

Narrating Selves:
The Narrative Integrity of Fictional Autobiographies

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PhD

University of York

English and Related Literature

July 2018

Abstract

The thesis examines the way writers use fiction as a rhetorical vehicle to thematise and to theorise the project of autobiography — a transformation of life into narrative that involves a negotiation between aesthetics and ethics. It analyses four fictional autobiographies, published since 1988, by Paul Auster, Julian Barnes, Lydia Davis, and Philip Roth. Each text presents an autodiegetic narrator narrating crucial moments in her/his life; they are ordered progressively according to the way each engages with the issue of narrative artifice on the narratorial and/or authorial level. I explore what makes the character narrator’s life-story *work*, that is, the way s/he negotiates the possible tension between form and ethics, the resolution of which is what I call *narrative integrity*. The double meaning of the word “integrity”, as a formal and an ethical quality, encapsulates the dual demands of formal coherence and ethical commitment inherent in the challenges of autobiography. This thesis discusses four forms of narrative integrity — contingency, consistency, coherence, and counterpoint — and suggests ways in which they are interpreted differently on the representational and the rhetorical level of the text. Adopting a rhetorical approach to fiction, I address the way the particular representation of autobiography in each text is used rhetorically, not autobiographically, by the author to theorise certain aspects of self-representation in general. I argue that integrity as a critical concept helps elucidate the complications involved in life writing by foregrounding the issue of form, which is necessary, if also potentially problematic, for the articulation of personal truths. This project situates itself within the broad field of ethical criticism in literary studies and explores the relationships between fiction, narrative ethics, and life writing.

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Acknowledgements

There is a story in my junior high school textbook, written by Ran In-Ting, a well-known Taiwanese watercolourist, called 飲水思源. It is about a man who lives alone in the mountains by the river. He builds a watermill and uses it to mill rice for a small living. He finds himself with some extra earnings one day and decides to give thanks to the milling stones, the means of his living, burning incense and saying out loud prayers of gratitude. After a few months of this practice, he realises that the stones relies upon the watermill to work, and so he turns to give thanks to that instead. Then again, he realises that without the running water, the mill is useless on its own. Thus, the man embarks on a pilgrimage up the mountain, toiling through many miles until the river becomes a small brook, finally able to give thanks to this blessed grace. The pilgrimage becomes a ritual. When it is time again for the journey, several days of rain delays his departure. The man becomes impatient, fussing over this inconvenience. He walks out of his hut into the open and prays for the rain to stop. In that moment, he realises, the water in the river comes from the heavens, and therefore his pilgrimage is already complete.

There is another story from my youth, which merged with this first story when they first shot through my memory. A prose essay 謝天 by Chen Chih-Fan, a scientist and also a popular writer. It is about his experience living abroad, witnessing the saying of prayers at the beginning of each meal of his American friends. He goes on to reflect upon his own childhood and the doctrines he grew up with, a moral tale about claiming credit from ancient Chinese history (which I will not indulge here), and the way Einstein always attributes his discoveries to friends and predecessors. The piece concludes with the reminder that, whatever we achieve

in life owes much more to the contributions of countless others than ourselves; and because of that, we might as well thank the heavens.

Such were my thoughts upon conceiving this acknowledgement, turning my mind's eye backwards not just to the past four years, but also the whole history of my education, to the people and things that I need to give thanks to. The task became too inclusive, since this thesis is also made possible by the quiet little things in life — the sun that rose each day, the peace of the night. There is also music, from rock to blues, folk to classic. Rather than offering an exhaustive list of names (and at the risk of exhausting the reader), or use the abstracted “heavens” as the bearer of my gratitude, I limit myself to those that offered constant support for the past four years, during which this thesis slowly came into existence.

My first thanks go to my supervisors, Derek Attridge and Richard Walsh, whose patience and kindness in their mentorship made me competent and confident as a researcher. I first met them while studying for a master's degree at York in 2009. When I returned in 2014 for a PhD, their presence and encouragement made me feel this — both York and the study of literature — is where I rightly belong. For me, the pure unexpectedness of Derek's reply and encouragement to my informal enquiry to pursue PhD study at York remains a mystery, and this chance event led the way to everything that followed. Richard's guidance in the writing-up stage of this thesis is invaluable, and I thank his good cheer and humour as well as the sharpness of his critical eye in seeing this project through. I thank them both for showing me how to do research by example and letting me make my own discoveries, which were slower but all the more rewarding.

I want to thank Adam Kelly, who was on my thesis advisory panel, for the encouragement and fresh perspective he brought to this thesis, for his attention to detail and facilitation of the supervision process.

My time at York would be very different without the company and support from fellow PhDs and friends. Gilly Howe was one of the first people, and one of the most friendliest, I met at York, whose friendship made a huge difference at the beginning of my life here. Daisy Johnson offered many stimulating conversations on subjects serious and silly, on research as well as musings about the strangeness of life. Marie Allitt's friendship and kindness lessened my anxiety and made me feel welcomed. Fiona Hobbs Milne's energy and enthusiasm were a great source of support, with whom I exchanged ideas about research, the academia, and the future.

The mental hurdles that I overcame in the past four years would not have been possible without physical exercise for company. I want to thank the instructors at York Sports Village, Emma, Jo, and Kate, for their energy and kindness, making me feel part of a community outside the academia at York.

I want to thank the English department at the University of York, both the academic and administrative staff, for their patience and support in facilitating my learning process over the past few years. I also want to thank many members of The International Society for the Study of Narrative, whose generosity and hospitality made me feel welcomed in the academic world.

My greatest thanks go to my parents, Ching-Ming and Hsu-Wei, without whom I would not be here. They taught me how to live, encouraged me to be adventurous, and supported my whims and ambitions. My father Ching-Ming, an engineer by training but an avid reader and writer, kept a well-stocked library which had books from the natural sciences to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, on weiqi and

chess as well as ancient Chinese literature. Books were part of the air I breathed growing up, they lined the shelves in every room of the house, which was not large but enough for our quiet living. My mother Hsu-Wei, who studied journalism, nourished us with home-made food, and whose devotion kept our lives in order. I miss my life under their roof and the time we spent together without quarrelling.

This thesis is a celebration of the life lived, the life I have now, and the life I am looking towards. The past gives the present and future meaning, and the future reveals ourselves to us in ways that are unexpected. I dedicate this to my future self — may you be somewhat different, but always me.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author.

This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter I

Introduction: The Project of Autobiography, Fiction, Integrity

1. THE MEMOIR BOOM AND THE WORK OF GENRE

The last decade of the twentieth century saw a significant increase in the publication of memoirs in the United States and the United Kingdom, a period that has been described as “the memoir boom” (Smith and Watson 2001; Rak 2013).¹ Julie Rak, in discussing the book publishing industry and the marketability of memoirs, notes that this trend “has created curiosity about its content, shock about its popularity, celebrations of its power, and disgust at its excesses” (10). In *Memoir: A History* (2009), Ben Yagoda suggests that memoir, as both a cultural and a commercial product, shapes public discourse: “Autobiographically speaking, there has never been a time like it. Memoir has become the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged” (28). Bestselling memoirs, such as Nick Hornby’s *Fever Pitch: A Fan’s Life* (1992), Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), and Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood* (1996), introduced relatively unknown writers into the spotlight. The pathos of personal passions and hardship overcome resonated with the wider audience, and memoir, as one of the forms of autobiographical writing, creates a bond between people in narrating life’s challenges.

Memoir’s truth-telling nature makes it a powerful rhetorical tool that wields emotional and ethical force. And yet, as a factual narrative based on individual

¹ Thomas Larson sees this phenomenon as a “literary movement”: “Passionate, contrary, innovative, undefined: memoir today has the energy of a literary movement ... Indeed, we may be living in the age of memoir” (21).

memories rather than archival research, as in historical or biographical narratives, its truth value may be closer to that of the novel than first appears. To consider this ambiguity as a matter of genre, current scholarship approaches such literary categories not as mutually exclusive or pure forms, but “as plastic, fluid, and perhaps inherently hybrid entities that may emerge, evolve, and eventually die out” (Couser, “Genre Matters” 141). G. Thomas Couser suggests that we should understand genre in relation to its historical, cultural, and political context, not simply as a matter of form but also of function, or “form *as* function”: “literature’s *form* as a means of understanding its *function* and its *force*” (ibid 141, 145; original emphasis). Couser draws out the kind of work that genres do simply by their presence, the way they “encode or reinforce particular values in ways that may shape culture and history” (ibid 146). Genre “creates knowledge as it organises it” (Rak 26), knowledge that specifies the possible and the permissible forms of agency, identity, and truth.

The memoir boom can be seen as an indicator of contemporary culture, in which an intensified production and consumption of life writing, in both traditional and new media, reflects an increased interest in personal storytelling. The subject matter of these memoirs has become more diverse and can feature the kind of lives that were previously under-represented. Memoirs also foreground the process of fashioning and shaping one’s own experiences, that is, the way to make the life-story compelling enough to justify its commercial and cultural value. Autobiographical writings such as the memoir showcase the writer’s individuality, by declaring that “[h]ere is what it was like to be *me*, to face what I faced, to lose what I lost” (Larson 22; original emphasis). In this way, the *form* of the experience, “what it was like”, is arguably just as significant as the represented experience itself. Formal choices involved in the narrative representation of life reveal the way the writer experiences

and understands the world; the writer's personality and sense of self is expressed in the telling as much as in what is told.

While genres do not offer a definitive classificatory system, they make "a claim about the text's ontological status, its rhetorical power, and its value as testimony" (Couser, "Genre" 148). Indeed, there are ethical stakes involved in transforming life into narrative, and genres, as "pre-digested ways of knowing" (Rak 19), already condition the way the text will be interpreted before readers make their own judgments. At the height of the memoir boom, a number of bestselling memoirs were later revealed as hoaxes and works of fiction. Binjamin Wilkomirski's Holocaust memoir *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1995) was debunked three years after its publication; Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love: A Harrowing True Story of Love and Revenge in Jordan* (2003), about being a witness of an honour killing, was revealed as fictional; and the memoir *My Own Sweet Time* (1994), supposedly written by the aboriginal author "Wanda Koolmatrie", was discovered to be written by Leon Carmen, a young white Australian man (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 37, 137-138).² These examples show a violation of trust between authors and readers and an abuse of the function that genres are supposed to perform. The initial popularity of these fake memoirs shows that while memoir is a literary and rhetorical form, expectations about truth value are considerably involved in readers' judgments. This raises the question of the interpretative assumptions of readers of life writing, and the need to direct attention not only to the text's mimetic representation and affective force, but also to the

² A more complicated case is J.T. LeRoy, the author of *Sarah* (2000) and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), which are autobiographical accounts of his troubled and abusive relationship with his mother growing up. In 2005, it was revealed that LeRoy is the pseudonym of Laura Albert, and that public appearances of LeRoy were impersonations by her sister-in-law, Savannah Knoop. Knoop published a memoir about this six-year hoax, *Girl Boy Girl: How I Became JT LeRoy* (2008).

political and moral forces operating in the discursive forms themselves. Caroline Levine, discussing the organising power of forms as a sociopolitical issue, draws attention to the way forms “shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context” (5).³ The practice of life writing relies upon existing, normative forms in order to fulfil the purpose of communicating individual experiences and personal truths. However, forms are also imposed onto experience and can potentially mislead our interpretations of the nature of the communicated content.

The scandal of James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) and the media attention it attracted can be seen as an exemplary case of such autobiographical hoaxes. Originally sold as a memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* recounts Frey’s experience of overcoming addiction without using the twelve-step model established by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The book was selected by Oprah Winfrey’s book club, became a bestseller, and celebrated for its “true” story of redemption. When it was exposed as fictional a few years later, the extensive media coverage culminated on U.S. national television with an indignant Oprah chastising Frey and his publisher Nan Talese for lying to the public. Besides the financial interest involved, that a novel labelled as a memoir can boost sales volume, the controversy was also about the definition of memoir and what kind of information it is supposed to offer. In an interview with Larry King in 2006, Frey said: “A memoir literally means my story, a memoir is a subjective retelling of events” (qtd. in Rak 193). And yet, King retorts, by selling the book as a memoir, readers expect the truth, even if subjective, to be based on facts and not deliberately fabricated for dramatic effect.⁴ Yagoda gives a

³ Levine identifies four “particularly common, pervasive” forms that organise modern living: “bounded *wholes*”, “temporal *rhythms*”, “powerful *hierarchies*”, and “*networks* that link people and objects, including multinational trade, terrorism, and transportation” (21; original emphasis).

⁴ In the same interview with King, Frey claimed that he originally offered the manuscript as a novel to a number of publishers but was rejected (Rak 183). The ultimate decision to sell it as a memoir

broad definition of twenty-first-century memoir: “Attention is resolutely focused on the self, and a certain leeway or looseness with the facts is expected” (2). This “looseness” is a cause for disputes and rests on a fragile, but also powerful, sense of trust between authors and readers. Publishers play an influential role in how that trust is set up in the first place. Memoir as a genre is shaped *as* people produce works in its name.

Both Frey and Talese downplay their violation of readers’ trust, effectively disavowing Oprah’s belief in publishers’ role as “the *moral* arbiters of genre” (Rak 197; original emphasis). Oprah’s appeal to Talese — “I’m trusting you, the publisher, to categorise this book whether as fiction or autobiographical or memoir. I’m trusting you” (qtd. in Rak 197) — gives the impression that these literary categories are mutually exclusive. However, the lines between them are blurred rather than clear-cut. The narrativisation of life resists easy classification, and readers need to be cautious about the kind of work that genres do on our behalf. As Couser suggests, “the point is less to determine what [a text] *is* — it isn’t any *one* particular thing — but rather what it *does*” (“Genre” 145; original emphasis). I would like to emphasise the issue of how that work is done, that is, the way the life writer argues for the “rightness” of her/his life-story in communicating emotional and personal truths. Such truths are not the same as objective facts, but they do argue for a certain sense of necessity and even inevitability. This, I suggest, centres upon the way life writers re-member, and also mis-re-member — that is, re-assemble but also potentially mis-assemble — their experiences into a coherent narrative. Overt

instead may be based on the assumption that “a factual account about addiction would sell better than a fictional one” (ibid 184). Rak describes this as an instance of “discursive ‘coaxing’”, how a work can be “coaxed” to fit an established genre, and draws attention to the publisher’s role in such marketing decisions (30).

attention to referential accuracy in the evaluation of life writing obscures the way that the narrative representation of life is a matter of form as well as ethics.

This thesis emphasises the significance of form in life writing and analyses fictional representations of first-person retrospective narratives that engage with the possible tension between aesthetic and ethical values in writing the self. I examine the way writers negotiate and theorise this tension through the rhetorical vehicle of fiction, that is, by writing a fictional autobiography instead of a nonfictional one. My brief excursion into the memoir boom and the autobiographical hoaxes that proliferated at the turn of the century serves to illustrate the challenges involved in the project of autobiography, which include negotiating between telling a true story and telling a compelling story, addressing the scepticism provoked by the autobiographer's dual role as the agent and the object of the life-story, and speaking a personal truth that both resists and relies upon normative assumptions about the way truth should be told. My use of the word "autobiography" invokes the literary genre and its history, but my discussion focuses on the *act* of autobiography, "a discourse or activity that surfaces within many forms or different types of media" (Rak 23).⁵ I also take the *bio* or "life" element of the term to refer to a certain, significant period in the autodiegetic narrator's life, rather than a narrative from cradle to grave (which no autobiography can really deliver anyway). I understand the fictional representations of autobiographical narrations, or fictional autobiographies, with which this thesis is concerned to be addressing the critical issues of self life writing rhetorically, not autobiographically. I suggest that fiction as a rhetorical vehicle offers writers greater freedom to explore the relationship between form and

⁵ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson proposes a more neutral term "self life writing" that is derived from the etymological roots of auto-bio-graphy in Greek. But the three-word term is rather clumsy, as they admit (*Reading Autobiography* 4). Following their strategy, I will be using autobiography and self life writing interchangeably, but reserving the use of the latter for special emphasis.

ethics than nonfiction; and I propose that the idea of *integrity*, as both a formal and an ethical quality, encapsulates these reciprocal demands upon self-representation, and provides a useful way to rethink and reconceptualise the project of autobiography.

2. FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Resistances and challenges to established genres can be seen as the negotiation of values, driven by historical, cultural, and political changes. The evolution of genres provides for experimentation and hybridisation of different literary forms, enabling them to perform kinds of work that previous forms could not do. This is observable in the field of life writing. While scholarship on genres such as autobiography, biography, memoirs, etc., is well-established and ongoing, new umbrella terms such as *life writing* and *life narrative* have taken over to designate this burgeoning field. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson envision a new outlook for this area of research: “by shifting from *autobiography* and *memoir* to *life writing* and *life narrative*, we suggest the terms in which a new, globalised history of the field might be imagined” (*Reading Autobiography* 5; original emphasis). The new terms seek to include forms and modes of communicating personal experiences that have been marginalised or previously neglected. As such, the move “reflects an impulse toward catholicity and toward reconsideration of traditional definitions and distinctions” (Couser, “Genre” 142). The naming of new genres and subgenres illustrates the attempt to demonstrate “an equivalent flexibility on the part of critics” (ibid 144), not in order to pigeonhole these works but in order to understand what it is they do and do differently from their predecessors.

Fictional autobiography, the focus of this thesis, is a literary form that can be found in the eighteenth century, developing alongside the novel and the autobiography. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* books (1719, 1720), *Moll Flanders* (1722), and *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724); Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766); and Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767) can be seen as early examples of the fictional autobiography. However, these texts are generally regarded as predecessors of the novel rather than the fictional autobiography, which is taken to be a hybrid form or an imitation of the autobiography. Dorrit Cohn, in analysing first-person narratives, uses "the ontological status of its speaker" to distinguish between the autobiography — "a *referential* genre, a discourse that refers to the past of a *real* speaker" — and the first-person novel, which "in its classical guise of fictional autobiography, is the deliberate artificial simulation of this referential genre" (31, 30; original emphasis).⁶ There is a grey area between the autobiography and the first-person novel, as seen from the number of fake memoirs mentioned earlier. The classification of texts depends to a certain extent upon generic framings by publishers and the interpretative stances adopted by individual readers, who may read a work as autobiographical in spite of the writer's intentions or publishers' marketing strategies, and vice versa, may distrust the text's claim to referential accuracy. Writers can also deliberately and provocatively play with the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, as in some of the formal experiments of postmodern novels, and especially in genres such as autofiction and historiographic metafiction.

⁶ Cohn further distinguishes between fictional autobiography and autobiographical fiction; the latter is understood to be "based on the *author's* life" (30; original emphasis).

Cohn applies Philippe Lejeune's contractual theory of autobiography to fictional autobiography to propose that, "[i]n effect, all fictional autobiographies offer a telescoped *double* pact: an autobiographical pact impacted within a fictional pact" (33; original emphasis). Lejeune's autobiographical pact refers to a "contract" between the text and the reader that is effected by "the identity ('identicalness') of the *name* (author-narrator-protagonist)", which confirms the work's referential quality: "The autobiographical pact is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the *name* of the author on the cover" (14; original emphasis). The fictional pact refers to the non-identity of the name of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. Cohn's double pact emphasises the layered communicative acts within narrative fictions. On the narratorial level, the (fictional) autodiegetic narrator is engaged in a real act of life writing; on the authorial level, the represented content is understood as invented and fictional. Cohn foregrounds "the authorially intended meaning [that] passes from author to reader — behind the narrator's back" (33). In this way, Cohn's approach assumes a "hierarchy of investment for readers", "a strict pecking order of readerly curiosity", based on the essential, ontological difference between the fictional and the real (Pennington, *Creating Identity in the Victorian Fictional Autobiography* 13, 14). Heidi L. Pennington argues that this does not address the way the fictional autobiography, by explicitly acknowledging its fictional status, encourages rather than conceals a double reading stance — the represented content is invented but the autobiographical process is real, and this doubleness is significant. I agree with Pennington that there is a need to consider the specific fictional nature of these authors' engagement with the act of autobiography in writing fictional autobiographies instead of nonfictional

ones. However, we reach different conclusions about the rhetorical function(s) that the fictional autobiography performs in general.

Pennington, in the first book-length study of the fictional autobiography as a genre in its own right, argues against the general assumption that it is a belated and derivative one developed from the nonfictional autobiography. Instead, the fictional autobiography “took shape alongside the nascent novel and autobiography genres throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Pennington, *Creating* 40). Pennington sees the three as “sibling genres” that became separated upon a “growing tendency in the eighteenth century to conceive of fictional and referential discourses as two distinct modes of narrative truth-telling” (ibid 40).⁷ The three genres share certain formal and thematic concerns, but this is not to assume that the relationship is one of imitation or borrowing (ibid 15-16). The fictional autobiography represents an “intersection of two modes of truth-telling”, and Pennington suggests that its readers seek the autodiegetic narrator’s authentic identity while fully aware of the fictional nature of such epistemological certainty, that it is an effect of the “absolute assurances of created truth” (ibid 43). Following Catherine Gallagher’s theorisation about the rise of fictionality as a new category of discourse in the eighteenth century, Pennington suggests that Victorian readers were one of the first audiences able to practice the double reading stance that this genre required and encouraged (ibid 40). Her discussion focuses on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853), Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and Esther Summerson’s narration in *Bleak House* (1853). Pennington sees Victorian fictional autobiographies as “promot[ing] a rethinking of personal identity more broadly”, that identity is

⁷ Pennington also discusses other “literary siblings”, such as the non-autobiographical first-person novel and the omniscient realist novel (*Creating* 18-27).

understood as collaborative and made to feel “real” through imaginative, social, and narrative processes (ibid 5, 52).

In response to Cohn’s double pact, Pennington sees the double consciousness in reading fictional autobiographies as simultaneous rather than hierarchical, that such texts “stimulate a marked and simultaneous awareness of fiction and actuality” (*Creating* 14). Readers, in imagining the autodiegetic narrator as if a “real” person, engage in the same “fictional process” of identity construction for these fictional characters as we do for people in real life (ibid 5). Before moving on, I want to clarify Pennington’s use of the words “fictional” and “fictionality”, which is different from the way I use them in this thesis. In calling identity construction a *fictional* process, Pennington draws attention to the constructed nature of all identities, the way that “you and I, and everyone we know, are fictions” (ibid 5).⁸ This move puts aside the ontological distinction between the fictional and the real in order to emphasise the way *all* identities are constructed and artificial: “the ‘selves’ of people in the real world are fictional creations constructed using the same cognitive and affective processes with which readers animate fictional worlds, characters, and situations” (ibid 5).⁹ Pennington concludes that, “fictional autobiography enables a more focused study of the processes of fictionality and identity creation than does referential autobiography” (ibid 66). There is indeed an advantage in engaging with the project of autobiography by writing fiction instead of nonfiction, which is what this thesis also argues. However, Pennington’s

⁸ Pennington suggests that Victorian readers, instead of seeing the artifice of identity as a threat, regards it as productive and useful for adjusting to the changing pace of life in the nineteenth century (53).

⁹ Pennington’s discussion also considers developments in cognitive literary theory, such as the work of Lisa Zunshine and Blakey Vermeule. Cognitive narratology is a thriving area of research in literary studies, but this opens up a different set of questions beyond the scope of this thesis.

terminology obscures the difference between narrativity and fictionality, that narrative artifice renders fictive and nonfictive “processes” as both “fictional”. I suggest that this underplays the rhetorical quality of fictive discourse, which involves a specific kind of communicative intent that is different from nonfictive discourse.

The concept of fictionality applied in my analysis follows the rhetorical approach developed by Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh. In “Ten Theses about Fictionality”, Nielsen et al. conceptualise fictionality as “the intentional use of invented stories and scenarios” that appears in both fictive and nonfictive discourse (62). Fictionality is understood as a rhetorical quality, a means to an end rather than an end in itself, and is “relative to communicative contexts rather than intrinsic to the discourse itself” (ibid 66). Textual or discursive features that indicate the ontological status of the communicated content are culturally and historically variable rather than universal or absolute. In this way, fictionality is not a property of the text in itself but of its rhetorical force, recognised as such according to the communicative situation. Fictionality, as the use of invented content to convey a rhetorical point, is not primarily an indicator of the discourse’s ontological status. Pennington’s claim that all identities are fictional moves too swiftly past the distinction between narrative and fiction — real identities are constructed narratorially and imaginatively, but they are not presented with the same communicative purposes as those that are invented and non-referential. I want to draw attention to a rhetorical distinction between fictional and nonfictional narratives — narrative understood both as a cognitive resource involved in identity construction or autobiographical writing, and as a product representing the process of that activity.

