extravaganzas that characterise the most powerful of Roth's and Banville's late works, and, in an important sense, it is fundamentally opposed to the aesthetic of rapturous self-dissolution. Death, for Coetzee, is also an immanent frontier but it is not the exertion of the desiring force of the will that brings death into the present. Rather, it is a renunciation of the will and a radical disabling of force that establishes mortal confrontation at the very core of Coetzee's art. Death is, finally, what holds the writer accountable, and in directing his readers to begin from nothing, what holds us accountable too. In the work of all three writers, death is the stimulus for writing, rather than a figure for a putative negation of the world by the word. It is the source of creative endeavour rather than its end.

Ironically, reflecting on how death is implicated in the work of writing, as well as reading, may go some way towards taking us out of the language of crisis that has proclaimed so many deaths over the last half century and beyond—the author, the subject, the human, the novel and, in recent years, literary theory. But

these categories have stubbornly survived and even thrived. The focus on endings reflects a certain temporal consciousness that is common to the modernist concern with the lost object and the jubilant declarations of freedom characteristic of postmodernism. This is a consciousness that constructs time in terms of before and after and that regards death as antithetical to life. It is possible to discern in the works addressed here a different temporal consciousness that shifts the focus from death as ending to death as becoming. In directing our gaze to the potentialities of the present, in locating the boundary condition here and now, we might acknowledge that these so-called deaths are more properly evolutions and rejuvenations. This is not a matter of changing how things are but of how we see them. It is thus, fundamentally, a question of reading.

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