Pennington's approach aligns the fictional representation of autobiography with autobiography itself, that is, equates the imaginative exercise with the real practice of identity construction in life. It is important to point out that this radical move is her main argument: "fictional processes are the foundation for, and not merely the practice versions of, two of the most central aspects of modern living: namely, the experience of being a self and of knowing other selves" (Pennington, *Creating* 56). In defending the fictional autobiography as a distinct, not derivative, genre, Pennington claims that the phenomenological difference between reading fiction and reading nonfiction can be performed simultaneously in the reading of fictional autobiographies. I would like to address another aspect of self life writing that fictional autobiographies also explore, namely, the negotiation between form and ethics. I put aside the question of whether the constructed identity and life-story are "life-like" or indeed authentic, and foreground instead the way these narratives *work*, that is, the organising principle or narrative integrity that makes them truthful without being the only truth. My analysis addresses the layered communication within the text, the way the narratorial act contributes to the authorial act's communicative purpose(s). I suggest that readers of fictional autobiographies are invited to witness and reflect upon the autodiegetic narrator's act of re-membering — that is, re-assembling — her/his experiences and forming them into a shapely story, that the shape or form of the story contributes to, as well as potentially undermines, the truth of the told and the "rightness" of its telling.

My own understanding of the kind of work that fictional autobiographies do and demand from their readers is different from Pennington's not only because my primary texts are written in a different historical and cultural environment, but also because of this different interpretation of fictionality. As Nielsen et al. point out, to

understand “all narratives as constructed” is not to assume that “all narratives are fiction” (“A Response” 108). Thus, I reserve the word “fictional” to signal an ontological distinction and regard the constructedness of identity and life-storytelling as a matter involving narrative artifice. Pennington, in arguing that self-making is “structurally identical” (*Creating* 4) across the ontological divide, suggests that questions regarding real acts of autobiography and invented ones are fundamentally the same, whereas I foreground the rhetorical distinction between fictional and nonfictional representations of self life writing. On this point, I follow Walsh’s formulation in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (2007), that “[t]he distinction between fiction and nonfiction rests upon the rhetorical use to which a narrative is put, ... the kind of interpretative response it invites in being presented as one or the other” (45). Fictional and nonfictional autobiographies, despite raising common formal and thematic issues, invite different interpretative responses and evaluative frameworks, and present different, if also related, questions as most relevant. Readers engage with different elements of the text when evaluating the narratorial act or the authorial act, and also when considering the text as a whole. We perform sequences of interpretation and reinterpretation in the process of reading that are explicitly and/or implicitly triggered by textual cues. I emphasise the fictional nature of the authors’ engagement with the project of autobiography, and the ways in which the use of fictionality as a rhetorical vehicle offers more freedom to explore the challenges of self life writing. In this way, I put aside issues of reference to analyse issues of form; that is, the negotiation between aesthetic and ethical values in self-representation.

3. AUTOBIOGRAPHY, FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY, THEORETICAL FICTION

Scholarship on the genre of autobiography offers useful insights into the formal and thematic issues that are also addressed in fictional autobiographies. Critical approaches to autobiography as a genre can be broadly categorised into “the stylistic or rhetorical one associated with James Olney's *Metaphors of Self* [1972]; the contractual one associate with Lejeune; [and] the deconstructive one, exemplified by Paul De Man” (Saunders 142). Olney characterises the development of autobiography studies as a “shift of attention from *bios* [life] to *autos* [self]”, “opening things up and turning them in a philosophical, psychological, and literary direction” (“Autobiography and the Cultural Moment” 19; original emphasis). But Olney considers that it is “the third element of autobiography” — *graphie*, or the act of writing — that is the most important: “it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors” (ibid 22).

Olney’s emphasis on form suggests the significance of narrative in ordering experience to make it comprehensible to oneself and others. The life writer is both the agent and the product of this process, and this raises certain questions about the assumption that the self is a unified whole, and whether it exists prior or posterior to the act of writing. In relation to the idea of selfhood, performativity theory suggests that “[a]utobiography does not transcribe a self that already exists. The act of narrating brings that self into being” (Saunders 511). The unity and coherence of the self as well as the life lived is an *effect* of self-narration rather than an essence or a natural scheme existing prior to the act of narrative. Roland Barthes engages with the idea of the self as a product of writing in his anti-autobiography *Roland Barthes*

(1975): “*the subject is merely an effect of language*” (79; original emphasis). Sidonie Smith separates the “I” of autobiography into “the I before the text, the I of the narrator, and the I of the narrated subject” (108). The three are not necessarily identical; it is the act of writing and narrating that establishes the continuity and unity between them. What I explore in this thesis is the way this effect is achieved, that is, how the autodiegetic narrator constructs the unity, coherence, and formal necessity of her/his life-story, which involves the negotiation between the different I’s or selves of autobiography. I discuss the way formal integrity both contributes to and has the potential to undermine the ethical integrity of the life-story. The shapeliness and the rightness of the life-story are always, potentially, in tension.

De Man’s deconstructive critique focuses on the “specular pair” of autobiography: “the author *of* the text and the author *in* the text” (923; original emphasis). Their relationship is one of tropological substitution, which De Man describes as “prosopopeia” (926) — the narrating self within the text is a disfigured, “de-faced” version of the extratextual self who writes. Reading a text as an autobiography assumes that this “disfigured” subject *is* the flesh-and-blood author, but this is only one among many possible modes of reading. De Man’s deconstructionist critique is provocative for the way it opens a gap by foregrounding the role of language. The act of writing textualises the self and the life, and produces a partial, and potentially misleading, version of the real writer and her/his life. Life and its narrative representation are indeed essentially different; however, the act of autobiography selects and isolates certain aspects of one’s experiences and therefore makes certain personal truths more visible. This thesis suggests that, instead of condemning the project of autobiography as doomed to failure, it is necessary to rethink it as one that engages with the idea of integrity, as a way to move beyond the

either-or determination of referential truth. Form is necessary to uphold the ethical force of life-storytelling, and a commitment to the ethical values of one's cultural and historical surroundings — to live up to a shared idea of what constitutes a “good life” — makes form meaningful.

Narrative representation inevitably involves interpretation and is therefore unavoidably subjective. The project of autobiography, rather than being exhaustive, requires the life-story to have integrity, the form of which communicates one's individuality. Self life writing is not only an epistemological project about self-understanding, it is also (and this thesis argues that it is better thought of as) an ethical project that acknowledges “a primary opacity to the self” (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 20) — the self is partially knowable and not completely unknowable. The autodiegetic narrator re-members — that is, re-assembles — a selection of events and integrates them into a coherent whole. The constructedness of the life-story and the way this activity shares certain characteristics with the writing of fictions do not prevent autobiography from being practised and repeated to the present day. Scholarship in the field of life writing emphasises a kind of commitment to the quest of writing the self in spite of the challenges. Writers, both novelists and critics, have produced critical and creative responses to postmodern and poststructuralist critiques on the conception of selfhood and its relationship to narrative as a discursive form and as a cognitive resource. Their experimentations and explorations invoke, if they also sometimes reject, the idea of autobiography as a well-defined genre.

The single term “autobiography” is inadequate to account for the variations in creative strategies of first-person narrative that explore questions of identity and the ideology of history. Nevertheless, Lejeune's 1973 definition of autobiography as a

genre is a good starting point to understand the functions it is supposed to perform. Lejeune proposes that autobiography is a “[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4; original emphasis). The definition emphasises the “prose” form, the subject matter as the “life” or “story of his personality”, and the identity of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist as the same, real person. Lejeune’s contractual theory of autobiography is based on the reader’s perspective — it is readers who decide whether we are reading an autobiography or not and can read it in spite of the author’s intentions. Here, Lejeune and De Man would seem to agree that autobiography is an effect of the reading posture adopted. Where they part company is the relation of autobiography to other narrative forms, especially those that resemble the autobiographical, or those with an autodiegetic narrator. De Man argues that generic boundaries are ineffective, that autobiography is rather “a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (921). Lejeune defends the genre but also acknowledges the different shades between fiction and nonfiction; there is a grey area between the autobiographical pact and the fictional pact, not only because it may be indeterminable which pact is applied — such as in the absence of the narrator’s name — but also because it may be deliberately ambiguous.

Lejeune formulates a second, broader definition of autobiography in 1986 based on Gustave Vapereau’s *Dictionnaire universel des littératures* (*Universal Dictionary of Literature*, 1876), that it can be “any text in which the author *seems* to express his life or his feelings, whatever the form of the text, whatever the contract

proposed by the author” (123; original emphasis).¹⁰ The identity of the author-narrator-protagonist may also be intentionally put in question to resist the common assumption that the proper name guarantees their necessary connection (this is a topic to which I return in chapter five). Equally, the text as a whole may resist being classified as either autobiography or fiction and try to be both at the same time. Lejeune finds such examples in Serge Doubrovsky’s *autofiction*—a term Doubrovsky coined in 1977 with the publication of *Fils*. Autofiction can be loosely described as when the autodiegetic narrator bears the author’s name but the narrative is clearly fictional. Philip Roth uses such creative measures in his autofiction *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) — Roth meets the identity thief “Philip Roth” and becomes involved in a secret mission for the Israeli intelligence. Lejeune’s revision of his original theory of autobiography allows for play in the referential use of language, engaging with the “tension between referential transparency and aesthetic pursuit” (Lejeune 128). Instead of seeking to set the bounds of autobiography, Lejeune suggests that this broad category includes “a continuous gradation of texts going, on one side, toward the banality of the *curriculum vitae*, and on the other, toward pure poetry” (128; original emphasis).

Max Saunders, in analysing the role of autobiographical writing in modernist literature, points out that there is a difference between reading what one believes to be an autobiography and what is considered to be autobiographical (5). The autobiographical dimension of a text can be explicit, implicit or, as De Man argues, undecidable. A text that is deliberately ambiguous in this respect engages with the complications of life writing that go beyond the superficial determination of

¹⁰ Vapereau’s entry of autobiography reads: “AUTOBIOGRAPHY ... literary work, novel, poem, philosophical treatise, etc., whose author intended, secretly or admittedly, to recount his life, to expose his thoughts or to describe his feelings” (qtd. in Lejeune 123).

referential truth. In adopting a rhetorical approach to fictionality, this thesis does not treat the distinction between autobiography and fiction as all or nothing; it moves beyond such binaries by referring to “degrees of fictionality rather than the distinction of fiction” (Nielsen et al., “Ten Theses” 67). Fictionality is exercised to a greater degree when the text draws attention to its own textuality. Walsh describes the self-reflexivity of metafiction as “fictionality redoubled”: “it not only invokes a rhetoric of fictionality, but invokes it (in part) to address the operation of just that rhetoric at one discursive remove” (40-41). In chapter four I discuss the intricate working of fictionality in Davis’s novel, which self-consciously examines the difference between autobiography and fiction.

I apply Lejeune’s idea of “continuous gradation” (128) to suggest that there is a spectrum of fictional autobiographies, which can be broadly ordered according to whether the text engages with the issue of narrative artifice explicitly on the narratorial level and/or implicitly on the authorial level. I combine this with Mark Currie’s idea of *theoretical fiction*, proposed in his *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (1998), to suggest that fictional autobiographies use fictionality to illustrate and to *theorise* the negotiation between form and ethics in self life writing. Contemporary writers address the challenges of autobiography — the fragmentation of the self and the artifice of the life-story — critically and also imaginatively. Different ethical questions arise depending on the interpretative frame readers choose as appropriate, which can be influenced by marketing strategies, paratextual features, and our interpretations of the authorial ethos. My choice to focus on works of fiction is not to assume that nonfictional autobiography (only) deals with reference and not form; rather, I am interested in the way formal and ethical issues (which are common to both fictional and nonfictional autobiography) are explored via the rhetorical vehicle

of fiction and the specific kind of investigation it offers. There may be allusions to the author's personal experiences in the represented narrative, but I argue that the aesthetic integrity of the text does not render extratextual information necessary for interpretation. Referential issues may arise on the narratorial level, that is, the autodiegetic narrator may be concerned with the accuracy of her/his narrative or the reliability of her/his memory; but these imaginary data contribute to the text's communicative purpose(s) as fiction rather than offering informative value. My purpose is to examine how the narrator achieves the impression of being truthful rather than to judge whether s/he is indeed so, by analysing the way the life-story is made to *work*, that is, have integrity. The autodiegetic narrator and the text are called upon to negotiate a possible tension between the aesthetic and ethical demands in writing the self, and the organising principle of the narrative is the resolution of these demands, that is, its narrative integrity. Fictional autobiographies illustrate and theorise the way one upholds the necessity and the rightness of one's life-story, which is an artificial construct but nevertheless can articulate certain personal truths.

Another scholarly work on fictional autobiography as a genre is Regine Hampel's discussion of postmodern novels, which is oriented towards the postmodern idea of selfhood, poststructuralist theories of the role of language in relation to the self, and the concept of intertextuality. Hampel offers a taxonomical study of postmodern fictional autobiographies, listing the thematic and narrative devices used in works such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Julian Barnes's *Talking It Over* (1991), Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991), and John Banville's *Ghosts* (1993). In line with my own approach, Hampel also puts aside the notion of reference in analysing fictional autobiographies; but her study foregrounds theories of postmodernism and

poststructuralism that appeared in the late twentieth-century, works by Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. Hampel sees postmodern fictional autobiographies as engaging with the poststructuralist idea that, “the self ... has ‘become textualised’; it is now intrinsically linked with language, with linguistic processes”, and “involved in a never-ending process of ‘writing’ (in the Derridean sense)” (58, 75). Hampel suggests that the form of fictional autobiography is particularly suitable to address postmodern questions about the self and its representation; that by treating a self that is avowedly textualised, the postmodern fictional autobiography self-reflexively “explores the relationship between text and reality” with language as the mediator, and “reassesses our ways of looking at the world and the place of the self in it” (247).

We can see from this brief summary that, despite using the same name for this category of texts, Hampel’s postmodern study offers a very different theorisation of what fictional autobiography is and does from Pennington’s Victorian one.¹¹ This thesis, in discussing four fictional autobiographies published between the 1980s and the present, does not aim to produce a cultural history of this literary genre that would bridge Hampel’s and Pennington’s findings, or provide a diachronic study about its developments in the twenty-first century. Such a project would have its merits, but it is not what this thesis offers. My goal is to address the way fiction, as a rhetorical vehicle, is used to explore the activity of self life writing, and I argue that there is more to be done using such an approach to this topic. However, Hampel’s discussion shares certain thematic concerns with my own, such as the unity of the

¹¹ As in Cohn’s approach, Hampel considers that the fictional autobiography, including those written in the eighteenth century, “pretends to be referential and authentic; it imitates these conventions [of the autobiography] and uses them for its own ends” (19). Pennington takes a different view, as I have shown.

self and the relationship between the narrated self and the narrating self, and I want to address these briefly before moving on.

Hampel's analysis of postmodern fictional autobiographies, putting aside the notion of reference, regards these texts as offering alternative models of the self and what she calls "self-definition", a term which is meant to embrace both self-determination and intersubjectivity or intertextuality.¹² The self can be "whole or fragmented, multiple or unified", and it is formed in relation to others and society at large (248, 249). This idea of the self as negotiating antithetical attributes, I would want to insist, needs to be balanced by the consideration that, in transforming life into narrative, the autodiegetic narrator of fictional autobiographies nevertheless needs to satisfy the requirements of narrative form — s/he needs to negotiate these countering forces and competing interpretations of her/his experience in order to produce a life-story that embodies both formal and ethical integrity. The double meaning of the word integrity allows the possibility that the life-story as an integrated whole *both* does and does not work — it may satisfy the formal requirements of being coherent but not necessarily the ethical requirement of being truthful and accountable, or vice versa. Thus, while Hampel emphasises the indeterminacy and ongoingness of writing the self in postmodern fictional autobiographies, my discussion examines the way that the first-person, retrospective narrative as a life-story has integrity *in spite of* poststructuralist critiques of the self as fragmented and autobiography as an impossible project. The life-story, as a completed work, already demonstrates its formal integrity to a certain extent — it has reached an "end", that is, the telling has ceased and some purpose(s), whether

¹² Hampel prefers "self-definition" over the word "identity", which she sees as implying autonomy, stability, and finality that is unsuitable for the postmodern idea of selfhood (248).

recognised or not, has been achieved. The life-story attests to the life or existence of the autodiegetic narrator at a certain moment in time, and is a snapshot, a time capsule even, that represents a temporary pause in the flow of her/his life.

Another relevant issue about the self in Hampel's study is the identity or non-identity between the narrated self and the narrating self. Hampel points out that "postmodern fictional autobiography extends the already existing temporal and spatial non-identity between narrator and hero to include grammatical and personal non-identity between narrator and character" (105). The idea of a fragmented, instead of unified, selfhood can be represented through a split narrator, for example by referring to her/his younger self in the third person, or by having multiple narrators on the same narrative level (offering competing interpretations of the same event) or on separate, embedded narrative levels (Hampel 104-114). As mentioned earlier, my selection of texts offers a spectrum of fictional autobiographies that is ordered according to the way narrative artifice in life-storytelling is engaged with, explicitly on the narratorial level and/or implicitly on the authorial level.

Accordingly, the selection of texts analysed in the chapters of this thesis starts with the least self-conscious narrator in Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989); next comes the more self-conscious but nevertheless self-delusional narrator in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011); then the self-doubting narrator in Lydia Davis's *The End of the Story* (1995); and finally, the externalised self in the figure of a fictional character in Philip Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988). All these autodiegetic narrators are required to negotiate and clarify the relationship between her/his narrated self and narrating self. There are moments of surprise in the narrative process for the narrator her/himself, as well as secondary surprises on the rhetorical level of the text for readers to discover.

Common to Pennington's, Hampel's, and my own discussion on fictional autobiographies is the importance of self-reflexivity. I develop this characteristic further with reference to Currie's interpretation of the theoretical, derived from Barthes: "Theoretical does not of course mean abstract. ... it means *reflexive*, something which turns back on itself: a discourse which turns back on itself is by virtue of this very fact theoretical" (qtd. in Currie, *Postmodern* 55; original emphasis). In this way, theoretical fictions "are not really novels that contemplate *themselves* so much as novels which contemplate the logic and the ideology of narrative in the act of construing the world" (Currie, *Postmodern* 74; original emphasis). My conception of fictional autobiographies is that they are theoretical fictions, and that they are self-reflexive in more than one way, or, in more than one degree — there is the narratorial act of retrospection, and there is the authorial use of fictionality to contemplate and theorise the text's represented content in relation to the project of autobiography in general.

Currie finds reflexivity and theoreticality to be common features of postmodern creative writing and poststructuralist criticism, arguing that "[s]elf-contemplation, or reflexivity, is fundamentally critical because it refers us to other texts, to narrativity in general, not from some Olympian position of metalingual distance but from within the discourse on which it reflects" (*Postmodern* 75). Reflexivity is not self-absorbed narcissism; it draws attention to the text's own gaps, orients itself outwards, and acknowledges the intertextual nature of writing. Postmodern novels exhibit different levels or degrees of self-consciousness and ironic self-distance, and Currie points out that "some narratives are more theoretical than others," more easily giving way to "ironic recontextualisation" that contests their own interpretations (ibid 63, 103). My selection of primary texts can be seen as

ordered according to the degree of the narrator's self-consciousness, the degree of the text's self-reflexivity or *theorisation* of self life writing — in the fullest realisation of such self-consciousness, the text reflects on itself explicitly on the narratorial level; in its incipient forms, on the other hand, it does so only implicitly, and thus less theoretically, on the authorial level.

Consciousness about the constructedness of mimetic reality in any form of writing is one of the main characteristics of postmodernism. This does not mean that there were no self-conscious fictions before the twentieth century, but only that it becomes more difficult to ignore the mutual contamination between fiction and history, fiction and autobiography, and — Currie's main point — fiction and criticism. Currie uses Derrida's essay, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce" (1984), as an example of "criticism as fiction", arguing that Derrida discards the pretence of critical objectivity by enacting his critical intent rather than stating it in a metalanguage — the writing of criticism becomes the writing of theoretical fiction (*Postmodern* 63-68). Currie is not proposing a literary genre called "theoretical fiction" that seeks to encompass contemporary creative and critical writing, but identifying "a discourse which dramatises that boundary [between fiction and criticism] or uses it as an energy source" (*ibid* 60). What he identifies as "fiction with a theoretical intent or theoretical fiction" refers to a narrative which performs or enacts its theoretical, critical, intertextual relationship with other narratives (*ibid* 58). The connection between postmodern literature and poststructuralist criticism rests upon this sense of performance, that "it is not what a novel says but what a novel does ... that narratological knowledge of other texts derives from its intertextual performance and not from the statements of a metalanguage" (*ibid* 76). I suggest that fictional autobiographies engage with this

theoretical activity in various degrees, and that their critical sensibility is joined with narrative creativity — the shaping of life into narrative requires an alertness that is tuned into both ethical self-scrutiny and formal aesthetics. Fictional autobiographies theorise the project of autobiography by (explicitly or implicitly) acknowledging alternative and competing interpretations of the represented events that are not directly offered by the text itself. The concept of narrative integrity that I develop in this thesis invokes a sense of openness that is related to reflexivity — there is more than one truth to say about one’s life, more than one way to be truthful, and more than one form of integrity. Autobiography as a self-reflexive act is oriented outwards to the other and also temporally towards the future.

4. THE ETHICAL

In speaking of ethical integrity, this thesis situates itself as part of the broad discussion on the ethical force of literature within current scholarship. The question of ethics attracted increased attention towards the end of the twentieth century, a trend that is partly reflected in the titles of a number of collected volumes published during this period.¹³ I want to pay particular attention to the discussions that took place within and between literary studies, philosophy, and psychology. Literary critics, such as J. Hillis Miller and Adam Zachary Newton, engage with philosophical works by Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida, and Foucault, among others, in discussing authorial agency and readerly responsibility; and philosophers, such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, turn to literature in their discussion of moral

¹³ Here is a short list of works that emphasise a “turn” in critical attention to ethics: *The Turn to Ethics* (2000) edited by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz; *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (2001) edited by Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack; *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English* (2007) edited by Bárbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina. *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004) edited by Paul John Eakin is also a significant contribution to this discussion.

philosophy (Buell, “Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics” 7-11).¹⁴ The nature of ethical enquiry can be broadly considered as “a process of formulation and self-questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries, norms, selves, and ‘others’” (Garber, Hanssen, and Walkowitz viii). This investigation is pursued in relation to real life and real subjects as well as imaginary ones.

David Wood suggests that “the experience of the ethical” is an encounter with alterity that is characterised by an attitude of openness, not just in the sense of “leav[ing] the door open, but that one is always willing to open the door” (117). Wood’s formulation of the ethical engages with Derrida’s idea of “infinite responsibility” and foregrounds the practice of that activity rather than the failure to be fully responsible — responsibility is “a recursive modality, an always renewable openness” (ibid 117). This is significant for the study of literature, which can be seen as a practice of reading and rereading, writing and rewriting, a process that is “renewable” and future-oriented. Derek Attridge’s discussion on readerly responsibility is relevant here, and I want to draw attention to the way the encounter with the other in the experience of reading enacts a change in the self, that “the self too can be said to be a ‘creation of the other’” (*The Singularity of Literature* 24).

Attridge’s idea of “the creation of the other” can be interpreted in two ways: as emphasising the self’s agency in creating the other, which is “an entity that is irreducibly different from what is already in being”; and as referring to a kind of passive open-mindedness, that the self is “created *by* the other” (*Singularity* 22, 23;

¹⁴ For further details on the development of these interactions, I refer readers to Lawrence Buell’s “Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics” (1999) in the *PMLA* special issue “Ethics and Literary Studies”; Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s entry “Ethics” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (1995); Michael Eskin’s “Introduction: The Double ‘Turn’ to Ethics and Literature?” and “On Literature and Ethics” (2004) in the *Poetics Today* special issue on ethics and literature; and Dorothy J. Hale’s “Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorising the Novel in the Twenty-First Century” (2009). Hale suggests a new ethical theory has emerged in recent attempts “to articulate a positive social value of literature for our postmodern age” (“Aesthetics” 899).

original emphasis). The concept thus embraces both a condition of instability and inconsistency that occasions the arrival of the other, and a sense of the unexpected irruption of the other that results in a destabilised condition. Attridge's idea of the other is not exemplary, as in Levinas's Other, but as a "possible name for that to which control is ceded" (ibid 24). The creation of the other suggests a condition of "self-dividedness", that "I am always, in a way, other to myself" (ibid 25). This is a dialogic rather than a static condition — not that the self *is* other, but that a recognition of one as other to oneself both arrives unexpectedly and is always already an implicit condition of existence. To relate this idea to the project of autobiography, I suggest that the act of self life writing simultaneously makes visible and enacts this "othered" relationship to oneself.¹⁵ The self is re-formed or remoulded in bringing the other into being, in making the other visible, and in creatively negotiating the relationship between the self and the world. In the process of this negotiation, what is experienced as the other is "necessarily, no longer entirely other" (ibid 24). Attridge suggests that, what is encountered is a new self, a self whose "procedures of comprehension [begin] to change" (ibid 27). The form of one's comprehension and ways of storying life become more expansive in recognising the self as other, in creating and embracing new and alternative modes of knowing and living.

The creation of the other is a process that involves creativity, in which the product can be a work of literature. Attridge's idea of responsible reading is one which "strives to respond fully to the singularity of the work in a new time and place", and as such he proposes to understand "the work as stranger, even and

¹⁵ We can relate this to Hampel's idea of the non-identity between the narrating self and the narrated self discussed earlier; there are a number of thematic and narrative devices to engage with this idea of the self as other.

perhaps especially when the reader knows it intimately” (“Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other” 26). Such an attitude demands work from readers, demands us to enquire, revisit, and even challenge ourselves in the act of reading, and to practice this again in the next and every act of reading and rereading. Attridge does not prioritise the other or the self, but emphasises what he calls “a *relating*”, that the other as other is “other to” oneself at a specific time and place (*Singularity* 29; original emphasis). Responding fully to the singularity of a person, a text, or a relating requires “a readiness to be creative in our response” (ibid 33). In this way, we creatively change ourselves and, Attridge suggests, “a little of the world as well” (ibid 33).

Creativity is something that is required of the life writer, or for my purposes, the autodiegetic narrators of fictional autobiographies. The transformation of life into narrative is a selection or isolation of certain events that are arranged into a meaningful sequence. This narrative or life-story attests to the singularity of the life lived as it is comprehended at a specific moment in that life. The work required in this activity includes negotiating the formal and the ethical requirements of self-representation, engaging with the social and moral values of one’s cultural environment, and self-reflexively evaluating the “rightness” of the way one conducts these activities. This process can be transformative and surprising. There is potential to encounter the other, or to experience the creation of the other, in Attridge’s sense. For this reason, I suggest that the project of autobiography is an ethical one, and that readers of fictional autobiographies witness a representation of an ethical experience — the autodiegetic narrator’s encounter with the other and the self as other — and also undergo the experience themselves in reading.

John Guillory, in proposing that reading is an ethical practice, considers it as “a practice on the self” in which the element of pleasure contributes to self-improvement (39). Self life writing can be understood as a project towards self-understanding and potentially self-improvement. Guillory engages with Foucault’s discussion on the politicisation of sexuality and morality in the late nineteenth century in *The History of Sexuality* (1978, 1985, 1986), and sees “a turn from the political to the ethical” in the second and third volume, *The Use of Pleasure* (1985) and *The Care of the Self* (1986) (ibid 34). Guillory adapts Foucault’s separation of “the moral code of modernity and the ethical practice of antiquity” to suggest a way to distinguish between morality and ethics: the former concerns the “choice between right and wrong, good and evil” and the latter as “a realm in which one chose [sic] *between goods* ... a mode of action distinguished by possibilities of pleasure rather than the sense of obligation” (36; original emphasis). This formulation assumes a spectrum of conduct which has “morality at one end, the choice between right and wrong, and the aesthetic at the other, the choice among objects of beauty. The ethical then would occupy a terrain in the middle of this spectrum as the choice between goods” (ibid 38). Guillory, in response to Foucault’s idea of an “aesthetics of existence” or an “art of life”, warns against the conflation of ethics and aesthetics, arguing instead that there is “a relation of continuity” between the moral, the ethical, and the aesthetic (37, 38).

Guillory’s formulation is useful for theorising the possible tension between aesthetics and ethics in fictional autobiographies. The temptation to aestheticise life in order to produce a shapely narrative, such as one that conforms to conventional forms of life-storytelling, is countered by the value of ethical integrity and the need to respond fully to one’s own singularity. My idea of narrative integrity, as one

involving form and ethics, borrows force from Guillory's idea of ethics as a choice *between goods*, that there is no single, exclusive truth to be communicated in transforming life into narrative; rather, there are several truths, or "goods". Narrative integrity embraces a sense of openness to the different "goods" offered in self life writing — the point is not the determination of referential truth but to understand how the autodiegetic narrator chooses which truth or "good" to offer, and why. S/he needs to defend the "rightness" of that choice, which is non-absolute and is informed by the shape of the life-story; that is, each event has a "right" place that contributes to the formal integrity of the whole. My selection of texts shows different degrees of engagement with this sense of "rightness" — the more self-conscious the narrator, the more visible the other "goods" that are not chosen, and the more contingent rather than necessary the one that is chosen appears to be. Examining the narrative integrity of fictional autobiographies allows us to consider the ways in which remembering, if also always potentially a mis-re-remembering, is "an exercise in *telling otherwise*" (Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting" 9; original emphasis). In speaking of "an ethics of memory", Paul Ricoeur considers the ethical potential of narrative to be this renewable constructedness, that "it is always possible to tell in another way" (ibid 9). The project of autobiography is an act of telling otherwise that involves both creative and critical sensibilities and engages with the negotiation between aesthetics and ethics.

Literary critics, in theorising the act of reading, have formulated different interpretations of the reader's relationship with the text. Attridge's conception of "the work as stranger" ("Innovation" 26), mentioned earlier, is an alternative approach to Wayne C. Booth's metaphor of books as friends, as good and/or bad company. Booth foregrounds the negotiation of values in reading literary works, that

“we must both open ourselves to ‘others’ that look initially dangerous or worthless, and yet prepare ourselves to cast them off whenever, after keeping company with them, we conclude that they are potentially harmful” (*The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* 488). Such judgments depend upon the activity of reading, which is both a solitary self-reflexive activity and a communal one that Booth calls “coduction”. Coduction refers to the exchange between readers on their experiences of reading, and includes “how we arrive at a value judgment and how we defend it” (ibid 73). Booth emphasises that these two elements operate simultaneously, that “the very effort to describe accurately [one’s judgment] ... in turn modifies the evaluation, and that is further modified as we converse with others” (ibid 74). Coduction is a dialogical activity that may involve narrative, as we shape and reshape an account of our value judgments in the process of communicating with others. This intellectual exchange has the potential to change not just our judgments themselves, but also the way we evaluate, that is, the forms or patterns of the narrative understanding that produces our value judgments in the first place. I suggest that “to describe accurately” (ibid 74) the process of one’s value judgment can be considered as an act of *storying*, that is, to communicate one’s evaluative process *as a narrative* in order to make comprehensible not just what one understands but also how one arrives at that understanding. I develop the concept of storying in chapter four with Davis’s novel *The End of the Story*.

In *Narrative Ethics* (1995), Newton offers a different theory on the ethical force of literary texts and proposes that narrative offers models of ethical relationships and interactions, showing “the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalising person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process” (11). Newton’s theory of narrative ethics engages with

works by Levinas on the Saying, Mikhail M. Bakhtin on dialogism, and Stanley Cavell on acknowledgement over knowledge. He presents a triadic, analytical framework: *narratorial ethics*, which addresses “the formal designs of the storytelling act”; *representational ethics*, which concerns the consequences of textualising people in narrative; and *hermeneutic ethics*, “the extent and the limits of intersubjective knowledge” (25). Newton boldly claims that “a narrative *is* ethics in the sense of the mediating and authorial role each takes up toward another’s story” (48; original emphasis). This is relevant to the project of autobiography, which as an ethical project acknowledges the way other people contribute to the shape of one’s life-story, for better or for worse. The autobiographer can also invoke the supernatural as the determining force of her/his life-story, which raises the question of agency and potentially redistributes responsibility for past events. I discuss the relationship between self-determination and predetermination in chapter two with Auster’s *Moon Palace*.

Phelan offers a rhetorical approach to the ethics of narrative and distinguishes between “an ethics of the told and an ethics of the telling” (“Rhetoric/ethics” 203). Phelan’s rhetorical poetics foregrounds the authorial communicative act, which contains and judges the narratorial communicative act. This approach examines the way readers arrive at interpretative and ethical judgments by evaluating the dynamic interactions between the characters, the narrator’s telling in relation to the told, the implied author’s evaluation of the narrator’s telling, and the reader in relation to the values and beliefs communicated on different levels of the text. Phelan draws attention to the “multilayered nature of narrative communication” and addresses the way in which narrative progression on the representational level influences readers’ judgments in the reading process (ibid 211, 212). These ideas of progression and re-

evaluation are important for my discussion in chapter three of Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, in which the narrator separates his discursive ethos and character ethos to recover his narrative authority.

The above discussion shows that there are a number of fruitful exchanges between literary studies and philosophy on the ethical force of literature, and now I want to move on to those that also involves psychology. Hanna Meretoja suggests that “[t]he ethical potential of narratives ... is linked to their capacity to expand our sense of the possible”, that reading narrative fiction cultivates “our capacity to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present” (142, 20). In speaking of “an ethics of storytelling”, Meretoja advances narrative hermeneutics as an emerging interdisciplinary field at the intersection of literary studies, psychology, cultural memory studies, and other areas of research, in order to foreground the interpretative aspect of narrative communication; that is, the respect in which storytelling communicates not just what we know, but *how* we know. In relation to self life writing, Meretoja points out that “self-reflexive literary and autobiographical narratives can function as a mode of ethical inquiry that provokes critical reflection on culturally dominant moral conceptions and prejudices” (303). Fictional autobiographies offer representations of this critical reflection, in which normative values invoked in self life writing are engaged with in various degrees. Dan P. McAdams, from a psychological point of view, draws attention to the way “[t]he social environment in which we live and mature shapes the development of our basic beliefs and values”, and that “each of us must also come to some implicit conclusions about the meaning of the world, so that our identities may be anchored by ideological truth” (*The Stories We Live By* 84). This necessary “anchoring”

requires a negotiation between personal and cultural values, which is often thematised in fictional autobiographies.

McAdams's discussion of personal myth-making is especially relevant to my discussion of the formal integrity of life-stories. McAdams defines personal myths as "a special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole" (*The Stories We Live By* 12). Personal myths and works of fiction share certain characteristics, such as having a beginning, middle and end, and being constructed "to make a compelling aesthetic statement" (ibid 12).¹⁶ Besides formal considerations, however, McAdams also draws attention to the way a personal myth is appreciated for both "its beauty and its psychosocial truth" (ibid 12). What separates this project from Meretoja's and McAdams's, and other related discussions on the project of autobiography, is that I investigate these real-life issues as they are mediated through the use of fictionality. That is, I consider the ways in which fictional autobiographies are used as a rhetorical vehicle to engage with critical issues involved in personal myth-making and the normative assumptions about selfhood, self-representation, and the relationship between life and narrative.

Judith Butler's discussion in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) also concerns real-life issues, but it presents a number of important and relevant concerns that I also explore in this thesis. Butler offers a countering voice to an ethics of stories and storytelling, warning against the "seamlessness of the story" that can prevent us from getting "the truth of the person, a truth that, to a certain degree ...

¹⁶ McAdams sees personal myths as developing over time and, as we mature, acquiring a higher degree of coherence, opening, credibility, differentiation, reconciliation, and generative integration (*The Stories We Live By* 110-113). McAdams also presents a life-story theory and argues that "identity takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, characters, plot, and themes" ("Identity and the Life Story" 187).

might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness — in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form” (*Giving* 64). Some things in life are non-narrative, things that can be overpowered by narrative and result in a distorted re-presentation. Giving an account of oneself is thus always, necessarily, partial and incomplete. From a different perspective, however, we can say that while life exceeds narrative, it can also succumb to the necessity of narrative in order to give life meaning.

Butler proposes a theory of responsibility based on “a primary opacity to the self” and envisions “a new sense of ethics” which is not based on the epistemological imperative to know, but recognises “the limits of knowability in oneself and others” (*Giving* 20, 42, 63). There is a shift from the epistemological to the ethical, from the question of knowing or being known to recognising the limit of knowability itself. Butler’s case against stories identifies the possibility that the formal integrity of the life-story can overpower its ethical integrity. This is indeed a constant threat. The negotiation between form and ethics is ongoing in the project of autobiography, which is always renewable in the sense that retrospection is a repeated activity. The life-stories discussed in this thesis are individual cases in which this negotiation is concluded and resolved in some ways at the end of the book; however, the investigation goes beyond the representational level of the text — it operates on the rhetorical level and in the interpretative and evaluative act of reading, which is also renewable.

We can respond to Butler by arguing that there are other forms of narrative which are not seamless. A life-storyteller can aspire to formal coherence in order to show that her/his experience cannot have been interpreted in any other way; however, this may not be successfully executed. No matter how “seamless” the

presentation of the story, meaning also resides in what is left out. The gaps or evasions, whether acknowledged or not by the life-storyteller her/himself, rather than ensuring the narrative's formal coherence can instead be undone by a critical reader. Conversely, the use of metalepsis — the transgression between narrative levels — can be considered as a pre-emptive counterstrategy to the “seamlessness” of narrative storytelling. Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*, which I discuss in chapter five, actively utilises this strategy to question the “facts” offered in his own autobiography.¹⁷

Butler makes another objection to narrative storytelling as a vehicle for giving an account of oneself, that it is conditioned by the normative assumptions of one's cultural environment: “The ‘I’ who begins to tell its story can tell it only according to recognisable norms of life narration” (*Giving* 52). Butler engages with Foucault's critique on the “regime of truth” to point out that the narrative form is part of the regime that “decides what will and will not be a recognisable form of being” (ibid 22). Rejecting these norms is to challenge their authority; but this would also be “to risk unrecognisability as a subject” — that even I will not be able to recognise myself — which Butler does not believe a storyteller would countenance (ibid 23). For Butler, to risk oneself is to practise critique, which is a self-reflexive activity: “to call into question the truth of myself and, indeed, to question my ability to tell the truth about myself, to give an account of myself” (ibid 23). This self-

¹⁷ Alexandra Effe examines J.M. Coetzee's use of metalepsis to engage with the tension between form and ethics in *Summertime* (2009), arguing that Coetzee's use of “[m]etalepsis functions to renounce authority and to invite the reader to enter into dialogue with the text” (“Coetzee's *Summertime* as a Metaleptic Conversation” 260). Effe makes a broader argument about metalepsis as an ethical form in her monograph *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Narrative Transgression: A Reconsideration of Metalepsis* (2017). Coetzee himself has published several pieces on the project of autobiography. I refer readers to his lecture “Truth in Autobiography” (1984), his idea of “*autrebiography*” discussed in interviews with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* (1992) and *Selves in Question* (2006), and his correspondence with psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz published as *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (2015). Coetzee's Nobel lecture “He and His Man” (2003) also offers an interesting discussion in a more poetic and creative form.

questioning scrutinises the way that I may be only recognisable in a normative framework, and that in offering an account of myself in narrative form, I may be perpetrating the normative values that dictate what is “true”.

For Butler, storytelling is not a critical activity, and this is what separates telling a story about oneself and her idea of “giving an account of oneself” — the life-storyteller does not risk her/his intelligibility and recognisability. If Butler’s first objection to the narrative form — its seamlessness — can be undone by a critical audience (and this can also be oneself, as the first reader of one’s life-story), we can reconsider the second objection when storytelling is taken up as a critical activity — that is, as the writing of theoretical fictions, which include fictional autobiographies. Represented self-narration in these works is not just the narrating character’s effort to produce a shapely story, but also a contribution to certain rhetorical purpose(s) of the authorial act, which scrutinises the “rightness” of the represented autobiographical account as a way to theorise self-representation in general. Fictional autobiographies can therefore show the potential conflict between the desire for formal coherence and the need to give an account of oneself that has ethical integrity. The autodiegetic narrator negotiates this tension by applying an organising principle that can uphold both aesthetic and ethical demands, which is what I mean by the life-story’s *narrative integrity*.

5. NARRATIVE INTEGRITIES

Narrative integrity as a concept has also been developed by Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier in their discussion of the narrative construction of autobiographical identity in real-life, which they argue “will inevitably be conditioned by some notion of the good life” (75). My own use of the concept in this thesis is similar to Freeman

and Brockmeier's formulation, that narrative integrity embraces both the "harmony of proportion or beauty of form" and "the coherence and depth of one's ethical commitments, as evidenced by the shape of one's life" — "a dialectical structure of meaning" involving aesthetics and ethics (ibid 76). Freeman and Brockmeier consider that this dialectical relationship is also between personal and cultural values, which is negotiated and renegotiated over time. Narrative integrity, as an imposition of form, inevitably modifies experience itself in the act of transforming life into narrative. One's autobiographical identity and life-story are therefore always artificial constructs. In spite of narrative artifice, however, Freeman and Brockmeier argue that the sense of coherence, while constructed, is what gives "sensible meaning to experience" (95).¹⁸ In this way, Freeman and Brockmeier's idea of narrative integrity binds together the living and the telling and renders them inseparable, arguing that "there is no life apart from the stories told about it and that there are no stories apart from the ethical realm" (97).¹⁹

This thesis explores the way acts of life-storytelling are represented in works of fiction, rather than how they are performed in real life. Accordingly, Freeman and Brockmeier's theorisation of narrative integrity in relation to life has different implications from my own. By addressing the way narrative integrity works in fictional autobiographies rather than nonfictional autobiographies, I foreground

¹⁸ Freeman also describes the interrelation between form and ethics as "the idea of the poetic", that in seeking to make sense of the world, one strives "to give form to it, to say something that is not just interesting or coherent but also worth hearing" ("Rethinking the Fictive, Reclaiming the Real" 126).

¹⁹ Galen Strawson rejects the assumption that "a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood" ("Against Narrativity" 428). Strawson's dismissal of what he calls "the *psychological Narrativity thesis*" and "the *ethical Narrativity thesis*" (ibid 428; original emphasis) ignores the complicated question of what a narrative is and how one narrative can be distinguished from another. Claiming to be an "Episodic" without a narrative outlook, Strawson distinguishes between *I*, "a human being taken as a whole", and *I**, "an inner mental presence" that is not continuous over time (ibid 430, 433). However, this does not render narrative irrelevant but seems to be a question about the scale or the temporal duration of a narrative unit.

textual and formal issues without claiming to offer a cultural study on contemporary self life writing. Freeman and Brockmeier argue that there are different degrees of narrative integrity depending upon how strong the consensus of a “good life” exists in one’s epoch or culture (76). When such consensus is contested, they suggest, the construction of autobiographical identity will have “a relatively low degree of narrative integrity, with autobiographical memory in turn emerging as decidedly more ambiguous and multivoiced” (76). Freeman and Brockmeier clarify that the idea of degree should not be taken as offering a moral judgment on the person’s identity or her/his life, as represented in narrative. Their point is that an idea of a “good life”, whatever it is assumed to be according to the person and the culture, is inevitably involved in both living and telling (76). Perhaps we can consider the number of fake memoirs and autobiographical hoaxes around the end of the twentieth century as reflecting an absence of a strong consensus about what constitutes a “good life”. My selection of texts, which were published around a decade before and after the millennium, can be seen as part of a renegotiation of values at the turn of the century. But rather than judging how “ethical” these autodiegetic narrators and their life-stories are (and by implication evaluating the ethics of their authors), I am more concerned with the way these texts offer individual cases of how a person negotiates the complicated relationship between formal and ethical integrity in writing the self.

The following chapters discuss Auster’s *Moon Palace*, Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*, Davis’s *The End of the Story*, and Roth’s *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography*. The texts are not ordered according to their publication date, but to the degree of self-consciousness demonstrated by the autodiegetic narrator and her/his engagement with the way narrative artifice both facilitates and undermines

the project of autobiography. Thus, each of the texts engages with issues that are left unexplored by the narrator of the previous text, and examines them further on the narratorial level and/or the authorial level. In the course of discussing these fictional autobiographies, I address thematic issues of the belief in self-determination versus predetermination, the value of being “normal”, the relationship between narrative coherence and the representation of truth, and the way self-consciousness both contributes to and undermines the “rightness” of one’s life-story.

I present a critical category in each chapter that figures in the narrative integrity of both the narratorial and the authorial communicative act, but which is interpreted differently on the representational and the rhetorical level of the text. These are *contingency*, *consistency*, *coherence*, and *counterpoint*. As formal characteristics, these categories function to order and shape the narrated events into an integrated whole, that is, a life-story, and thereby render the chaos of experience meaningful and comprehensible. At the same time, however, it is possible that an integrated form does not offer an authentic re-presentation of experience. In other words, formal integrity can be mistaken as evidence for ethical integrity, an issue that is engaged with indirectly by the authorial communicative act. I do not claim typological significance for these four categories, which were inferred in the process of my reading and whose alliteration is a happy coincidence. Each category is valued by the narrating character for the way it offers a meaningful interpretation of her/his experience, which includes what happened, how, and why; or the order of events and the reasons they happened in that order. Foregrounding the contingency of life dispels the necessity of that order and allows greater potential to consider alternative interpretations of past events, without privileging or excluding any one of them. The value of consistency functions to recover a sense of necessity by constructing afresh

one's entire life-story. Coherence is both necessary and suspect in that the explanatory power of formal coherence can function independently of the represented content's claim to truth, to the point that narrative understanding, which operates on coherence and facilitates comprehension, becomes itself suspect.

Counterpoint represents a resistance to the desire for harmony, acknowledging the sense that there is always a counterargument or counter-interpretation available, if not always recognised, and that the negotiation is ongoing rather than final.

My discussion in the following four chapters does not mean to suggest, by choosing to foreground one form of narrative integrity for each text, that it is the only one operating in that life-story. Formal coherence is required for all life-stories; however, in Davis's novel, it becomes an object of investigation and is not simply applied in the narrator's life-storytelling. Counterpoint, referring to competing interpretations of past events, is always explicitly and/or implicitly acknowledged in fictional autobiographies. In Roth's *The Facts*, however, it is foregrounded by presenting a dialogue between different characters reflecting on and criticising the embedded autobiographical narrative. Contingency applies to the represented events themselves, which is unexpected on the narratorial level but determined on the authorial level.²⁰ Contingency is more significant in Auster's novel in that the narrator does not privilege actual events over events that could have happened but did not. In this way, the rarity of chance is rendered as significant as fate, a paradox that nevertheless sustains the integrity of the narrator's life-story. Consistency can be seen as a fundamental requirement for the life-story to function — we have the same character who answers to the “I” of autobiography — and Barnes's narrator values

²⁰ Roth's book is an exception in this regard, because the narrating character is a real person and, despite being the author, has limited control over his own life experience. Roth has authority over the order of the telling, but not the order of the told.

consistency, especially consistency with the norm. When competing versions of the past are revealed, he separates his narrating self from his narrated self and narrates anew his whole life-story. This strategy functions to uphold his discursive ethos, but with mixed results.

The different forms that co-exist in life-storytelling operate collaboratively but are also, potentially, in conflict. As Levine points out, forms travel, organise, constrain, overlap, and “can collide to strange effect” (18). This strangeness, as an element of surprise, speaks to the ethical dimension of the project of autobiography — one is surprised in the process of both living and writing, and it can often be oneself that is surprising. Negotiation between aesthetic and ethical demands in self life writing can be seen as experimentation with different forms in order to create a life-story that expresses one’s own sense of rightness. In upholding the integrity of one’s life-story, one chooses *between goods* and is always called upon to defend the “rightness” of that choice. In the concluding chapter, I sum up the discussions in this thesis by relating them to the broader topic of the relationship between life and narrative, considering the difference between them as involving the idea of integrity. I also suggest ways in which the concept of narrative integrity can contribute to future research on living and telling.

Chapter II

Timely Coincidences: Folding Time in Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*

“It made no sense, and because of that, it made all the sense in the world.”

— *The New York Trilogy* (1987), p.298.

1. INTRODUCTION

Moon Palace (1989) is a fitting first study for this thesis and offers a relatively straightforward case of writing the self. The autodiegetic narrator Marco Stanley Fogg recalls a significant period in his early twenties when a series of unexpected events left him on the brink of death and then miraculously saved him. Fogg's physical and spiritual recovery is followed by the discovery of his father's identity, which his single mother and maternal uncle were unwilling to reveal before their unexpected deaths. Filling the blanks in his past, Fogg undergoes a symbolic rebirth that necessitated a reconstruction of his sense of self and his relationship with the world. The reunion between Fogg and his father proves to be brief and catastrophic and ends with the latter's death. By the end of the novel, he is once again alone and an orphan.

The cyclical movement of Fogg's fortunes defies an optimistic vision of progress, but the novel does not thereby slide into a pessimistic vision of doom. The end of Fogg's narrative shows him on the brink of adulthood and prepared, rather than dreading, the uncertain future: “This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins” (298). However, the optimism of this ending nevertheless contains self-exculpatory undertones, which I will be exploring in this chapter.

Auster's novel shows the way we retrospectively make sense of the contingency of

life through narrative, in which fate is paradoxically used to account for the randomness of chance. *Moon Palace*, as a fictional autobiography, offers a representation of the self-mythologising tendencies in life-storytelling, and the way narrative sense-making folds time in a certain way that reassigns causality and accountability.

Fogg's autobiography contains a certain equivocation, even a seeming paradox, in the way he sees both chance and fate as the hidden forces at work that contributed to his rescue and self-discovery. His continual amazement at what had happened aligns the perspectives of the narrating-I and the experiencing-I, with the effect that the sense of surprise experienced by the protagonist Fogg (because of his ignorance about *what* will happen and *how* it will happen) overshadows the way the narrator Fogg is determining *why* it had happened. The narrating present is systematically suppressed to reproduce a sense of the open time of experience. There is one exception, however. Fogg explains at one point the impetus for telling his life-story, which was occasioned when he ran into a former acquaintance on the streets of New York: "I suspect that the idea to write this book first came to me after that meeting four years ago, at the precise moment when Zimmer vanished down the street and I lost sight of him again" (103).¹ The mention of "the precise moment" is significant. There is a certain preoccupation as well as anxiety about time and timing — the exact moment that change takes place — in Fogg's autobiography.

Fogg has a penchant for identifying temporal coincidences, which include things happening at the same time and place and simultaneous actions taking place separately. He sees the connection as meaningful rather than arbitrary and

¹ This is the only time in the novel that Fogg mentions he is writing a "book". There is little evidence to suggest that Fogg is referring to the book he is within, in which case readers might interpret this as a metaleptic remark. I understand the comment as indicative of Fogg's control over the shape of his life-story as an integrated whole.

coordinates the coincidences that he identifies into a successive chain of cause and effect. This contrasts with his belief in contingency, which resists such attempts at meaning making. In this way, there are antithetical movements of meaning making in his narrative, which equivocates between interpreting coincidences as purely accidental and as meaningful accidents — chance is both affirmed and understood as predetermined. Fogg acknowledges the life-story project that he is conducting, and his privileged position compared to his younger self, but this self-consciousness does not extend to reflections on the discursive representation itself, the way he is constructing as well as reporting his experiences. Formal issues such as narrative artifice, teleology, and narrative progression are not questioned on the narratorial level of the text. However, the authorial communicative act implicitly engages with these issues and evaluates Fogg's insensitivity to the ethical stakes of autobiography. I will be examining the separate interpretations and theorisations of contingency offered by the narratorial and the authorial communicative acts.

Many of Auster's novels are, like *Moon Palace*, told in the first-person by character narrators who experienced or witnessed the events themselves, such as *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) and *Leviathan* (1992). They often include an explanation of why this story is being told — Fogg was inspired by his unexpected encounter with Zimmer, Peter Aaron in *Leviathan* is trying to finish his testimony about his friend's criminal activities before the police arrive. There is a certain urgency and immediacy that makes the story both more credible because it is presented as autobiographical and less credible because the narration itself is manifestly fictional.² Dennis Barone considers that such reminders of the artifice of

² Auster commented on the visibility of such narrative frames in his novels, that showing a story coming into existence via a human agent rather than a disembodied voice “give[s] a groundedness and credibility to the stories ... They posit the work as an illusion — which more traditional forms of

the work in Auster's fiction are not used to disrupt or frustrate the reading process, but as "embed[ding] philosophical investigations on the nature of fiction within a narrative that never takes itself to be the real itself" ("Introduction: Paul Auster and the Postmodern American Novel" 7). This implicit, reflexive dimension of Auster's work and fictions in general can be understood as engaging with the ethical force of literature — fiction serving as a vehicle for "philosophical investigations", a representation of reality used to investigate reality itself, and in the process questioning its own "rightness".

This chapter shows how Auster's novel uses the rhetorical vehicle of fiction to theorise the role of contingency in acts of autobiography. Fogg's narrative is an attempt to make sense of the unexpectedness of life and transforms the sudden and premature deaths of his family members into a retrospectively timely and necessary sequence of events. In narrating his experiences, however, Fogg evacuates the very quality he claims to be re-presenting — narrative makes too much sense of contingency and so is both too powerful and too weak to re-present it. Contingency runs counter to the sequentiality and the implied causality of narrative, which reduces the plurality of meaning to a single interpretation, that is, a single life-story. In writing the self, the chaos of experience becomes neatly organised; coincidences are fashioned as meaningful by being placed within a sequence of events and as parts of a whole.

Autobiography is an empowering act of self-determination, and Auster's novel explores what Tim Woods calls "the thematic of freedom" (145) — freedom against fate, self-determination against predetermination. However, autobiography as

narrative don't — and once you accept the 'unreality' of the enterprise, it paradoxically enhances the truth of the story" ("The Art of Fiction", par. 17).

an aesthetic act implies that the power and freedom are also artificial and fabricated to some degree — “one can become the author of one’s own life, become one’s own supreme fiction” (Woods 146). Both Fogg and the novel are required to negotiate this tension between the aesthetic and the ethical demands of autobiography. As I mentioned, Fogg does not engage with the critical issues of life-storytelling, and his representation of contingency is ultimately a quasi-contingency that follows a retrospective logic. But the novel does contain true contingency on a higher level — Fogg’s narrative is only one among many possible ways to formalise experience, and the novel theorises the role of contingency in the project of autobiography on this rhetorical level. In the following, I begin with a discussion about contingency in Auster’s novels and in literary theory. Next, I examine the ambivalent interpretation of coincidences in Fogg’s narrative, his negotiation between self-determination and predetermination, and the use of prolepsis to fashion a concordance between time and truth. I conclude with a discussion of the value of contingency, which both undermines and upholds the narrative integrity of Fogg’s autobiography.

2. THEORISING CONTINGENCY

Readers familiar with Auster’s work are no strangers to a worldview grounded in contingency. In an interview with Mark Irwin, Auster acknowledged that, “[i]f my work is about anything, I think it’s about the unexpected, the idea that anything can happen” (*The Art of Hunger* 333). Many of his characters are confronted with extraordinary and mysterious forces that seem to defy understanding. *The Music of Chance* (1990) shows the lives of two strangers entangled after a random encounter, followed by a gamble in which their freedom is lost. The narrator of *Leviathan* (1992) rejects the fatalism inspired by an accidental fall in his friend’s life-story.

Oracle Night (2004) stages an uncanny correspondence between the word and the world — the power of words to influence and even to determine the future.

Despite appearances, the unlikely scenarios in these novels invoke realism and not the supernatural. I suggest that the overwhelming number of coincidences in Auster's work, and particularly in *Moon Palace*, serves not to undermine the reality of the story but rather to assert contingency as an undeniable condition of life. Contingency in Auster's work signifies what Roland Barthes calls "the category of the 'real'" ("The Reality Effect" 16) — reality is invoked not by the ordinary but the extraordinary, whose rarity does not disqualify its factuality.³ A world where anything can happen is one where the only certainty is, perhaps paradoxically, the unexpected. For Fogg, this means embracing "chance as a form of readiness, a way of saving myself through the minds of others" (1). There is an openness suggested in this worldview — to be ready for chance is to be ready for anything, which includes the other, as a figure of the unexpected.

The project of autobiography represents an attempt to make sense of unexpected experiences by integrating them into a coherent whole. The fulfilment of coherence is an imposition of form that is constructed and artificial — artificial not in the sense of falsehood but as implying the contingency of the chosen, as well as any, interpretation of life. Geoffrey Galt Harpham draws out the ethical potential of narrative artifice: "Narrative moves from an unstable inaugural condition, a condition that *is* but *ought not* ... through a process of sifting and exploration in search of an unknown but retrospectively inevitable condition that *is* and truly *ought-to-be*" (*Getting It Right* 182). Narrative sense-making brings about this union

³ Auster said in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory that "Life is full of such events"; "The unknown is rushing in on top of us at every moment. As I see it, my job is to keep myself open to these collisions, to watch out for all these mysterious goings-on in the world" (*The Art of Hunger* 290, 291).

between *is* and *ought*, a hermeneutic movement that is simultaneously chronological and teleological. The distinctiveness of one's life-story lies in the particular shape of this *ought-to-be*, which I call the narrative integrity of autobiography. The "truth" of each life-story is a negotiation between formal coherence and the oughtness or "rightness" of this artificial construct; the integrity of each autobiography is singular and non-exclusionary.

Contingency in fiction can be used as a plot device to resolve conflicts and to produce a happy ending, but for Auster it goes the other way around — an end is reached *in spite of* unresolved issues, and contingency is invoked as a resistance to the easy reassurance provided by epistemological certainty.⁴ Perplexity remains in spite of the availability of a coherent resolution that might be satisfactory. Woods points out that the "willed unity" produced by Auster's narrating characters nevertheless "hid[es] a variety of paradoxical and contradictory desires, ideas, opinions, and ideologies" (145). Aliko Varvogli makes a similar point about the nature of this negotiation between the self and the world, which she takes to be a central theme in Auster's fiction: "his protagonists abandon themselves to the world at large in the hope of attaining a universal truth, of discovering a governing principle that will impart sense to their lives and actions; they all fail to do that, although they do discover a personal truth to live by: the reality of the fictions they create" (114). It would be helpful to clarify Varvogli's last point and note that what is fictional to the readers is real to the characters, whose "fictions" are not to be understood in terms of falsehood but in the sense of being constructed. The artifice

⁴ Auster, in the interview with McCaffery and Gregory, criticises the use of contingency in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fictions, in "mechanical plot devices" that results in conventional endings such as, for example, family reunions (*The Art of Hunger* 288). He explains his own use of contingency as showing "the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. ... In philosophical terms, I'm talking about the powers of contingency" (ibid 288-289).

of these personal truths is something that I find productive and not utterly self-undermining — these truths uphold a sense of “rightness” that is singular rather than universal and express the autobiographer’s personality. The narratorial communicative act does not necessarily engage with narrative artifice, as we see in Fogg’s autobiography, and may display a lower degree of ethical sensibility. The authorial communicative act critiques this potential oversight, not by *either* endorsing *or* opposing this artificial unity, but by using it as a way to theorise the negotiation between the formal and the ethical integrity of self-representation in general.

The worldview presented in Auster’s work suggests that any end is provisional, contentious, and subject to future change — not necessarily either for the worse or for the better. The openness suggests a resistance to epistemological certainty and a movement towards the ethical. Auster’s novels have their own integrity that is not founded on completeness or certitude. Many are open-ended even as we seem to recognise what is going to happen. At the end of *Timbuktu* (1999), the protagonist Mr Bones, a dog, runs into the traffic in the hopes of reuniting with his owner who is already dead. *The Music of Chance* ends with the protagonist Nashe slamming his foot on the accelerator and seeming about to crash the car. The action stops mid-way and Auster leaves the rest unwritten, inviting readers to produce their own interpretations in the face of the unknown, answers that reflect our own cherished worldviews and the biases inherent in them.

Current scholarship on Auster’s work foregrounds the particular themes in his novels that use contingency as a backdrop to stage related issues. Woods sees *The Music of Chance* as “a critique of the ideology of American capitalism based on Puritan expansionism” (145). For Ilana Shiloh, Auster’s novels are variations of

“[t]he useless quest, the journey doomed to failure”, which is “most explicitly concretised in *Moon Palace*” (132). Shiloh foregrounds the father-son relationship depicted in *Moon Palace*, taking a line from Fogg’s narrative — “a complex dance of guilt and desire” (256) — as the fitting expression for the yearning for the absent father thematised in the novel, that guilt and desire forms “a psychological closed circuit perpetuating itself” (Shiloh 146). Adam Kelly’s discussion about testimony in Auster’s *Leviathan* engages more with the role of contingency in relation to the characters’ meaning-making. Kelly points out that “testimony itself produces knowledge — not in the guise of referential truth, but as a mode of performative coherence similar to that of fiction” (64). The narrator Aaron, in the process of putting his friend Sachs’s life into a narrative, cannot reconcile the incongruity between the formal coherence that is required and the contingency of real life, which defies exclusive interpretations. What is at stake is less what is true but what is plausible, what makes more sense in the narrative of Sachs’s life, and Kelly calls this “the retrospective maintenance of coherence” (69). For Kelly, *Leviathan* explores the tension between coherence and contingency, art and life, and the necessary fallibility of testimony.

Steven E. Alford offers a more systematic discussion about contingency in Auster’s work and identifies two contradictory claims in what he calls “Auster’s cosmology”: on the one hand, the world and our lives as essentially meaningless and we are driven by an “epistemological cowardice” to construct stories or illusions to obscure this void in meaning; on the other hand, the world as mysterious, with a meaning that is hidden and only partially revealed to us (61-62). Fogg’s autobiography operates according to both claims — the tragic loss of his family happened for no obvious reason, yet there are hidden clues that seem to foretell this

outcome. The contradiction inherent in this worldview is maintained rather than resolved in Auster's novels. Contingency defies any attempt to re-present it in narrative, a cognitive resource that cannot help but make too much sense of what is ultimately meaningless. Narrative is both too powerful and not powerful enough to represent the contingency of life. As Gary Saul Morson points out, narrative "tend[s] to create a single line of development out of a multiplicity" (*Narrative and Freedom* 6). The ambivalence inherent in Auster's cosmology is not a flaw to be eradicated, but can be seen as acknowledging the limit of narrative and human attempts to organise the unruliness of experience and life itself. It suggests a resistance to the epistemological desire for coherence, and in its stead a tolerance for ambiguity — the subject is removed from its seat of knowledge and left in a state of uncertainty.

Alford rightly points out that how one names coincidences or unexpected events matters, because it reveals underlying metaphysical and epistemological assumptions about the world, oneself, and the relationship between the two. This is Alford's response to Auster's claim that, "[i]t doesn't matter what you call it", whether "Chance", "Destiny" or "an example of probability theory at work" (*The Art of Hunger* 290). It is a paradox that chance and destiny can be interchangeable, as they are in Fogg's narrative. Fogg's and Auster's worldviews are indeed similar — both equivocate about contingency, as simultaneously meaningless and meaningful. However, there is a limited extent to which we can regard the two as versions of the same.

Brendan Martin uses factual details from Auster's life to suggest that Fogg is "a literary duplicate" of the author and that *Moon Palace* is "both Fogg's autobiography, as well as a version of the Auster story", that is, the novel is Auster's "postmodern autobiography" (77, 67). Martin sees Auster as involving himself "in

the duplicitous art of self-invention”, in which “his protagonists voice his concerns and anxieties” (100). This reading foregrounds the referential connection between Auster’s novels and his personal life, in which the blurred distinction between fact and fiction functions as a “postmodern investigation of authorship” (ibid ix). There is a point to be made about the autobiographical aspect of Auster’s novels, the way fiction is used as a form of self-expression and offers advantages that nonfiction cannot provide. However, rather than tie the novel back to the author himself, I wish to move beyond this referential connection and its indirect truth claims, doing this not to discredit Martin’s approach but to argue that there is something else the text is exploring. The similarities between Fogg and Auster are less crucial for my purposes because I regard the fictional representation as being used rhetorically rather than autobiographically — Auster is not deploring the artifice of self-invention but showing the way and the reason it *both* can and cannot work; that is, it achieves a sense of integrity that both can and cannot satisfy oneself and others.

Although we see the character “Paul Auster” appearing in *City of Glass* (1985), which is collected in *The New York Trilogy* (1987), the proper name does not guarantee any essential link with the real author.⁵ We can say that Auster does write about himself in the strictest sense in *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), *Winter Journal* (2012), and *Report from the Interior* (2013).⁶ But rather than writing with the goal of revealing something about his life to the public, Auster explained that he is “using myself to explore certain questions that are common to us all ... Myself, yes — but myself as anyone, myself as everyone” (*The Art of Hunger* 307). Auster’s

⁵ I return to this topic in chapter five with a discussion of Philip Roth, who provocatively uses his own name in his fiction.

⁶ The use of the second- and third-person in these works can be seen as an imaginary and an experimental way of writing the self. These works are autobiographies in the broad sense, but I will not be pursuing them here because this thesis deals with first-person narratives.

use of the third- and second-person narration in these three texts draws attention to the distance between the writing self and the written self, the way “[t]he self that exists in the world — the self whose name appears on the covers of books — is finally not the same self who writes the book” (ibid 308).⁷ The project of autobiography engages with the idea that the self is a construct, and Auster’s novels explore the consequences of what Barone calls “postmodern self-fashioning” (5). For my purposes, the identity of this self is less important than the way it is constructed. This thesis examines the process of assembling pieces of the self into an integrated whole — a process of re-membering that is also a process of dis-membering. The resulting product, as a finished work of art, presents *a* self that embodies a sense of integrity, in both the formal and the ethical meanings of the word.

Hilary P. Dannenberg, in *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (2008), traces the evolution of two plot patterns in literary history: coincidence and counterfactuality. Dannenberg finds theories about contingency and counterfactuality in real life to “[offer] a number of useful parameters for the definition of coincidence absent in literary research” (*Coincidence* 91-92). Of the theories that Dannenberg finds useful, C. G. Jung on “synchronicity” shares some features with Fogg’s interpretation of contingency as derived from his experiences. Jung defines synchronicity as “the simultaneous occurrence of two meaningfully but not causally connected events” (36). Dannenberg calls such acausal connections *analogical coincidence*, which she finds to be a common way of representing coincidence in twentieth-century literature — “forms of coincidence

⁷ This comments recalls Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Borges and Myself” (1956), in which the speaker “I” laments his existence is overtaken by “Borges”. Barthes makes a related comment on a “basic dissymmetry of language” in self-writing: “the *I* of the one who writes *I* is not the same as the *I* which is read by *you*” (*The Rustle of Language* 17; original emphasis). The implications of this gap will be explored in following chapters, where I analyse texts featuring narrators who are more self-conscious about their role as a writer.

[that] are constructed through an *indirect or figurative system of connection*” dependent upon the character’s subjective perception of the correspondence (*Coincidence* 105; original emphasis).⁸ This is in contrast to traditional uses of coincidence in literary fiction, in which it is integrated into the story by revealing a hidden causation, or kinship, or similarity.

On the recognition scene between Fogg and his father Solomon Barber, Dannenberg draws attention to “its detailed mapping of facial characteristics and the emphasis on genetic similarity” (*Coincidence* 33). Fogg recalls: “Once I became aware of this [that we had the same eyes] ... I had no choice but to accept it. I was Barber’s son, and I knew it now beyond a shadow of a doubt” (288). Kinship is thus verified by similarity, and the coincidental nature of their meeting becomes retrospectively harmonious because of this subsequent revelation. Coincidences in *Moon Palace* are not always reconciled according to Dannenberg’s three traditional models, although it invokes and even parodies them. As I have argued, coincidences are not simply found but identified in Fogg’s narrative, and this is an important distinction. Overall, the novel’s seemingly excessive number of coincidences can give the impression that it is a parody of nineteenth-century novels with a kinship plot, such as Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1839) and *Bleak House* (1853).⁹ Fogg notes this comparison himself in the novel: “[after my mother was killed in a traffic accident] I apparently moped around a lot and did my fair share of sniffing, sobbing

⁸ Dannenberg further distinguishes between modernist and postmodernist forms of coincidence — the former based on “the subjectivity of human perception” and the latter showing correspondences on multiple narrative levels for the readers, not the characters, to recognise (*Coincidence* 106).

⁹ Another allusion may be made to the silent film *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), directed by D. W. Griffith, when Fogg describes himself and another character Kitty Wu as both “Orphans in the storm” (84).

myself to sleep at night like some pathetic orphan hero in a nineteenth-century novel” (4).

Jung’s idea of synchronicity emphasises simultaneity and is a subset of the broader category of coincidence, which can include temporal simultaneity, repetitions of the same event at a later time, and meaningful connections that are retrospectively identified. Fogg’s fascination about coincidences is followed by simultaneously desiring and resisting explanations for them. What I want to draw attention to is the element of surprise that is foregrounded in these instances, surprise that calls for explanations not based on causality and gives Fogg the freedom to interpret the events at will. In this way, he produces a retrospective coherence from the incongruity and contingency of his experiences, a retrospective timeliness that sees unexpected losses as happening at the “right” time.

Fogg values contingency for the way it maintains this play between certainty and mystery. He also demonstrates this by regarding actualities as contingent events. Fogg, in recalling his rescue, names it as a “miracle”: “Considering the odds against me, it was a miracle I lasted as long as I did” (1). The implied counterfactual event is death, which he assumes to be a likelier outcome. Actuality as contingent gives the impression that what did happen warrants a deeper meaning because it survived the odds. In this sense, life becomes significant and precious because it is evaluated against all the “unrealised but realisable possibilities” (Morson, *Narrative* 118). Morson calls this *sideshadowing*, which “conveys the sense that actual events might just as well not have happened” (ibid 118). Sideshadowing refers to “both an open sense of temporality and a set of devices used to convey that sense” in narrative fiction (ibid 6). It restores what Morson calls “the presentness of the past”, “a sense that something else might have happened” (ibid 7). Actuality is not privileged over

these might-have-beens, and this produces alternative interpretations of the past. “Sideshadowing therefore induces a kind of temporally based humility” (ibid 119), by acknowledging what is not there, what did not happen but could have happened, what is unknown and also what cannot be known.

Fogg’s autobiography uses sideshadowing, but the openness implied in this narrative strategy is also undermined by connecting contingency with fate — accidental happenings are seen as part of a predetermined design. His use of phrases such as “oracle” (31), “miracle” (50, 58), the “secret harmony” of the world (78), or “premonition of things to come” (205) suggests a divine force at work in which he is a passive actor with no control over his future. However, it is Fogg himself who plays god in his life-story — he is the one who knows the outcome and is therefore able to recognise these so-called premonitions *as* premonitions. The invocation of fate neutralises the sense of open time and reduces the “*field of possibilities*” (Morson, *Narrative* 119) into a single, unknown but preordained, narrative development. His narrative both desires and resists the assurance of predetermination, the will of a higher power beyond the individual, who is understood as deprived of agency and therefore as unaccountable for his own actions. The theological implication is in tension with self-determination, and this is something Fogg continues to negotiate throughout his life-story.

There are shared characteristics between Morson’s sideshadowing and what Dannenberg calls *temporal orchestration*, “a multifaceted narrative strategy that works to capture the reader’s attention by suggesting multiple versions of events” (*Coincidence* 42). Temporal orchestration can be used to create surprise, suspense, and curiosity, in which the intensification of these three narrative interests prompts readers to “liminally plot future possibilities” (ibid 42) — “future” as in the future of

the story that is not yet read but already written and completed. Dannenberg sees the multiplicity suggested by temporal orchestration to “intensify the reader’s desire for causal-linear clarity” (ibid 45). In other words, when contingency is foregrounded in narrative representation, it produces a residual effect that makes causality more desirable; however, this does not mean causality is a more plausible answer. The desire for causality is indeed something we find in Fogg’s autobiography — he associates independent events across time and space to form a single sequence that is retrospectively coherent and “right”, while simultaneously insisting on the contingency of this established connection. The value of contingency, which functions as the narrative integrity of Fogg’s autobiography, both facilitates and frustrates his attempt to establish “causal-linear clarity”, resulting in this equivocation of chance as fate, fate as chance.

3. TIMING AND PROPHECY

Almost everything in *Moon Palace* happens by chance rather than being motivated by the characters’ decisions; or rather, this is the impression we get from Fogg’s narrative. The false sense of open time in his autobiography is made possible by the dual perspective and double temporality of retrospective narration. As mentioned, there is a counter movement of sense-making against the chronological unfolding of time — Fogg is telling and interpreting the events backwards, using the end to justify his interpretation of all that went before while also lamenting his inability to read signs from the (supposedly predetermined) future. In this way, the aberrations of chance, the prematurity of his family’s deaths, the missed opportunities due to “bad timing” are reinterpreted as happening “on time”, as a sequence of events that could not have happened in any other order. Chance happenings are seen as following the

design of Fogg's fate — a retrospective interpretation that offers “causal-linear clarity” (Dannenberg, *Coincidence* 45). What did happen is understood as what *ought* to have happened, and Fogg comes to terms with the tragic loss of his family, moving from regret to acceptance.

Steven Weisenburger finds that, in Auster's novel, “[e]ach time characters approach a ‘dead end’ or ‘period’ ... concluding any particular ‘sentence,’ then chance and contingency take over” (135). But we need to distinguish contingency on the story level and on the discourse level. Fogg's mother Emily was killed in a traffic accident, his uncle Victor died of a heart attack, his father Solomon tripped and felled down an empty grave pit just after revealing his identity. These are unexpected events beyond Fogg's control; nevertheless, the sense of contingency is heightened by his re-presentation of them, which downplays explanatory factors. Victor's death was especially devastating because he was just about to join Fogg in New York and expectations were raised for their imminent reunion. This unexpected loss severed Fogg's link to the world: “I began to wobble, to fly in greater and greater circles around myself, until at last I spun out of orbit” (19). Death is inevitable, but the unexpectedness of these deaths makes them seem premature, as happening before their time, as if there is a “right” time to die. The protagonist Fogg's grief is coupled with the narrator Fogg's sense of belatedness and regret. After revealing Solomon's identity and how close he came to meeting his son years ago, Fogg says:

It was all a matter of missed connections, bad timing, blundering in the dark. We were always in the right place at the wrong time, the wrong place at the right time, always just missing each other, always just a few inches from figuring the whole thing out. That's what the story boils down to, I think. A

series of lost chances. All the pieces were there from the beginning, but no one knew how to put them together. (243)

There are two things to observe here. First is Fogg's emphasis on the value of coincidence — how difficult and rare it is to be at the “right” place at the “right” time. Given what he knows now, the narrator Fogg is able to identify and determine what is the “right” place and time. The posteriority of his position allows him to make these judgments based on the now completed story, whose formal integrity is time-bound. This leads to my second point — the metaphor of putting the pieces of a puzzle together that forms a complete whole. Fogg's narrative includes not only his own experiences but also all the relevant events and people that he was ignorant of at the time. Unlike his younger self, the narrator Fogg knows “how to put them together”, how to fit the pieces together into a coherent story. There is a certain bias here, however, which has to do with what Morson calls *backshadowing*, the assumption of “a neat whole from parts that in fact did not cohere or lead in a single direction” (*Narrative* 239). Backshadowing is “foreshadowing after the fact” and makes “the past looks as if it were predestined to lead to the present and as if the signs of our own time were already there for those willing to see them” (ibid 13, 238). Backshadowing is the effect that Fogg's autobiography strives for, that the past and his interpretations of the past are inevitable rather than contingent; however, it remains in tension with the value of contingency that he upholds at the same time through the use of sideshadowing. In the above quote, Fogg seems to suggest that at any point in time the pieces can always be put together in the same way, that the same story will be produced because it always comprises the same pieces or events. The logic of this argument works in retrospect — the posterior perspective rules out all contingency except the actual outcome, therefore boiling down to the same story.

And yet, Fogg presents this activity as prospective, as something that is true “from the beginning”.

Fogg never intended to embark on a search or quest for his father and his own identity, even if that appears to be so in retrospect. Weisenburger suggests that reading the novel as “a quest for paternal origins” is due to the “powerful reasons of genre” (132). *Moon Palace* cues readers with the conventional components of the kinship plot and plays with this expectation. It has orphans undergoing hardship, finding true love, and reuniting with their families, which are all brought about through a series of “coincidences”. The mystery of Fogg’s parentage is presented early in the novel: “With my father ... all was a blank” (4). Readers expect that at some point this mystery will be solved, and Auster’s novel indeed follows this narrative progression to reveal the identity of Fogg’s father in a dramatic recognition scene. But this is not where the novel ends, when the supposed orphan reunites with his family. Instead, it has Fogg undergo one turn of fortune after another, until he is again broke and alone — an orphan in the storm — much like at the beginning of the story. The cyclical pattern of Auster’s novel counters the optimism of progress that seems to be guaranteed by the passing of time with each successive generation.¹⁰ The image of the moon signifies repetitions, cycles, light after darkness, and vice versa. Trying to find a place for himself in the world, Fogg’s supposed “search for self” is a nonlinear journey where he is ambushed by contingency. He is careful about the dates and sequence of events, even while his storytelling leaps back and forth in time.

¹⁰ Auster suggested in an interview that the novel is “a critique of the notion of progress”, demonstrated by the similarities between the lives of the three generations — Fogg, Solomon and Effing (*The Art of Hunger* 324). For example, all three undergo a period of extreme isolation and solitude.

Weisenburger sees the intervention of chance in Auster's novel as staging a discontinuous sense of time. The end of one state leads to the beginning of another and this continues ceaselessly in a cyclical rather than progressive movement. Fogg acknowledges this when reading about the Chicago Cubs' fluctuating fortunes: "to witness their sudden, wholly improbable surge from the depths seemed to prove that anything in this world was possible. ... Causality was no longer the hidden demiurge that ruled the universe ... reality was a yo-yo, change was the only constant" (61). However, Fogg also assumes the universe operates according to contingency and has no observable pattern at all, that anything can happen and happen for no reason. There are different forms of time acknowledged in Auster's novel: cyclical, spatial, and, implicitly, as flowing backwards. Fogg's recollections produce a narrative sequence that includes several proleptic shifts — small loops of time within the discursive representation. I see these time loops as folding the future into the past, where Fogg's foreknowledge as narrator masquerades as "prophecy". Morson's idea of *foreshadowing* is a form of prolepsis that "involves backward causation, which means that, in one way or another, the future must already be there, must somehow already exist substantially enough to send signs backward" (*Narrative* 7). The dual perspective and double temporality of autobiography allows Fogg to simultaneously enjoy the advantage of that future position and claim that it already existed in the past. Foreshadowing assumes "a world in which time is closed", a kind of fatalism in which the future is not open (*ibid* 7). As mentioned earlier, however, the backward causation implied by Fogg's foreshadowing and backshadowing is countered by the contrary logic of his sideshadowing. These different directions of sense-making remain in tension, and the tension is maintained by the contingency of privileging either side.

Victor's death marks a turning point in Fogg's life: "my life began to change, I began to vanish into another world" (3). The funeral drains his savings and, instead of applying for scholarships or student loans, he decides upon "a militant refusal to take any action at all" (20). Fogg takes delight in the grotesqueness of this proposition and welcomes the inevitability of death. He graduates from Columbia University in June 1969 and is finally evicted from his apartment in late August. The summer of 1969 is another crucial turning point in his life. It witnesses his existential crisis and physical emaciation, and then from this rock bottom a turn of fortune produced by two unexpected events — the first bad, the second good.

Fogg survives in Central Park by scavenging food waste and relying upon the kindness of strangers. On this he says: "Perhaps that was all I had set out to prove in the first place: that once you throw your life to the winds, you will discover things you had never known before, things that cannot be learned under any other circumstances" (57). At the time, Fogg explains to himself that it was his "special state of mind" that willed those strangers to give him money or food (57). In the moment, he recognises that such fortuitous events are beyond his control and ultimately unpredictable. However, his theory on the contingency of life is later revised to qualify this contingency with a (hidden) sense of order: "I thought that by abandoning myself to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony to me, some form or pattern that would help me to penetrate myself. The point was to accept things as they were, to drift along with the flow of the universe" (78). This is the paradox in Fogg's autobiography of which I have been speaking; the way order (fate) appears in the very randomness (chance) of life.

Fogg's quite stable condition of homelessness is disrupted by a midnight rainstorm in which he is caught in the downpour and becomes seriously ill. The

narrator Fogg muses that he “might have lasted until the start of the cold weather” (63-64) if not for this rainstorm, and assuming no one murdered him — contingent events, both actual and hypothetical ones, are placed alongside each other. After a few days spent in a delirious fever, Fogg is rescued by Zimmer, his former roommate, and Kitty, whom he had met a few weeks earlier. Remembering this, the narrator Fogg has no doubt he would have died had they not found him. The counterfactual statement highlights what did not happen to emphasise the significance of what did. Dannenberg distinguishes between *downward* counterfactuals (imagining a worse scenario) and *upward* counterfactuals (imagining a better scenario) (*Coincidence* 112). The former create emotional satisfaction by avoiding a hypothetical disaster, while the latter stimulate regret. In this case, Fogg is positing a downward counterfactual — his death — and thereby increases his satisfaction at what actually happened.

Fogg pauses at this point in the story to enlarge and expand upon the significance of this extraordinary rescue: “it alters the reality of what I experienced. ... I had jumped off the edge, and then, at the very last moment, something reached out and caught me in midair” (49). Before his eviction, Fogg had met Kitty only once and by accident — she happened to be at Zimmer’s former apartment when Fogg was there looking for him and they were introduced because they happened to be wearing the same shirt. Fogg attributes his rescue and the subsequent emotional recovery to this brief, random encounter. From this interpretation we can see the way a purely accidental event on the story level can be refigured on the discourse level by being placed within a sequence of events and thereby becoming a *meaningful* accident. Kitty, alarmed by Fogg’s antics, had tracked down Zimmer at his new apartment the next day and together they had

searched the city until they found their friend three weeks later. The narrator Fogg retells these events from Kitty's perspective and foregrounds the way their actions can be synchronised down to the minute. Days before his eviction, Kitty had managed to get Zimmer's phone number "[a]t approximately the same moment" when Fogg accidentally dropped the last two eggs (his daily diet) on his kitchen floor (47) —his fortunes are turned simultaneously upward and downward in a single moment.

The timing of Fogg's rescue also contributes to its significance, and not just with respect to the alternative of that event — death. Had he been found earlier while he was in a relatively better state, it might not have been as profound and life-changing. Because he was rescued "at the very last moment" (49), the unexpected event is credited with a special meaning. Moreover, it produced a positive change that was unlike the negative outcome of earlier unexpected events, such as the premature death of both his mother and uncle. Fogg was saved by loving friends whom he did not know he had, and this experience induced an alternative attitude towards the unexpectedness of life. This sentiment is declared at the beginning of the novel, which I quoted in part earlier: "eventually I came to see that chance [meeting with Kitty] as a form of readiness, a way of saving myself through the minds of others" (1). To prepare for what cannot be prepared for is to inhabit "a form of readiness" — to be ready for anything to happen, which also means to be ready for the future. An accidental acquaintance turns out to determine the course of his life, and Fogg's narrative documents this (fictional) fact.

Weisenburger points out that Fogg's opening statement carries the novel's central motif: "Going inside *Moon Palace* means readying oneself for such chances. It also means being undeceived about the ethics of such chances" (136).

Weisenburger's metaphor of entering the book suggests inhabiting a certain state of mind that accepts chance rather than causality as the rhythm of life.¹¹ Because anything can happen, one must be ready for anything. "Moon Palace" is also the name of a Chinese restaurant in the novel and represents a literal physical space that one can enter. Weisenburger is right to emphasise the ethical implication of this mindset. Caught in the moment, it is possible to do something regrettable; and if causality is rejected as a principle of human action, actors may not be held accountable for their actions. As Weisenburger points out, "[t]raditional hierarchies of value have nothing, necessarily, to do with such chance transitions" (136). In this way, "chance" or "coincidence" may be invoked to absolve one's responsibility for what happens. Fogg's narrative equivocates between the meaninglessness of contingency and a kind of fatalism in which "[a] coincidence is a brief flash of the mystery showing its ordinarily hidden face" (Alford 62) — mystery as unknown but also predetermined. Attributing events to chance, the narrator Fogg deprives himself of agency and gives the impression that he is a victim of fate, that he had "no choice" but to act the way he did, for better or for worse.

Fogg is keen to see connections that go beyond the surface of things, and in this way contingency on the story level is reinterpreted on the discourse level. I want to develop this observation further, to suggest that *identifying* "coincidences" — simultaneous and non-simultaneous occurrences that are acausal but meaningfully connected — is Fogg's way of making sense of the unexpectedness of life. The accidentally matching shirt is retrospectively seen as destined to happen and as a premonitory sign or clue about their future relationship — they later become a

¹¹ Auster says in an interview that in all his books he tries "to leave enough room ... for the reader to inhabit it" (*The Art of Hunger* 282; added emphasis).

couple, and their identical shirts seem to make sense once it is revealed that Kitty is also an orphan. We can further make the distinction that while the identical shirts are coincidental on the narratorial level they are determined on the authorial level, for a rhetorical purpose — to suggest how one would interpret such events and to highlight the significance of such interpretation. Fogg suggests that, without the t-shirt, he would not have been invited by the new tenant of Zimmer's former apartment and thus would not have met Kitty or been saved — a contingent event is understood as part of a necessary sequence of events, therefore becoming not contingent at all. Fogg inserts his narratorial knowledge of the future as “premonitions” and makes “chance” play a greater role, without acknowledging the retrospective logic of this explanation.

Fogg's narrative obscures the double perspective of autobiographical narration and operates according to what Mark Currie calls “retrospective predictability”: “a characteristic human response to the unexpected event whereby the unexpected is reshaped by the teleology of narrative form in a demonstration that it had been predictable, sometimes even a pretence that it had been expected, all along” (*The Unexpected* 56). We can relate this to Morson's idea of backshadowing, the way that “the past is treated as if it had inevitably to lead to the present” (*Narrative* 13). There is “[a] particular tone of superiority” in backshadowing that privileges the narrating present and holds people accountable for what was ultimately unforeseeable, passing judgment on their supposed weaknesses (*ibid* 234). Currie's term is more pertinent, however, because it indicates the particular characteristic of this backward causation, the way it is presented or pretended as its direct opposite, as “prophetic”. Fogg displaces his own godlike narratorial role to an external, mysterious source by attributing to certain signs or events in the past with

the power to foretell the future. For example, when dining at the Chinese restaurant Moon Palace with Kitty and Zimmer after his rescue, his fortune cookie reads, “The sun is the past, the earth is the present, the moon is the future” (94). Given what happens later (he will go to Utah, where the landscape is very much like the surface of the moon) and how he will come across this sentence again, the narrator Fogg says, “in retrospect ... it seem[s] that my chance discovery of it in the Moon Palace had been fraught with a weird and premonitory truth” (94).¹² The prophetic interpretation used here creates suspense and piques readers’ curiosity. First-time readers do not know what Fogg is hinting at, and the only way to verify this “premonitory truth” is to continue reading.

When we reach the point in the story where Fogg recalls coming across the fortune cookie saying again, the scene is focalised through his younger self:

The synchronicity of these events seemed fraught with significance ... It was as though I could hear my destiny calling out to me, but each time I tried to listen to it, it turned out to be talking in a language I didn’t understand. ... I couldn’t help feeling unsettled by what had happened. ... strange conspiracies of matter, precognitive signs, premonitions ... (227)

The accidental nature of synchronicity is connected to a predetermined design that governs his life, and the paradox is presented as fascinating rather than a discrepancy that needs to be reconciled. The temporal and narratorial distance between the protagonist Fogg and the narrator Fogg does not function to relativise this claim; rather, both subscribe to the idea that the rarity of these “synchronicities” justifies them having a deeper meaning. And yet, the “premonitory truth” (94) is asserted

¹² The “sun” can be seen as referring to his father Solomon, whose pet name was “Sol”, the Spanish word for ‘sun’ (244). Fogg does not point out this connection himself, and the novel leaves some such detective work, though not all, to the reader.

without offering any insight and serves as an “empty prediction” (Currie, *Unexpected* 64) that is free to be “fulfilled” by Fogg’s subsequent narrative.

The invoked counterfactuality — that he could have understood the supposed signs but did not — signals regret, and this is the overarching tone of Fogg’s autobiography, preoccupied as it is with missed opportunities. Dannenberg sees negative coincidences of the kind identified by Fogg as demonstrating “the human urge to counterfactualise in tragic contexts” (*Coincidence* 125). The fallacy of this post-hoc identification of signs or clues is obscured by replacing the narrating present with a “prophetic” explanation that opens up the closed future with a hypothesis that is both virtual and actual. Fogg’s narrative directs readers’ attention entirely to what happened in the past and compresses the distinction between the experiencing-I and the narrating-I — the two exist on separate timelines even if they are indeed the same person. He folds the completed future into the representation of the past, in which his prophetic language invokes a divine, unverifiable source that legitimates the correctness of his retrospective predictions. In this way, his life-story is both true, because coherent, and untrue, because contingent, at the same time.

4. SURPRISE, SUSPENSE, FOLDING TIME

In *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (1994), Morson uses *Oedipus* as an example to theorise the double temporality of narrative, which is characterised by identification and foreknowledge. The two temporalities are represented by Oedipus and Tiresias — one does not yet know what will happen and the other already knows what will happen; one “speaks from within the story and one from outside it, and we as audience are constantly aware of both perspectives” (Morson, *Narrative* 61). Currie points out that the temporal doubleness of *Oedipus* represents one end of

a spectrum of narratives in which suspense is replaced by irony (*Unexpected* 15-16). *Moon Palace* would seem closer to the other end of the spectrum in which the narrative is dominated by suspense at the expense of irony. However, while uncertainty presides over Auster's novel, there is an implicit reflexive dimension of *Moon Palace* that demonstrates rhetorical irony if not dramatic irony. We need to distinguish between the protagonist Fogg's experience, the narrator Fogg's discursive representation of that experience, and readers' experience in the reading process, in which, I suggest, surprise plays an important role. The dual perspective of the experiencing-I and the narrating-I in autobiography can be temporarily aligned but does not become identical. As mentioned earlier, Fogg aligns his narratorial perspective with his younger self, creating a sense of open time and foregrounding the power of contingency. However, the authorial act of the novel distances itself from Fogg's narrative interpretation by acknowledging the rhetorical effect of his quasi-contingency, the way he identifies events *as* coincidences and heightens the sense of surprise to make the past open to interpretation. Contingency is kept in view, or rather, is blocking the view of the narrating present and Fogg's backward logic.

The text's temporal structure reveals an implicit self-consciousness that evaluates Fogg's autobiography and theorises the role of contingency in all acts of autobiography. Double temporality is a common feature among all autobiographical, retrospective narratives. What is distinct in Auster's novel, however, is what I call *temporal folding*, which is a kind of prolepsis that bends the double temporality to create a sense of seamlessness. There is a proleptic leap forward to reveal what happened later in the story, and then a backtracking that forces readers to wait for an explanation of *how* it happened, which includes the in-between events leading to the

outcome (story level) and the interpretative activity involved in re-presentation (discourse level), that is, explaining *why* it happened and in that specific order. The proleptic shift sets up certain expectations by revealing the outcome in advance, which implicitly conditions the way the sequence of events and their significance are explained. The disordering of story time by discourse time can produce a sense of surprise for readers, but it is a different kind of surprise from the one experienced by the protagonist Fogg — what is surprising to him concerns the matter (both the outcome and events leading up to it, which may not be a “natural” progression); to readers, surprise also resides in the manner of the discursive revelation, which offers layers or sequences of surprise in relation to the rhetorical dimension of the text.

Meir Sternberg’s theory of narrative dynamics takes surprise, curiosity, and suspense as the “three master functions of narrative,” which involves recognition, retrospection, and propection, respectively: “Surprise ... is an index of false understanding and a belated call for realignment; the rise of curiosity signals that the past has been deformed into alternative formations; suspense throws us forward to the opacity of the future” (“Telling in Time (II)” 534, 531). Both surprise and curiosity “involve manipulations of the past”, whereas suspense “arises from rival scenarios about the future” (Sternberg, “How Narrativity Makes a Difference” 117). The protagonist Fogg experiences contingency in its rawest state, that is, life, where anything can happen. First-time readers participate in this experience of suspense, not knowing what will happen to him; at the same time, we are invited by textual and generic clues to formulate certain expectations about that unknown but already completed “future”, which subjects us to the possibility of surprise, by later

revelations having the potential to subvert those expectations.¹³ Surprise is distributed across reading time as events and their significances are gradually revealed on the representational and the rhetorical levels of the text. In contrast to his younger self, the narrator Fogg knows what will happen on the story level, but he claims to be still amazed by the fact that events happened at all and is ambivalent in interpreting the contingency of life. His narrative identifies a sequence of events that provides an explanatory function — narrative sequentiality tending to imply causality and even necessity. However, Fogg’s belief in contingency resists such explanations and thus maintains a state of uncertainty.

Sternberg points out that prolepsis involves an “artful switch of direction”, that the leap forward instead directs attention to the (temporarily) omitted past — “the unexpected future springs an unexplained past” (“Telling in Time (II)” 536). The “matter” or outcome is revealed but not the “manner” or the way that outcome is reached (ibid 523). But there is another element of the “manner” in question, that is, the explanatory how, or, the *why* that is inferred from the *how*. I want to draw attention to the way Fogg uses prolepsis not just for the purpose of reporting what happened, but to fold time in a certain way that renders seamless and necessary his interpretation of the past. Prolepsis provides him with the opportunity to explain more than once what happened and why, to reassign the significance of past events and redistribute responsibility among the people involved in more than one way.

In Sternberg’s scheme, readers’ experience of surprise as a result of the disordering of chronological events — the unexpected revelation of the future out of turn — changes to curiosity about what has been (temporarily) omitted, prompting

¹³ Dannenberg considers that “future-oriented suspense functions as a highly immersive narrative technique”, that readers’ mental construction of the possible “future” can be called *liminal plotting* (*Coincidence* 38).

retrospection. Events once understood as located in the “future” of the reading process now become, relative to the reading time locus, in the “past”. In Auster’s novel, however, prolepsis retains a certain degree of suspense and has the potential to generate a secondary surprise. There are no rival scenarios in terms of the outcome and the events leading up to it (story level), but there are rival explanations of them — *why* they had happened and in this particular order (discourse level). Fogg’s sideshadowing counterbalances the sense of necessity implied by the sequentiality of narrative, foregrounding instead the “unrealised but realisable possibilities” (Morson, *Narrative* 118), thus keeping in play a hermeneutic uncertainty. Actuality and unrealised possibilities become equally significant, rendering any interpretation of past, completed events inadequate because there are an infinite number of contingent factors to take into account. No explanation is exclusive or final; every explanation is contingent and unjustifiable in spite of being coherent or “right” at the same time.

Prolepsis invites readers to plot and form certain expectations about the omitted past that is not yet explained. Auster’s novel subverts readers’ expectations by staging events with no obvious sense of order or coherence. We can see this as the way coincidence functions in Auster’s novels — more than a strategy to propel the plot, it challenges, in its outlandishness, the credibility of the story even as it is true to the chaos of experience. The sense of surprise reappears in the reading process not only because of the revelations on the story level, but also because readers’ understanding of Fogg’s ethos changes when we shift to consider the rhetorical implications of his telling, the way the order of revelations conditions the interpretation of past events and can be used to justify his distribution of responsibility. The novel offers an explanation for unexpected events even as it

exposes the inadequacy of that meaning-making. Fogg does not claim his explanation as the only truth, but this ambivalence undermines both the formal and the ethical integrity of his autobiography.

After his rescue, Fogg lives in Zimmer's apartment and recovers physically and psychologically. He realises that he has displayed "the most abject form of cowardice" and is flooded by "a crippling sense of my own stupidity" (71). Several weeks later, on the first of November, Fogg finds a job as a live-in companion for an elderly man in a wheelchair, Thomas Effing. As narrator, Fogg draws attention to the date, "November first: the Day of the Dead, the day when unknown saints and martyrs are remembered" (96). For first-time readers, it is unclear at this point in the novel what he is implying. Second-time readers may understand it as referring to the way Effing faked his death, and has now come back from the dead, in some sense, to tell his tale.

Otherwise known as Julian Barber, Effing is Solomon's father and Fogg's grandfather, a relationship that is not yet revealed at this point in the novel. In late December, Effing and Fogg start preparing the former's obituary. Effing announces that he will die on the twelfth of May (which he does), and time is running out for them to complete the job.¹⁴ Effing proceeds to tell Fogg the real story of his life, which begins with a twenty-page monologue (137-158) about his trip to Utah in 1916 and its disastrous ending. The rest is told by Fogg in the third-person: Effing had found a cave well-stocked with food, killed three train robbers who used the cave as a hideout, taken their stolen money, and gone to California and then Paris

¹⁴ Effing's strong belief in self-determination contrasts with Fogg's willingness "to drift along with the flow of the universe" (78). Effing told Fogg at one point: "There are no coincidences. That word is used only by ignorant people. . . . If they're strong enough, a man's thoughts can change the world around him" (101). Unlike Effing's conviction, Fogg is more ambivalent about self-determination, which we can see from his equivocation between chance and fate.

before returning to New York in 1939. Fogg transcribes Effing's life-story and together they revised it into three versions: a short obituary for the newspapers, a longer sensational version for an art magazine, and a complete edited transcript for his son Solomon (187).

It takes twenty days to finish editing the three versions of Effing's story, during which Fogg and Effing "rant[ed] at each other over the smallest stylistic points" (187). Telling us the role Fogg played in the writing of Effing's story, the novel invites us to consider whether what we are reading is one of these *edited* versions of Effing's life-story and to apply this scepticism to Fogg's autobiography — both its constructedness and the rhetorical purpose(s) it fulfils. Even though Effing's twenty-page monologue is placed in quotation marks, it could just as well be taken from the transcript edited for Solomon. Fogg does not engage with the complications that can arise from this mediated life-storytelling, the way that life-stories undergo slight changes when retold by another person; however, these issues are indirectly engaged with on the authorial level, in which the "seamlessness" of Fogg's narrative is suspect rather than satisfying. Effing's story is partly given in the first-person, but we see that it may be just as mediated as the stories of Kitty (82-84), Solomon (231-264), and Zimmer (85-87), which are all told in the third person by Fogg.¹⁵ Rather than concerning himself with narrative artifice or the question of authenticity, Fogg foregrounds the intersubjectivity of life and the importance of human relationships — how one life impacts another life consciously and unconsciously, how people and events "coincide" and have the power to determine the course of one's life and the shape of one's life-story. Fogg's autobiography

¹⁵ Kitty's life-story is doubly mediated. She tells her story to Zimmer, who tells it to Fogg, who then narrates it in the third person.

arranges the constellation of unexpected “coincidences” into a narrative sequence, in which the order of telling formulates a causal relationship between past events that further reinforces the necessity of the actual sequence.

Effing dies on the twelfth of May 1970, as he had predicted, and leaves Fogg seven thousand dollars. With this money, Fogg sets up house with Kitty and befriends Solomon, who had moved to New York upon receiving his inheritance. After describing his first meeting with Solomon, Fogg jumps to his discovery ten months later: Solomon is his father, then dying in hospital (230). This is the most significant instance of temporal folding in the novel. Readers know what will happen but not how it came about, and this, under Sternberg’s scheme, provokes curiosity. Currie points out that prolepsis changes the nature of the reading experience by reorienting readers “not in progression from cause to effect but in a regression from effect to cause” (*Unexpected* 40). Readers’ curiosity for what happened between the first time they met and Solomon’s death is a curiosity for the process between cause and effect, a gap that includes how it happened and why, both to be supplied by Fogg’s subsequent narrative. We anticipate that there will be some form of a “natural” progression leading up to that unexpected outcome; our expectations, however, by virtue of knowing the outcome, are constructed according to the same retrospective logic that the narrator Fogg uses in his autobiography — backward causation. Fogg’s narrative reasons backwards to account for Solomon’s injury and subsequent death, using the sequence of telling to negotiate the necessity of the told.

The “fold” of prolepsis moves from the narrated future to the past and then forward again, the gap or the “unexplained past” obscuring the layeredness of the discursive representation. Fogg’s narrative seeks to account for the events in a way that irons flat this discursive manoeuvring, that is, to render his interpretation

seamless, but not necessarily exclusive. Narrative imposes a sense of order and coherence that facilitates understanding but without guaranteeing truth. Readers' expectations of a "natural" progression of events are countered by the novel's foregrounding of the contingency of life. Despite having revealed the outcome, Fogg's prolepsis retains a degree of suspense and the potential for a secondary surprise for the readers by keeping competing interpretations in play, that is, self-determination and predetermination. The curiosity provoked by prolepsis invites readers to formulate certain expectations based on textual cues and literary conventions. However, the novel subverts these expectations by foregrounding the power of contingency as rule of life, one that is heightened by Fogg's narrative strategy. His appeal to the mysterious force of contingency presents himself as a victim of fate, as part of a grand design that is unknown but predetermined, while his ambivalence towards the adequacy of this as the only explanation allows him to claim a certain degree of agency.

After revealing Solomon's identity, Fogg pauses the main action to tell us the story of Solomon's life. This includes Solomon's affair with Fogg's mother (one of the students in his freshman history class) that led to his dismissal, and a ten-page summary of a juvenile novel written by him in his teens — a valuable "psychological document" about how the absent father influenced the son's imagination (256).¹⁶ Solomon's life-story continues for 35 pages (231-264) before Fogg returns to where he left off, when he had just met Solomon and had no idea this man was his father.

¹⁶ Fogg believes there is "a personal motive" behind Solomon's choice of research topics as a historian: for example, "the mythology of the American West" is him fantasising about the place where his father supposedly disappeared (256). Fogg does not spell out the implication of this observation for his own life-story and his own (absent) father. Shiloh suggests that Fogg and Solomon's journey to Utah in search of the cave Effing once lived in (which was cut short by Solomon's death) "is the narrative concretisation of their yearning for the absent father" (129) — history seems to repeat itself in these three generations.

Later, we reach the point in the story when Solomon tells Fogg the story of his life while in the hospital: “Those were the days when the story spilled out of him” (286). This relieves first-time readers of any foreknowledge and recovers our temporal alignment with the protagonist Fogg.

Temporal folding as a form of prolepsis is a repeated structure in Fogg’s narrative that offers the opportunity to narrate events more than once — a pleasure for the storyteller. There are other instances in the novel where Fogg uses temporal folding and thereby disrupts readers’ identification with the protagonist Fogg, such as when he explains Victor’s death (revealing it on page 2 before reaching that point in the story again on page 18) and when he explains his trip to Utah (270, 294). The story “thickens” as a result of these “folds”, but without becoming convoluted because everything is consistently narrated from the narrator Fogg’s point of view, which is also seemingly aligned with the protagonist Fogg’s point of view. Within these “folds”, readers are simultaneously aware of what the protagonist Fogg did not yet know then and what he as narrator already knows now. The narrator Fogg, in contrast to his younger self, is never caught by surprise and controls when and what to reveal. He is in suspense, not in the sense that Sternberg uses the word regarding the future of the narrated events, but in the sense that he is uncertain about how to choose between rival interpretations of them. The effect of surprise is confined to the protagonist Fogg and the readers, whose immersive experience is eroded by these repeated anticipations.

Readers are privileged over the protagonist Fogg by having access, in principle, to the “future”; that is, by being able to flip ahead in the book. The element of surprise is experienced differently for first- and second-time readers — the latter are able to recognise clues that foreshadow later events, as if in the role of a

detective. For example, at their first meeting, after revealing something that he had never told anyone else before, Solomon says to Fogg: “I feel there’s a bond between us now” (265). The “bond” can refer to the way Effing brought them together and also to their kinship. Solomon had already suspected the truth of their relationship at this first meeting (230). The hint, however, is followed by the protagonist Fogg’s bland reply: “It’s been a memorable weekend” (265). Solomon’s identity is already revealed at this point in the novel, but the narrator Fogg does not spell out the hidden meaning of Solomon’s expression.¹⁷ The scene is focalised through the protagonist Fogg, but readers inhabit the same position as the narrator Fogg and are made aware of the layered significance of the discursive representation. Quoting himself instead of narrating what he said, the narrating-I retreats behind the experiencing-I so as to maintain a consistent perspective on the events — the retrospective logic of Fogg’s narrative is disguised as chronological.

The temporal structure of Fogg’s narrative is comparable to what Currie calls the *proleptic past perfect*: “a tense that refers to an event which is previous to another event in the past” (*Unexpected* 152). It is used when there are two events in the past and thus three instead of two (past and present) time loci. Currie uses an example from Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2006) in which the middle event is an act of recollection: “We’d been in the middle of what we later came to call the ‘tokens controversy’” (38; Currie, *Unexpected* 152). The temporal focus is on the middle event (“later”) which recalls a previous event (“the ‘tokens controversy’”), which the narrator goes on to recall from this mediating time locus rather than from the narrating present. In *Moon Palace*, despite the proleptic shift, Fogg does not

¹⁷ Gérard Genette calls this “lateral omission or *paralipsis*”, “of giving less information than is necessary in principle” (*Narrative Discourse* 195).

pause to recall from the perspective of this middle event (when Solomon was dying in the hospital and not knowing what to do next). He processes both past events (the first day they met and when they are in the hospital) from the narrating present and contemplates the significance of their sequence and timing with regard to the whole story — it is the overall shape of his autobiography that is of concern. Fogg considers the three possible times that Solomon and his uncle Victor might have crossed paths (239-242), and this is another example of him identifying “coincidences” unknown at the time. But here it is a negative coincidence because they never did meet. He ends the flashforward with a conclusion of the whole story that I quoted earlier: “That’s what the story boils down to, I think. A series of lost chances” (243).

Currie points out that the proleptic past perfect “can function both as recollection (in relation to the narrator) and as anticipation (in relation to the narrated), and even as both, [at the mediating time locus] as the recollection of anticipation” (*Unexpected* 152).¹⁸ Thus, futurity is embedded in the past to make it seem as if we are facing an open future. However, this past future is already completed. In the example about Solomon, the anticipation takes the form of the future perfect with a modal inflection. Speaking from the narrating present, Fogg says: “No one could have known what would happen; no one could have guessed the dark and terrible things that lay in store for us” (231). Readers already know from the previous page that Solomon will end up “dying in a Chicago hospital with a broken back” (230), and will assume that this is what Fogg is referring to so ominously. And yet, more than fifty pages later, Fogg reveals that his own violent

¹⁸ It can also be used to perform the seeming paradox of “remembered forgetting” (Currie, *Unexpected* 153), which is something we find in Lydia Davis’s *The End of the Story* (1995). The narrator is aware that she forgets but not what she forgets.

reaction to the revelation of Solomon's identity indirectly caused the latter to fall down a grave pit and break his back (284). It is, in other words, this symbolic killing of the father that Fogg was (also) darkly hinting at. Creating suspense, Fogg uses the hypotheticality of the future perfect and takes advantage of what Currie describes as the power of narrative "to stage the co-existence of doubt and certainty", "to join the uncertainty of prospect to the certainty of retrospect" in which contingency is kept afloat (*Unexpected* 103). Fogg claims that what happened was unforeseeable and implies that it was therefore unavoidable and "unaccountable", both in the sense that contingency defies comprehension and that the necessity absolves all the people involved of any responsibility.

"It all happened so fast," Fogg says (284). It didn't matter whether Solomon fled because Fogg was raving at him "like a madman", and "must have stumbled on a stone or a depression in the ground" which precipitated the fall (284).¹⁹ It didn't matter because it could not have been prevented — the unexpectedness foregrounds the protagonist Fogg's perspective and obscures the way the simultaneous sense of inevitability is based on the narrator Fogg's posterior, retrospective interpretation. The time of the future is folded into the time of the past, masquerading as the past, as "truth". Claiming Solomon's fall and his later death as inevitable, Fogg's interpretation is self-exculpatory. His earlier statement — "No one could have known..."(231) — depicts them both as innocent actors who are devoid of agency and victims of fate. The later revelation justifies the ominous foreshadowing, but with Fogg's self-justification smuggled into the realm of truth as well. The final

¹⁹ The scene of Solomon's fall is described as a surreal experience: "The sun was at the top of the sky ... the whole cemetery was shimmering with a strange, pulsing glare, as if the light had grown too strong to be real" (284). Fogg's reference to insanity and his use of animal metaphors in this passage — Solomon fleeing "like some injured animal"; "His arms ... flapping like wings" (284) — suggest an attempt to separate this "accident" from his otherwise sane and human narrative.

words of his narrative — “This is where I start ... this is where my life begins” (298) — suggest the attempt to enter adulthood with a clean slate.

Bending the temporal frame of reference, Fogg distributes knowledge across time in such a way that the question of certainty or truth is addressed as a question of time. Currie points out that prolepsis “offers a significant resource for the description of crossovers between time and truth in narrative” (*Unexpected* 137). The crossovers produce a sense of seamlessness in which the assumed correspondence between time and truth becomes a rhetorical resource. “Truth” here includes what happened and the interpretation of what happened. Interpretation is inevitably involved in narrative representation and this raises its ethical stakes. Discourse time can manufacture what is true on the representational level of the text: what is not yet revealed in the narrative is what has not yet happened, which is understood as what is not yet, but eventually will be, “true”. The rhetorical implication is that what *is* revealed — including what happened, how, and why — is assumed to be what is true.

In the above example, we already know what happened (Solomon’s fatal fall). What is not yet known includes the how (Fogg’s violent reaction and Solomon’s stumble) and the why — the human quest for meaning (it was unavoidable, the working of “fate”). Once we reach this point in the story and are given a full account of the fatal fall, Fogg’s narrative transforms the hypothesis of the how and why into “truth”. I mentioned earlier Fogg’s rhetorical use of prophecy masks the backshadowing in his storytelling. But these “predictions” are not only guilty of covertly imposing a retrospective logic — “fate” replaces human agency and thus disposes of accountability. The appeal to providence is especially pronounced near the end, when his car is stolen along with most of his inheritance: “It was a prank of the gods, an act of divine malice whose only object was to crush

me” (297). This passage is focalised through the protagonist Fogg, and the narrator Fogg does not challenge or relativise his younger self’s claim.

The ethical implications of Fogg’s narrative strategy can be further explained with Morson’s distinction among three kinds of contingency: “free will”, “[a]bsolute chance”, and what he calls “[c]ontingency in the narrow sense” — “Given what happened before, only some things, but not every thing, can happen. And yet *more than one* thing can happen” (*Prosaics and Other Provocations* 37-38; original emphasis). We can apply this distinction to understand Fogg’s equivocal use of contingency that is both logical and self-exculpatory — he invokes contingency in the sense of absolute chance and consequently eliminates the possibility of free will, that he had “no choice” but to act the way he did. Fogg presents himself as a victim of fate and suppresses his guilt for the role he played leading to his father’s death. In summing up Solomon’s juvenile novel as “a complex dance of guilt and desire” (256), where the protagonist murders his father but is then savagely killed by wolves, he himself also exhibits such mixed feelings about his relation to Solomon.

The implied inevitability of Fogg’s autobiography carries a sense of oughtness that is at the same time not final or exclusive — what happened both was and was not meant-to-be. There is a resistance to the necessity of Fogg’s interpretations within the text. The constructedness of his life-story does not exclude alternative interpretations that can also be “true”, that is, have integrity. The artifice of narrative both fulfills and frustrates the desire for story, “story” as signifying completeness and a sense of closure but also as revealing the integrity of the narrative as imposed and constructed rather than found or absolute. The limitations of narrative in representing experience do not make the project of autobiography doomed to fail. It is not simply a matter of mimetic accuracy or a claim of virtue, but

of what this particular act of life-storytelling does, for the writer's sense of self and to communicate her/his personality to others. It is autobiographers themselves who need to defend the integrity of their own life-stories. Fogg offers a fairly coherent explanation of the unexpected turn of events, privileging neither chance or fate. However, the authorial level of the novel invokes Morson's "contingency in the narrow sense" (*Prosaics* 38) to imply that this particular life-story is only one among many possible stories that his experiences can be formed into. Only from this implicit, reflexive dimension is true contingency realised in *Moon Palace*.

5. CONTINGENCY AND INTEGRITY

Ultimately, I want to suggest, the worldview presented in Auster's novel and his fiction in general subscribes to this specific sense of contingency, the way that "*more than one* thing can happen" (Morson, *Prosaics* 38; original emphasis). This applies both on the story level and the discourse level, that is, the interpretation of the represented events is plural and non-exclusive. Contingency constitutes the narrative integrity of both Fogg's autobiography and the novel, but it operates differently for their separate communicative purposes. The value of contingency resists what Morson calls *chronocentrism*, "the natural egotism attendant on taking one's own time as special" (*Narrative* 13). Morson does not confine this ethical pluralism to the representational level of the text but extends it to the rhetorical dimension of fiction in which the use of sideshadowing encourages a kind of "intellectual pluralism", that is, to practice "a more dialogic approach to alternative values and perspectives held by people unlike ourselves" (ibid 14). We can apply this to the project of autobiography, in which the tension between aesthetics and ethics inherent in self-representation is treated, not by insisting on the absolute truth of the life-story, but

by recognising that there are multiple truths — multiple forms of integrity — in coexistence.

Coincidence is a rich resource for storytelling — it can mean nothing, but also anything. It provides an entry point to explore the plurality of meaning that can be assigned to experience. Alford describes this as the “chanceness” of coincidences, “a Borgesian Aleph that gives one a glimpse into the mysterious structure of the universe” (62). The sense of mystery offers a certain freedom to interpret coincidences at will by suggesting, paradoxically, both absolute chance and a hidden design. However, this ramification of possibilities also poses a challenge to storytelling and the project of autobiography. Sequentiality, as a requirement of the narrative form, erodes and evacuates the multiplicity of contingency. Jorge Luis Borges’s story “The Aleph” (1945) reflects on this dilemma: “What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive” (26).

Alford emphasises the role of memory, which is required for conceiving chanceness: “it allows us to hold up two seemingly non-simultaneous, yet eerily linked events and see them in their atemporal connectedness” (62).²⁰ The associative logic of memory allows us to sustain a constellation of meaning instead of ordering them into a temporal sequence. Fogg is influenced by his uncle Victor to practice a form of meaning-making that operates on this kind of associative logic. He recalls that Victor “found meanings where no one else would have found them, and then, very deftly, he turned them into a form of clandestine support” (6). Both of them relish creating meaning out of associations, the way a thought can “giv[e] way to

²⁰ We can compare this with Jung’s idea of synchronicity that I quoted earlier: “the simultaneous occurrence of two meaningfully but not causally connected events” (36). Alford is suggesting that memory provides us with the capacity to conceive of a non-synchronous equivalent of this network.

another, spiralling into ever larger masses of connectedness” (31-32). Fogg often spends time doing this by looking at the sign of the Chinese restaurant “Moon Palace” that he can see from an oblique angle from the window of his apartment, associating it with Victor’s band (“Moon Men”), who are traveling out west, and so with the West and the war with Native Americans, and so on (32). Another significant example is Victor explaining the aptness of Fogg shortening his name from “Marco Stanley” to “M.S.”, as in “manuscript”, originally to avoid bullying: “Every man is the author of his own life ... The book you are writing is not yet finished. Therefore, it’s a *manuscript*. What could be more appropriate than that?” (7; added emphasis).²¹ Victor’s comment here is indicative of the self-determination and free will implied in the project of autobiography, the way one forms rather than finds the meaning of one’s life. The life-story is the product of this process that is performed at a certain juncture of one’s life and is singular to that moment in time.

The limit of narrative’s ability to re-present the contingency of life concerns its requirement for coherence and its demand for readability, which tend “to reduce an endless ramification to a line and thereby to transform contingency into necessity” (Morson, *Narrative* 157). Harpham makes a similar point, but frames it as an ethical critique about the narrative transformation of *is* into *ought-to-be*: “if narrative is powerless to render either *is* or *ought*, it can, and ceaselessly does, figure a process of turning from a disjunction of the two, through resistance, towards their union” (*Getting It Right* 182; original emphasis).²² We can use the term integrity to

²¹ Fogg was made aware by “[a] few wits” that M.S. also refers to the disease multiple sclerosis. But rather than regarding this additional meaning in a negative way, he “welcomed any added associations or ironies that I could attach to myself” (7).

²² Harpham cites Genette to suggest that “description” functions for the representation of what *is*, “sermons” for the prescriptiveness of *ought*, and narrative figures somewhere in between (*Getting It Right* 182).

conceptualise this tension between “union” and “resistance”. Harpham is right to emphasise the antithetical forces within narrative that both desires and resists the end, in which formal completion is the termination of this play.²³ Fogg names contingent events as “coincidences”, and the ambivalent interpretation of this category — as pure accidents and as meaningful accidents — allows him to maintain this play. It is an equivocation which sees both chance and fate as the determining forces of his life-story, and Fogg privileges neither the emptiness of contingency nor the absoluteness of necessity. I suggest that the ethical integrity of his autobiography is its resistance to an either-or resolution. However, the formal integrity of Fogg’s autobiography is thus compromised to a certain degree by simultaneously and paradoxically appealing to both chance and fate.

The authorial rhetoric of the novel uses the compromised integrity of Fogg’s autobiography to demonstrate the limits of using contingency to account for the meaning of life. Contingency, as also the narrative integrity of the novel’s authorial act of communication, is different from the way it functions in the narratorial communicative act. The formal integrity of the text is demonstrated by being a completed work of art — the represented events, including Fogg’s narration, have reached a certain stop. The ethical integrity of Auster’s novel is performed through its rhetorical dimension, which goes beyond truth claims on the representational level or the evaluation of Fogg’s narratorial honesty or self-awareness. It implies that Fogg’s life-story as presented here is contingent, despite being coherent and having integrity in some degree — there is *more than one* story that can be formed from his

²³ We can relate this to Peter Brooks’s discussion of plot, in which “[t]he desire of the text (the desire of reading) is ... desire for the end”, for “the right end” (104). Brooks’s reading of Freud points out the provisionality of this end, “which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading” (109). This prospective outlook is something that I emphasise as well.

experiences. The value of contingency acknowledges the other possibilities that are not present, not written, and unknown.

Fogg buries Solomon in Chicago next to his mother and his uncle Victor, and then drives aimlessly for twelve hours before discovering that he is heading west, in the direction of their original destination, Utah, to look for Effing's cave. Fogg says: "In the morning, I understood that chance had taken me in the right direction" (294). This sentiment is applicable to all the sudden and unexpected turns of events and all the people he happens to meet and befriend — all retrospectively regarded as "right". His search for the cave is unsuccessful, but then again Fogg never expected to find it in the first place. Just as he starts to ponder what to do next, Fogg discovers that his car has been stolen and that "the decision was suddenly taken out of my hands" (296). The unexpectedness of the theft highlights once again his lack of agency and throws into relief implied assumptions about what should and should not happen. Contingency is taken as the rule or rhythm of life but it is also upsetting — both emotionally and formally for his life-story.

The protagonist Fogg is caught off guard, but the narrator Fogg knows that this will happen and how it will end. *His* narrative is more expansive in the sense that it contains dual perspectives — both his younger self's original expectations (that his car and money won't be stolen and thus that what happened was an "error") and the assurance of retrospect. From the narrator Fogg's perspective, we are given an itinerary of his trek to the Pacific coast, a log of the sequence and duration of each stop: "By the end of the first month ... A few days later ... ten or twelve days ... for a week... Three days later..." (297). Finally, at "four o'clock in the afternoon" of January 6, 1972, Fogg takes off his boots to feel the sand of Laguna Beach, California, against the soles of his feet (297). He stays until the full moon rises from

behind the hills, “not turning away until it had *found its place* in the darkness” (298; added emphasis). The mention of *finding one’s place* signifies the theme of every autobiography: to discover the place each person, event, thing will rightly fit in the story of one’s life. What is not spelled out on the narratorial level but implied on the authorial level of the text is that this “place” is always already contingent.

The end of Fogg’s story marks the beginning of the rest of his life, and the novel gestures towards an open future as it is coming to an end. This echoes a passage earlier in the novel: “down was up, the last was the first, the end was the beginning” (61). We can find the closure Fogg obtains at the end of his life-story in the beginning of the novel, which I quoted earlier: “chance as a form of readiness” (1). “Chance” can be understood as referring to the unexpected, the unknown, and the unforeseeable, not just as the paradoxical twin of “fate”. Thus, to be ready for chance is, in other words, to be ready for the future. We do not know how Fogg fares with this outlook and can only imagine how he would recollect the incoming future. The novel leaves readers with this lingering anticipation of the future that is to come, the suspense of waiting for the unexpected as we do in real life.²⁴

I would like to carry this sense of the unexpected into the next and following chapters. The desire to narrate as a form of meaning-making is provoked by encountering the unexpected. One can also experience surprise during the act of narrative. Fogg’s reaction to the unexpected equivocates between a desire for certainty and a resistance to know. In the following chapters, we see different responses to the unexpected: as a shock that needs to be overcome in order to recover consistency, as something that cannot be comprehended but can be

²⁴ We can find a similar sentiment in Auster’s novel *In the Country of Last Things*, which ends with a promise that remains to be fulfilled: “Once we get to where we are going, I will try to write to you again, I promise” (188). We do not hear from Anna Blume again, but we do see her flitting presence in *Moon Palace* as the girl who Zimmer is in love with (86).

coherently formalised, and as something that is countered through metaleptic framing. Surprise comes in different forms and what is “surprising” depends upon the person and their expectations about life. In the texts I discuss in the following chapters, we see the way more self-conscious narrators overcome the unexpected by transforming life into narrative, ways in which the process of writing is itself transformative.

Chapter III

The Consistency of the Norm:

Self-Revelations in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*

“I’m aiming to tell the truth; though mistakes are, I suppose, inevitable. And if I make them, at least I’m in good company.”

— *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), p. 96.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nearly three decades after the publication of *Flaubert’s Parrot* in 1984, Julian Barnes revisited the device of unreliable narration in his 2011 Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Sense of an Ending*.¹ These two novels, each with a first-person narrator who makes questionable interpretations of the events he has witnessed, are in part a homage to Ford Madox Ford, whose *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion* (1915) Barnes greatly admires. Barnes’s description of the themes of Ford’s novel applies to his own: “the unreliability of fact, the shiftiness of identity, the vast emotional confusions, the driving power of sex and love, the grand hopes and frequent disappointments” (“The Saddest Story”, par. 9). Barnes has written about the nature of memory and its relationship with identity over the years in both fictional and non-fictional forms, such as in his novel *England, England* (1998) and memoir *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (2008). In *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending*, these issues are dealt with in the form of fictional autobiography, which

¹ Barnes’s latest novel *The Only Story* (2018) also has a middle-aged man recalling his life, which centres around his affair with an older woman since the age of nineteen. The novel share certain thematic concerns with *Flaubert’s Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending*; however, since it includes a mix of first-, second-, and third-person narration, the 2018 novel is beyond the scope of this thesis, which focuses on first-person narratives.

uses the limited perspective of the first-person narrator to highlight certain aspects of self-representation — in this case, the unreliability of memory and the recourse to the norm.

There is a tension between conventionality and individuality that is characterised in both *Flaubert's Parrot* and *The Sense of an Ending*. These two novels' narrators have their own idiosyncrasies, but both are also stereotypically white, single, male, and undeniably English. They use their cultural knowledge as the basis for a kind of kinship with their narratees, invoking general truths and their supposed irrefutability. The narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot*, Geoffrey Braithwaite, circuitously reveals his own life-story in the process of completing a biography of Gustave Flaubert. *The Sense of an Ending* confronts the project of autobiography more directly and is better suited for my purposes — the narrator Tony Webster reflects upon his own unreliable memory and the way it undermines the truths of all life-stories. Webster resorts to familiar values when he is confronted with unexpected revelations about his past, using established forms of deduction which nevertheless result in false judgments. His conformity with the norm and insistence on his own normality operate on a principle of consistency; this formal coherence, however, is not a reflection of the correctness of his interpretations but rather a symptom of his unreliability. Webster is an unreliable narrator not because he is inconsistent, but because his valuing of consistency significantly prejudices his interpretations of both past and present events.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Webster is a retired divorcee who occupies his time with half-finished, half-hearted projects. He leads a habituated life in London and prides himself on having settled into a normal and innocuous routine. This late-life comfort is interrupted when Webster is notified of an unexpected bequest from

the mother of his ex-girlfriend Veronica Ford, whom he dated in university. Mrs Ford had instructed her lawyer to give Webster five-hundred pounds and the diary of his friend Adrian Finn, who killed himself forty years ago. While Veronica and Adrian had dated briefly after she and Webster broke up, he is puzzled — as are first-time readers — as to how and why Mrs Ford had gained possession of Adrian’s diary. The diary is withheld by Veronica, who despite her mother’s will refuses to hand it over to Webster. This sets the stage for the novel’s main action, which takes place in its second and final chapter and revolves around Webster’s unrelenting pursuit of Ford to obtain what he believes to be rightfully his. In the process, Webster inadvertently discovers, “to my consternation” (112), errors and omissions in his memory that call into question the account of his life given in the first chapter of the novel. New revelations about the past force him to reconstruct his own life-story and along with it his responsibility for other people’s fate.

Michiko Kakutani, in *The New York Times* book review, describes Barnes’s novel as a “psychological detective story” (“Life in Smoke and Mirrors” par. 2); Rachel Carroll sees it as “a kind of upmarket ‘tale of the unexpected’” (159). Suspense and surprise play significant roles in the novel’s plot and are distributed across narrated time, narration time, and reading time. There are unexpected developments for the young Webster in the past, for the older Webster in the present, and for both first- and second-time readers. First-time readers’ sense of surprise may be aligned with Webster’s surprise, but second-time readers would be less impressionable, given we already know what is not yet revealed to him. Barnes’s novel distributes information in an order that is rhetorically significant — it shows the kind of misjudgments one arrives at when given incomplete information (which can only be recognised as “incomplete” retrospectively) and the application of

normative logic when treating ambiguities in such situations. Webster, upon receiving new information that challenges the correctness of his understanding of past events, integrates old and new data to produce a new narrative interpretation that connects what were formerly regarded as isolated events, forming them into a seemingly inevitable series. In this way, the curiosity provoked by an unexpected revelation is immediately eliminated — the explanatory force of Webster's narration fills and closes the gap opened by the surprise. However, a coherent and consistent account of the past does not guarantee a legitimate interpretation; the formal integrity of his narrative does not give it unproblematic ethical integrity. Barnes's novel shows the way time qualifies truth, which is a condition of life.

This chapter shows how Barnes's novel elicits successive acts of interpretation by Webster and by first- and second-time readers, foregrounding the distribution of knowledge over time and the issue of consistency in self-narration. The novel makes the question of reliability explicit on the narratorial level and thematises it on the authorial level, which distinguishes itself from Webster's metanarrative self-criticism. Even while Webster self-consciously revisits his own words and reassesses their (hidden) meanings, readers are prompted to scrutinise the adequacy of his conclusions and the rhetoric of his self-interpretation. There is a redirection of attention in the text from the told to the telling, from the narrative to the narration, in which Webster's reliability is framed and evaluated according to different standards. The theoretical framework of my analysis is built upon Liesbeth Korthals Altes's metahermeneutic approach, which applies Erving Goffman's frame theory and presents evaluations of reliability as a matter of selecting whose ethos and which narrative level are most relevant for interpretation.

My discussion in this chapter foregrounds time as a significant factor in interpretation, showing how the order of the revelations determines Webster's reinterpretation of past events, and arguing that the novel's design makes his repeated mistakes inevitable as well as rhetorically necessary. My aim, contrary to Wolfgang Funk's reading focused upon the represented events, is not to restore the story's coherence by producing a narrative interpretation that patches up the gaps or eliminates the ambiguities in Webster's account. I question the assumption that formal coherence is an indicator of truth, and that self-consciousness is a corrective for unreliability, an issue that I also discuss in chapter five. I suggest that Webster's repeated failures and misinterpretations are attributable to the limitation imposed by the discord between time and truth. I situate my analysis in the broad field of ethical criticism, but without claiming to offer an interpretative pathway that would produce a more ethically correct alternative to Webster's interpretation. Instead of showing how to "get it right", I question what being "right" means and how "getting it wrong" contributes to that investigation.

2. FRAMING RELIABILITY

Theories of unreliable narration have undergone a perspectival shift in the last two decades from the authorial figure of the text to the reader. In the original formulation by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), "a narrator [is] *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not" (158-159; original emphasis). The possibility of unreliable narration arises because readers may detect diverging communications in a text in which the narratorial communication is contained and implicitly evaluated by the authorial communication. Booth's theory of unreliable

narration rests upon the figure of the implied author — “an ideal, literary, created version of the real [author]” (ibid 75) — which is taken to be the source of the text’s meaning. While Booth’s use of the implied author allows a distinction between the real author and the author image that readers infer from the text, it displaces the question of reliability from the narrator to the implied author or “the norms of the work”. Instead of speculating about what is unreliable, Booth’s approach asserts that readers agree upon what is reliable, a determination that results from interpretation, however, and is therefore variable rather than universal.

The cognitive turn in narratology redirects the emphasis of critical analysis towards the reader and the reading process. Ansgar Nünning rejects the assumed authority of the implied author and proposes that “cognitive theories can shed light on the way in which readers naturalise texts that are taken to display features of narrational unreliability” (“Reconceptualising the Theory, History and Generic Scope of Unreliable Narration” 46). Nünning applies Jonathan Culler’s idea of “naturalisation”, the way that readers resolve textual ambiguities by bringing the text “into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and legible” (Culler 162). This pragmatic and cognitive approach examines the interpretative frames that readers adopt in processing narrational unreliability, such as by consulting our knowledge of standard human behaviours or the conventions of literary genres. The emphasis is on the application of readers’ existing knowledge and the “literary frames of reference” activated (Nünning, “Reconceptualising” 48). Nünning expects readers to be able to detect “the structure and norms established by the respective work itself” and read against an unreliable narrator if thus determined (ibid 48). Korthals Altes finds that there is an internal conflict in this formulation, given that Nünning’s reader-oriented approach focuses

on what readers bring *to* the text that would question the narrator's reliability, rather than evaluating it as such against norms attributed to the text itself (150).

Bruno Zerweck, calling for "a second fundamental paradigm shift", proposes to examine cultural and historical factors that influence individual interpretative strategies for narratorial unreliability, widening the discussion to the field of cultural studies (151). This approach emphasises the diversity of the text's reading environments and encourages the exploration of different ways of seeing. For Korthals Altes, this historicising move brings the issue of reliability into the field of metahermeneutics — the reconstruction of readers' interpretative processes, especially of interest when there are conflicting interpretations of the same piece of work. Korthals Altes emphasises the importance for critics to recognise our own value-laden positions as "a constitutive aspect" of the investigation rather than an unwanted liability (43). In analysing normativity in fields such as postcolonial and feminist studies, there are "differences in degrees of reflexivity and objectivation (which is not to be confounded with objectivity)" (ibid 44). Awareness of the limits of our objectivity is constructive, because it demonstrates the importance of responding to ambiguity and subjectivity with curiosity instead of intolerance. Metahermeneutics addresses questions of *how* and *why*, and this is useful for investigating the project of autobiography — how one makes sense of oneself and the reason for that singular narrative interpretation to *work*, that is, have integrity.

On the issue of reliability and the construction of narrative truth, Korthals Altes uses Goffman's notion of *frame* to address the different degrees of authenticity in a work of fiction. Frames are tools that "allow individuals or groups 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' events and occurrences, thus rendering meaning, organising experiences, and guiding actions" (Korthals Altes 33). Werner Wolf also

uses frame theory to analyse narrative across media, summing up succinctly that frames function “to guide and even to enable interpretation” (3). The “plasticity” of the concept allows it to designate both a relatively stable frame of reference, such as stereotyping used in everyday situations, and the dynamic embeddings and ruptures that “open up new perspectives and contribute to the emergence of new frames” (Wolf 4). Korthals Altes’s metahermeneutic approach seeks to reconstruct readers’ interpretative pathways by examining the factors that influence their selection amongst alternative interpretative frames.

Korthals Altes examines the paratextual and textual signals that would trigger what she calls a “frame switch” (151). This concept is useful for the discussion of unreliable narration, which is characterised by a redirection of attention from the narratorial to the authorial communication circuit. Frame switch happens when certain signals cue readers to attend to a different narrative level than the one with which they are engaged, for example, abandoning their suspension of disbelief and recognising the characters as artificial constructs. Korthals Altes proposes that frame switch involves the question of “whose ethos” is foregrounded, which determines “what kind of ethical questions become relevant and for what interpretative and evaluative regimes [that] one considers appropriate” (134). Ethos is constructed by the audience according to “character effects that coincide to create a trustworthy image of the speaker” (ibid 3). Differentiating between the narratorial ethos and the authorial ethos allows readers to process the possible divergence of their communicative intents and examine the dynamics of this relationship.

In the case of unreliable narrators, textual signals such as verbal tics or inconsistencies redirect readers’ attention from the represented events to the act of representation and the questionable authority of its claim to narrative truth.

Ultimately, Korthals Altes sees this redirection as “prompt[ing] us to ask about the author’s communicative intentions and ethos” (151). Authors can adopt different “postures” in their social activities that would influence readers’ constructions of the authorial ethos and our interpretations of the text. Other works in the author’s oeuvre and generic framing of the text by publishers also have the power to influence our judgments. Korthals Altes’s study considers the hybrid genres of life writing that have proliferated since the last decades of the twentieth century and examines the interpretative pathways of readers who produce antithetical interpretations of the same text and the authorial ethos. Writers such as Michel Houellebecq, Philip Roth, Dave Eggers and Karl Ove Knausgård produce works that challenge the existing norms of narrative fiction and the boundaries between life and art.

Korthals Altes’s analyses of authorial and narratorial ethos are applicable to my discussion of fictional autobiographies and at the same time inverted within the sphere of fiction. These autodiegetic narrators adopt certain authorial postures when telling their life-stories in order to ensure they possess rhetorical credit — they need to evince a certain degree of trustworthiness to have their stories interpreted as personal and (fictionally) true. This can be done by demonstrating their good character and good will, expertise and knowledge, socio-political status, physical power and attraction.² When readers switch to consider the authorial level of communication, the issues that become relevant include the character narrator as a representative of certain social groups, cultural and ideological value systems, etc., and the discursive form or formalisation of these themes. Instead of the real author’s ethos, however, my discussion of fictional autobiographies is primarily concerned

² Korthals Altes identifies these areas under the category of “ethos topoi” — “culturally recognised grounds for rhetorical credit” (62).

with the narratorial ethos as a representation of the authorial ethos, which is in accordance with the idea of fictional autobiography as a representation of autobiography.

There are textual signals in Barnes's novel that can prompt readers to attend to a different narrative level or, in Korthals Altes's terms, to switch frames and adopt a different reading strategy. These are commonly called "signals of unreliability" — gaps, incoherence or inconsistencies in the narrative. What I want to bring to the discussion of unreliability, in continuation of my analysis in the previous chapter on Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*, is the element of time. My concern is the way readers' constructions of the narratorial ethos are modified successively in the reading process, changes that are triggered by the narrator's own metanarrational comments and, from a different perspective, regulated by the authorial plot design. First- and second-time readers construct the narratorial ethos differently, and this is especially significant for the kind of detective fiction or "tale of the unexpected" to which Barnes's novel is related — the way that truth is regulated by time and time qualifies truth.

Wolfgang Funk formulates a different theoretical model for the issue of reliability that is characterised in contemporary novels, using *metareference* and *reconstruction* as key concepts to analyse the dialectic relationship between experience and its representation in which the question of realism is replaced by the question of authenticity. Funk proposes an "aesthetics of reconstruction" in which the "reader's response and responsibility to recreate a coherent act of literary communication" is identified as "the authenticity effect of the text" (6). In this framework, authenticity is an effect produced by readers' interactions with the text, whose structural indeterminacy requires our participation in meaning making.

Metareferential clues rupture the narrative fabric and render the text alone insufficient to recuperate narrative coherence, and Funk sees this as calling for “an aesthetics of participation and mutuality” (7).

The main goal in Funk’s model is to construct a narrative interpretation of the represented content that would resolve ambiguities left unaddressed on the narratorial level. Instead of “unreliable narration”, Funk proposes to describe the text as having an “implicit narrative” — a *“storyline which is never overtly mentioned in the text but which must be reconstructed by the reader from apparent contradictions and omissions or insinuations ‘unintentionally’ dropped by the narrator”* (185; original emphasis). Readers construct such implicit narratives by selecting which omissions and ambiguities are more important than others, producing a narrative that is more “authentic” to them than the narrator’s account by having addressed the foregrounded gaps or inconsistencies.³ According to Funk, narratorial unreliability is the result of “an oscillation between rival and formally equivalent narrative versions of the same underlying set of events and circumstances” (187).⁴ Funk suggests a possible implicit narrative for Barnes’s novel, that Webster had a sexual encounter with the mother of his then girlfriend Veronica during his weekend stay with the family and is the real father of the illegitimate child instead of his friend Adrian (185). Funk is not arguing that this explanation is the true one, but only that “[i]t is structurally impossible to opt for one particular version of events solely based on the

³ This resonates with Korthals Altes’s model, which foregrounds readers’ selection of an appropriate evaluative framework based on whose ethos is most relevant for interpretation.

⁴ This corresponds to Korthals Altes’s discussion of the experience of art, which is constituted by “the cognitive oscillation about how to frame a particular event or artefact” (165). The audience selects a certain frame that would stabilise this “cognitive oscillation” in a way that befits the chosen evaluative framework. I would want to emphasise that there is more than one way to stabilise or to formalise this oscillation. The similarities of argument between Korthals Altes and Funk, in works published one year apart, is a telling indication of common concerns among contemporary writers and the direction of literary criticism. A detailed comparison of their approaches might yield theoretical and cultural insights, but is beyond the scope of this chapter.

evidence presented in the book” and reject another that is also inferred from the same set of (incomplete and ambiguous) materials (185).

Funk’s analytical model reconceptualises unreliability as a question of “authenticity” and foregrounds the text’s interactive potential — what is authentic to the narrator may not be authentic to the reader, and this invites and encourages readers to actively participate in reconstructing the represented content. However, the model shifts the emphasis from the act of narration to the narrated events, separating the representational logic from the representation itself, and overlooks the negotiation between what is represented and how it is represented that is a fundamental concern of theories of unreliable narration. In foregrounding the metareferential element of fiction published in the new millennium, Funk’s model takes too permissive an approach to narrative ambiguity, because what is considered to be implied in the text can be boundless.

My discussion of Barnes’s novel adopts an evaluative rather than a representational analytical framework, in which coherence is an object of investigation and not a criterion. Signals of unreliability in Barnes’s novel are visible on the authorial level, but not necessarily on the narratorial level. This distinction is important because it foregrounds the embedded narrative perspectives within the text — an internal resistance to endorsing a single interpretation of the events, which is what Webster’s narration seeks. At the end of Barnes’s novel, Webster regards his understanding of the events as coherent and final. However, when we reframe the novel and foreground the authorial communication circuit, questions arise about a tension between the formal and the ethical integrity of his narrative. Foregrounding the authorial ethos invites reflections upon Webster’s conclusion, the way that

formal coherence and consistency does not necessarily render his interpretations infallible or absolute.

Korthals Altes uses frame theory to develop James Phelan's model of character functions into three different reading strategies, which are distinguished according to "their modes for framing character" (Korthals Altes 132).⁵ Each reading strategy selects certain aspects of the text as most relevant to interpretation and applies an appropriate evaluative framework accordingly. A mimetic reading engages with characters "as if they were real people" in which "(folk) psychological and moral frameworks are fully appropriate"; a thematic reading "connect[s] character to frameworks involving various kinds of conceptual knowledge ... generalising a character's meaning or taking it to function within an argument"; and a synthetic reading directs "analytical attention to the means of representation themselves" and evaluates characters according to how they operate in the construct of the work as a whole (ibid 132-133). The object of analysis differs in these three reading strategies. The act of analysis itself can also take place within the fiction, which is what we find in Barnes's novel. Webster's self-consciousness introduces a narrative perspective that is different from his narrated self and also his previous narrating self, drawing attention to alternative interpretations of his own words and the arguments against assuming any one of them as "right".

Adopting a thematic or a synthetic reading strategy considers the point of Barnes's novel to be the characterisation of an unreliable narrator — we shift interpretative frames to process not just *what* Webster tells us but *how*. This foregrounds Webster as a representative of certain cultural values and as part of an

⁵ Phelan's three character functions are the *mimetic*, when "characters work as representations of possible people"; the *thematic*, when they are understood "as representative of larger groups or ideas"; and the *synthetic*, when they are considered "as artificial constructs within the larger construct of the work" (*Living to Tell About It* 12-13).

artificial but integrated construct, i.e. Barnes's novel, which has a different communicative purpose compared to the narratorial act. Webster reflects upon his own interpretations in light of new information, speculating that they may function "to apportion blame" or "to avoid being hurt" (35, 142). But we need to distinguish between evaluations of his own narrative on this metanarratorial level and those on the authorial level of the text. Barnes's novel offers a representation of a morally flawed character narrator and evaluates his narration without arriving at the same conclusion. The authorial communicative act does not either endorse or condone his interpretations; rather, the layeredness of narrative communication involves a more complicated dynamics between the different perspectives that co-exist within the text, and it is important to examine them more closely. Webster anticipates potential criticism about the possible misrepresentation of himself and other people, but there is a limit to this pre-emptive strategy. Besides the critical distance assumed by the novel's authorial communicative act, readers exercise our own judgment and revise our interpretations in light of new discoveries in reading and rereading, discoveries that are not confined to what is explicitly identified by Webster himself. Unlike the timelessness of Webster's existence as a fictional character, readers may arrive at a more in-depth understanding of his narrative and the whole novel in the renewable act of reading.

In the rest of the chapter, I analyse Barnes's novel by switching between interpretive frames and foregrounding certain aspects of the text as most relevant to my discussion. These can be the represented events, Webster's narrative representation, and the rhetorical implications of his narrative strategy. My discussion, instead of structured according to these three different aspects, proceeds thematically and centres around the idea of consistency, as both a formal and an

ethical quality that functions as the narrative integrity of Webster's autobiography. Consistency is what allows his life-story, as an interpretation of himself and his own life, to *work*, that is, have integrity. On the authorial level, consistency is interpreted differently. I suggest that Barnes's novel uses Webster's repeated misinterpretations not only to characterise a morally flawed narrator, but also to throw into relief the commonplace nature of his mistakes — the prevalence of such mistakes, including their normative logic, does not render them more acceptable.

3. GETTING IT WRONG

Barnes's novel engages with the experience of ageing and late-life reckoning, which involves the interaction between time and memory where one undermines the other. It shows the unsettling experience of having life-long truths exposed as falsehood, with the resulting sense of shock and resignation in response to change. From a different perspective, however, the novel treats ageing not only as its subject matter but also enacts that process — it is a novel that *ages*, in the sense that readers will never be able to recover the kind of surprise experienced in the first reading. Second-time readers, knowing that Webster's initial account of his life will be discredited, that his conclusions will be proven wrong and who is the real mother of the illegitimate child, may now interpret his candidness as self-delusional or even self-absolving. Webster himself anticipates potential criticism about his possible misrepresentations, and qualifies his own memories at the very beginning of the novel: "what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed" (3). The statement is banal enough to be quickly forgotten; but once we finish the novel and read this opening again, it stands out as an early warning — by the narrator Webster because of what he is about to reveal and also by the author

Barnes because such discrepancies can be easily overlooked with significant consequences. Webster's conventionality throws into relief the way that unjust, if prevalent, discriminations can be easily overlooked and perpetrated.

Against the idea of ageing narratives, it could be said that all novels age because rereadings will never produce the same experience as the first reading. But the change in readers' understanding of Barnes's novel has a durational aspect — it is a gradual change. Webster's re-narrativisation of the past upon receiving new information about Adrian's diary eliminates the curiosity produced by the revelation of "a *hidden gap*" (Sternberg, "Telling in Time (II)" 519; original emphasis), by immediately supplying a plausible explanation and thus rendering the case closed. I suggest that Webster's eagerness to incorporate and produce a new narrative interpretation is an attempt to render seamless the necessary revisions of his life-story — covering up the seams by overlaying it with a new narrative fabric. Webster's ability to re-member — that is, to re-assemble — the past in a coherent way has the potential to salvage his narrative authority, which is undermined by revelations that are beyond his control. However, his recovery of control and credibility is challenged repeatedly as another piece of essential information about Adrian's suicide is revealed. In this way, his narrative authority is progressively undermined as the narrative advances in spite of his self-corrections.

Webster's repeated failures to solve the mystery of Mrs Ford's bequest require readers to re-evaluate the quality of his report during the reading process. First-time readers are forced to continually recalibrate his trustworthiness or suspend our verdict of him until the very end. The question of Webster's reliability is something he himself scrutinises in the narrative. Nevertheless, his self-conscious reflections, besides giving the impression of sincerity, also have the effect of making

us doubt whether he is serious or *posing* as serious — something about which even he seems uncertain. At the end of the novel, Webster's surrendering of his agency — "I knew I couldn't change, or mend, anything now" (149) — does not settle the account but rather invites us to question the acceptability of his passiveness in spite of its pragmatism.

The identity of the mother is the supposed "spoiler" of Barnes's novel, but knowing this does not eliminate all of its ambiguities or ruin the kind of surprise it retains for second-time readers. What was once regarded as trivial detail, mere reality effect, can now be recognised as relevant in specific ways. This new relevance applies to both the representational and the rhetorical dimension of the novel. For example, Webster's self-correcting gesture is both a performance of reflective consciousness in action and a self-consciousness that has the rhetorical function of encouraging his narratee to believe he is genuinely concerned to avoid misrepresentation. Second-time readers are less impressionable and not subjected to the same surprises as the protagonist Webster; rather, we are as knowing as the narrator Webster from the start, and are in fact always ahead of him. This has consequences for how second-time readers engage with the logic, not just the content, of Webster's narrative representation — as we evaluate his deductions and retrospective rationalisations, our own evaluations also suffer from the same kind of retrospective rationalisation by virtue of knowing the end. And yet, there is already a proleptic relationship with the text for first-time readers as well, but of a different kind.

Mark Currie points out that, prior to reading, "a reader is not simply posterior to the text but also starts at its beginning and is duly sent forward by the projections" of three types of prolepsis, which are different forms of anticipation (*About Time*

32). These are *narratorial prolepsis*, which “takes place within the time locus of the narrated”; *structural prolepsis*, which refers to “the relation between narrated time and the time of narration”; and *rhetorical prolepsis*, which “takes place between the time locus of the narrator and the time locus of the reader” (ibid 31). In Barnes’s novel, there is also a rhetorical prolepsis on the narratorial level — Webster regularly anticipates the possible rejection of his interpretations by his narratee. Currie concludes that in terms of the readers’ relationship with the text, “[c]hronologically we have a line, but phenomenologically we have a loop” (ibid 32). Readers are ignorant of what has already been written and approach the text as if anterior to it. The relationship between *second-time* readers and the text can be described by revising Currie’s statement as: “chronologically we have a line, and phenomenologically we have a *double* loop”. The consequence is that readers reenact not Webster’s interpretative process but the retrospective logic of his interpretations.

The main action of Barnes’s novel has Webster narrating the events soon after they take place. He is in the process of discovery without registering it as such, assuming each revelation offers the final piece of the puzzle. This is different from Fogg in *Moon Palace*, who is in full control of the element of surprise and strategic about his revelations. The safe distance between narrating time and narrated time enhances Fogg’s authority as a provider of narrative truth. In comparison, Webster is working with incomplete information, because he has not yet reached the designated end, which is to say, learnt all there is to know about Adrian’s diary. It is not surprising that this kind of ignorance results in Webster making false judgments. As in real life, he does not know what will happen, even if what is to be revealed has already happened long ago. The issue is therefore less that Webster makes mistakes,

but that he makes them for unwarranted and misguided reasons — reasons which, I suggest, have to do with his normative value system and his dependence upon consistency as the organising principle of his narrative interpretation. The repetition of these mistakes is significant for the way it foregrounds the kinds of misinterpretation that occur in such a situation, which is, in a sense, every situation. Barnes's novel shows what happens when truth transforms into falsehood because of time, which both provides and qualifies knowledge.

In the first chapter of the novel, Webster is in full control of both when and what to reveal about his past; in the second chapter, however, when the narrated events take place close to narrating time, he can decide the way to reveal new information but not the information itself. Webster creates suspense and invites speculation when recounting his university days, wondering out loud “where is logic ... in the next moment of my story?” (40). He changes the topic in the middle of telling us he received a letter from Adrian after breaking up with Veronica. Instead of immediately revealing its content, he turns to imagine Adrian's future life as a graduate from Cambridge, musing that “[p]erhaps [civil service] would have suited Adrian” (40).⁶ Before revealing that this digression is an attempt to postpone the unpleasant news of Adrian and Veronica's relationship, which was the import of the letter, Webster credits “you”, his narratee, with having already seen through his manoeuvre: “You can probably guess that I'm putting off telling you the next bit” (40-41). By acknowledging the narratee's supposed suspicion, Webster also seeks to pre-empt criticism, as if there is nothing else wrong with his narrative besides what he has identified.

⁶ Webster's use of the hypothetical future perfect tense can be related to Fogg's use of this tense in narrating his father's accidental fall, which I discuss in the last chapter. The retrospective logic of Webster's narrative is obscured by the “co-existence of doubt and certainty” in using this tense form (Currie, *The Unexpected* 103).

Second-time readers, however, may be able to recognise a more poignant significance of this episode beyond Webster's own admission. His reflections on Adrian's possible future are not simply an evasion when we consider the latter's suicide that is revealed a few pages later. The direction of Webster's thoughts is not arbitrary but relevant to the story that he is telling — what did not happen is a foil for what did, which becomes more significant. The impression he gives of Adrian, as not “the sort who would get his name or face into the newspapers” (40), belies what he knows will happen later, when Adrian's suicide is reported in the newspaper, and who requested his suicide note be made public (48-49). Second-time readers answer to the “you” as the one who can indeed recognise that Webster is employing a delaying tactic, and also know what will be revealed in “the next bit” (41) — Adrian and Veronica's relationship, the former's suicide, and everything else the narrator Webster is ignorant of at this point in the novel.

Webster recreates for his narratee the surprise he felt at the time, but there are curious moments when a former surprise crosses over to the narrating present. At the point when Mrs Ford's lawyer tells him that the bequest includes Adrian's diary, the narrating Webster exclaims: “Adrian! How had Mrs Ford ended up with his diary?” (67). This was evidently his immediate reaction at the time, presented in free indirect discourse. However, because it is not marked as such, this gives the impression that the narrating Webster is surprised. The interjection compresses the temporal distance between the protagonist Webster and the narrator Webster, bringing the surprise closer to the narrating present and thereby heightening its effect. A similar example appears a few pages later, when Webster finds out through his own lawyer how long it takes to settle an estate: “Two years! I wasn't waiting that long for the diary” (71). Here, however, the past tense indicates that this is his former reaction. Moments such

as these modify the distance between narrated time and narrating time and blur the boundary between then and now. We can see this as a formalisation of the shifting nature of memory, transporting readers between different time loci but without clearly demarcating them. A telling moment comes near the end of the novel, when a social worker confronts Webster and asks, “Do you mind me asking who you are?” (147). Webster repeats the question to himself: “Who I am?” (147). The reiteration suggests that Webster is offended, by the social worker’s ignorance and by the way it implies that he is a nobody in spite of his sense of self-importance.

Barnes’s novel moves through a combination of suspense and surprise towards its final revelation: there had been an affair between Adrian and Mrs Ford, who had become pregnant as a result. This discovery makes Webster reconsider the esteem in which he has held Adrian ever since they met in school. His previously conclusive and overwhelmingly positive portrayal of Adrian’s character — whose clear-sightedness and “state of grace” far exceeded his averageness (87) — needs to be reconciled with Adrian’s newly revealed secret. Adrian’s suicide note had explained his rejection of life as a repudiation of the gift bestowed but never sought for in the first place (48). However, the revelation of the pregnancy and the child now presents this grand philosophical gesture as a pretext to obscure the presumed real reason for his suicide — “he was afraid of the pram in the hall” (142). Webster deems this new piece of information more decisive than all his previous experience of Adrian, reducing him to someone “who had got his girlfriend pregnant, been unable to face the consequences, and had ‘taken the easy way out’, as they used to put it” (140). His conclusion gives the impression that this is a familiar narrative, underwhelming precisely because of its conventionality and jarring with the exceptionality of Adrian’s intelligence. It is the same story as that of their mutual

schoolmate Robson, who hanged himself after getting his girlfriend pregnant (13). Webster recategorises Adrian as someone who is “[n]o more than a version of Robson” (141), stripping him of his individuality. In an added ironic twist, it turns out that the brilliant Adrian, who outdid all his schoolmates, fathered a mentally disabled son, Adrian Jr. This discovery prompts Webster to picture what life must have been like for the mother and child, appealing to his narratee to “imagine the loss, the sense of failure, the guilt” felt by the mother (139).

The identity of Adrian Jr. and his disability are revealed *before* the point at which Webster discovers the true identity of the mother, whom he first assumes to be Veronica. The order of the novel’s revelations is significant for the way it brings Webster and first-time readers closer to the truth about Adrian’s suicide without diminishing the surprise and significance of the final revelation. The identity of the mother changes the meaning of the whole affair and the role each person played. At the end of the novel, Webster establishes “the chain of responsibility” (149) that retrospectively accounts for the way each person contributed to the outcome, Adrian Jr. But even before the final revelation, each new piece of information calls for a reinterpretation of everything narrated up to that point. Carroll describes Webster’s narrative as following “a pattern of reversion”, in which the Severn Bore that he witnessed as a student figures as “a key textual motif” of the novel (167).⁷ Each new revelation prompts Webster to recall the past once again, the present rewriting the past. Later events change the meaning of previous events by incorporating them into a series of events, rather than regarding them as isolated incidents. This pattern reflects the way that retrospection is future-oriented — the future has the potential to

⁷ Michael Greaney sees the Severn Bore as “a punning allusion, conscious or otherwise, to [Webster’s] self-presentation *as* a bore, an amiable dullard whose life is scarcely worth remembering” (236; original emphasis). This impression of Webster’s self-effacement is nevertheless contrary to the way he rationalises the necessary role he played in the affair between Adrian and Mrs Ford.

change the meaning of the past and the present, and we experience this irresolution until death takes over.

Carroll addresses the representation of disability in the novel and argues that once the disabled child enters the scene, the issue of responsibility changes focus from Adrian's suicide to his son's disability. After identifying Adrian Jr., Webster changes the supposed cause of Adrian's suicide from a philosophical question to an act of cowardice, assuming Adrian lacked the "moral courage" to accept the consequences (142). One of the consequences is Adrian Jr.; however, we need to distinguish between Adrian Jr.'s existence and his disability — two aspects that I argue should not be conflated. Webster first notices the child's disability before discovering that he is Adrian's child. Once he is enlightened on both aspects, he concludes that this new information should be understood as "[t]ime's revenge on the innocent foetus" (139). An obvious interpretation of "revenge" here is to assume that it refers to Adrian Jr.'s disability, which Webster sees as having an attributable cause (in this case the product of evil wishes) rather than as something contingent. Carroll points out that "disability is attributed to maternal abnormality" in the novel (164). Indeed, when Webster believes Veronica is the mother, he assumes that "the trauma of [Adrian's] suicide had affected the child in her womb" (139). When he realises that Mrs Ford is the real mother, he produces a new deduction: "[the child] born to a mother ... at a dangerously late age. A child damaged as a result" (149). Carroll contends that the novel's design invites readers to make a further assumption that Webster does not explicitly articulate, a retrospective interpretation of Adrian's suicide: "there is an insidious logic within the narrative which seems to suggest that being the father of a son with learning disabilities is a fate which [Adrian] has 'avoid[ed] at all costs' through his suicide" (163).

Carroll acknowledges that the attribution of disability to “maternal abnormality” is made by a morally flawed character, whose “narrative perspective is not offered as unproblematic” (164, 168). Textual clues, such as different accounts of the past and Webster’s self-directed scepticism, trigger a “frame switch” and discourage readers from taking his words at face value. This foregrounds the authorial ethos, in which the novel’s authorial communicative act is understood as rejecting, not promoting, Webster’s interpretations. As “a product of his culture” (Carroll 168), Webster represents a certain cultural value system that the novel both characterises and evaluates. Nevertheless, Carroll’s criticism is also directed at the author Barnes, that “the narrative function of disability in relation to the structural and thematic design of the novel is less easy to dismiss” than the kind of misjudgment that Webster represents (168). What Carroll most strongly objects to is the decision to make Adrian Jr. *mentally* disabled, achieving the narrative irony at the expense of disability. Carroll’s interpretation of the authorial ethos as culpable for the narrative’s “insidious logic” (163) situates the novel within a value regime that foregrounds the author’s social responsibility.⁸ Webster’s responsibility is moderated because he is not the one in control of the outcome — it is Barnes who decides Adrian Jr.’s fate.

My reading of Barnes’s novel, while also addressing its “structural and thematic design” (Carroll 168), foregrounds the act of autobiography that is thematised and theorised within the text, thus interpreting the authorial ethos

⁸ This situates the novel within “the Civic World”, “with responsibility, justice, or the common good as recognised values” (Korthals Altes 74). Korthals Altes uses the six value regimes or “Worlds” identified by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot to discuss the way readers’ interpretations are conditioned according to which “World” the work in question is placed within. The other five Worlds include the Inspired World in which “creativity and originality ... are leading values”, the Domestic World which foregrounds family values, the World of Opinion which champions fame, the Industrial World which values “efficiency, zeal, and technical skills”, and the World of Commerce “with rentability as a dominant value” (ibid 74).

differently from Carroll, who sees the novel as revolving around the plot of disability as disaster. I am more concerned with Webster's thematic and synthetic character functions that contribute to the novel's engagement with issues related to self-representation, one of which is the value of consistency as a form of integrity. Consistency, as the narrative integrity of Webster's autobiography, both does and does not work — in complying with the norm, Webster does not scrutinise the “rightness” of accepting normality as a “good” that outweighs every other “good”. Recalling John Guillory's formulation of ethics as “the choice between goods” (38), Webster's narrative does not identify other “goods” besides the “good” of being normal. Other categories that he uses to process experience, such as “oddness”, all function as a foil for normality — the *only* “good”. In response to Carroll's criticism, I suggest that the problematic representation of disability is part of a coercive discourse of normality that is already in place throughout Webster's narrative. It is normality, as a “good” that operates on consistency as both a formal and an ethical quality, that I take to be the novel's main concern and what it invites us to question.

4. CONSISTENCY AND ETHOS MANAGEMENT

Barnes's novel shows the way secrets un-covered from the past call for narrative to re-cover the coherence of one's life story. Webster's reaction to the revelations is less to re-member — that is, re-assemble — the past, and more to dis-member his life-story and construct it anew — weaving a new narrative fabric that is seamless rather than patching up the gaps. For Webster himself, the secrets would have been better left undisturbed. It was never his intention to discover the affair between Adrian and Mrs Ford, even if this offers him a fuller understanding of

his friend's suicide. Webster was just trying to obtain what was legally his: Adrian's diary. When his ex-wife tries to dissuade him from pursuing the diary, Webster refuses just because "[Veronica has] stolen my stuff" (76). Ultimately, the "truth-seeker" (52) of the novel is neither Adrian nor Webster. Perhaps it is the reader who seeks "truth", "truth" in the sense that the novel's ambiguities are accounted for and evaluated according to a value system that is deemed appropriate, but keeping in mind that there is always more than one interpretative frame that is "right". In the process of "getting back my stuff" (132), Webster unexpectedly discovers additional information about other people's lives. His most surprising discovery, however, is arguably himself. Webster separates his narrated self from his narrating self and capitalises on this distinction in order to gain rhetorical credit.

New revelations about the past call for action, and one method Webster uses is recategorisation, as when he demotes Adrian from a "truth-seeker" performing a philosophical quest to "a version of Robson" (52, 141). Later revelations prove that this neat categorisation is only provisional — Adrian's extramarital affair with Mrs Ford reveals itself as a different kind of transgression from Robson's. Responding to unexpectedness by applying familiar categories proves inadequate, suggesting their limitations in processing experience and the need to modify or even reinvent them as required. Webster contrasts his "peaceable" nature with his distaste for messiness when informing us he has already made his will: "I've achieved a state of peaceableness, even peacefulness. Because I get on with things. I don't like mess, and I don't like leaving a mess" (68). This statement, however, is accompanied by an equivocating remark, "Or so I've persuaded myself" (68). In this way, Webster separates his discursive ethos from his character ethos; he self-consciously cues his narratee to register this distinction and to regard the former as more valuable or

relevant. Messiness is the antithesis of Webster's "categorical neatness" (Greaney 226). It threatens to undermine the formal integrity of his self-representation, presenting the risk of being inconsistent and therefore unreliable.

Webster also names as "odd" what is unfamiliar, i.e. what does not conform with the current situation. Used pejoratively to signify transgression, oddness represents the threat of being an outcast and the fate of rejection. Michael Greaney reviews Barnes's novels over the years and sees oddness as both his subject matter and "the structural motor or generative principle that energises his narrative designs" (226). Oddness, as something "that has been temporarily decategorised" (ibid 226), is a form of inconsistency — it draws attention to itself by being different. To develop that observation further, I want to point out that oddness depends upon what we consider to be *not* odd, or "normal". Barnes's novel questions the norm — what is accepted and acceptable as "normal" — as much as it pushes into the spotlight what is "odd". Each revelation in Barnes's novel introduces something "odd" — it can be a new piece of information waiting to be categorised or it can make categorised information appear problematic or "odd". The second scenario happens to Webster's own life-story. Revelations in the latter half of the novel prove his initial narrative to be misleading and false, enacting, not just stating, the novel's theme of late-life reckoning.

For Webster, who prides himself on his conventionality, oddness is undesirable. What he values instead is being ordinary and part of the majority, which signifies power and control. To be more precise, Webster values consistency with what is assumed to be established. As he smugly announced: "Tony was and is Tony, a man who found comfort in his own doggedness" (89). As the organising principle of Webster's autobiography, consistency represents his conformity with the

norm, even at the expense of discovering his own feelings. When dating Veronica, Webster evades her question about their future together by turning defensive, accusing her of having already decided the answer she wants without needing to consult him. He insists that his refusal to answer is due to his “peaceable” nature, rather than her assumption of being “cowardly” (35). Webster’s peaceableness not only represents a desire to harmonise rather than causing disputes, but also a desire to contribute to the collective status quo by rendering his own opinion obsolete. Webster avoids being open with Veronica, knowing that he cannot read her mind and afraid of upsetting the “consistency” of their mutual understanding — his unacknowledged goal is to *meet* her expectation, not to exceed or fall short of it.

Webster does not only value consistency in his desire to conform and harmonise, but also in his adherence to an idea of his life-story as a single construct of uniform thickness or density — in other words, he wants the story of his life to maintain a consistent level of interest. We can relate this to Frank Kermode’s discussion of *chronos* and *kairos* in a book that shares the title of Barnes’s novel. The two Greek words represent different ways to conceive of time — *chronos* refers to “simple chronicity” or “passing time” and *kairos* to a “moment of crisis”, “a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end” (46, 47). The “end” in question can be understood in the biblical sense as apocalyptic; in autobiography, the end or the outcome of events can be interpreted as meaningless, or meaningful and determining, or both, which is Fogg’s interpretation in *Moon Palace*. In Barnes’s novel, there are many false “ends” — Webster assumes the latest piece of information is the final one, leading him to make judgments that are later recognised as false. His narrative attempts to “harmonise origin and end”, to establish “a concord of past, present, and future” (Kermode 48, 50). This “concord”,

I want to suggest, is realised when old and new information are assembled in a way that possesses narrative integrity, that is, when they form into a single construct with its own internal logic or sense of “rightness”.

The summary of Webster’s adult life at the end of chapter one — marriage, divorce, retirement — gives the impression of being “all *chronos* and no *kairos*” (Greaney 232), what Kermode calls “humanly uninteresting successiveness” (46). However, when it comes to his present life that involves Adrian’s diary, Webster encounters several “moment[s] of crisis” (Kermode 47) — established truths are revealed as false, calling for a different explanatory link to account for the relationship between the past and the present. Webster seeks to recover the coherence and consistency of his own life-story as well as the story of Adrian’s suicide, re-evaluating which events are relevant and assuming their sequence as significant rather than arbitrary. He uses the latest information (false “ends”) to reassign the meanings of past events, repeating this activity after each revelation. Consistency is realised on a formal level, for example, conflicting impressions of Adrian’s character are resolved by dismissing his own personal memory and crediting the latest piece of information (his affair with Mrs Ford) instead. Webster’s reinterpretations following each revelation can be seen as an ethical dimension of consistency, that is, he reconciles conflicting interpretations by rejecting what is recognised as false. However, Webster’s self-corrections are not voluntary but rather compelled by the authorial designs of the novel.

Webster recalls that one of his and his schoolmates’ fears was that “Life wouldn’t turn out to be like Literature” (15). To his “shame and disappointment”, he had grown up in an ordinary household with parents that “[a]t best ... might aspire to the condition of onlookers and bystanders” (15). In later life, however, Webster

comes to accept this condition of being average, valuing conformity rather than exemplarity and emphasising his own normality to a fault. When his ex-wife Margaret proposes getting back together, she appeals to the frequency of such occurrences — “Odder things have happened, was the way she put it” (55). The conservative Webster refuses, however, on the grounds that he is *too normal*: “I’m just *not odd enough* to do something like that” (55; added emphasis).⁹ This defence reappears when Webster explains that he is content with his conventional life: “I don’t think this is complacency ... I suppose the truth is that, yes, I’m not odd enough not to have done the things I’ve ended up doing with my life” (64). The double negative is a curious way to express satisfaction with being plain and ordinary. Webster believes that he could not have lived a more normal life, the kind of life that is the “social backdrop” of Literature (15). However, in expressing his “impeccable non-oddness”, Webster instead “foreground[s] the very oddness it disclaims” (Greaney 235).¹⁰ This effect places normality in an uncomfortable relationship with oddness. While the categories seem to be mutually exclusive, identifying others as “odd” does not necessarily make one “normal” in comparison.

Webster fears inconsistency in his own life-story, but is disappointed to find consistency in others’. He expects to find “traps, ambiguities, implied insults” in Veronica’s email that gives an account of her mother’s life (111). Unsuccessful, he disappointedly concludes that Mrs Ford’s life was “an ordinary, sad story — all too familiar — and simply told” (111). We can note two causes of Webster’s dismay

⁹ When reading Mrs Ford’s letter to him regarding the bequest, Webster observes the curlicue of her handwriting and speculates the owner to be “a woman perhaps ‘odd enough’ to do things I hadn’t” (65). Second-time readers may take this as a foreshadowing of the affair revealed later on in the novel. But given that Webster narrates events as they unfold, identifying the sentence as a foreshadowing is a retrospective attribution.

¹⁰ Greaney goes further to suggest that Webster “unconsciously acknowledges: only someone as odd as me ... could have lived the life I have lived” (235).

here: the ordinariness of Mrs Ford's life and the dullness of Veronica's telling, who does not engage him in an indirect rhetorical combat. Different from the revelations about Adrian's suicide, Mrs Ford's life and her life-story as told by Veronica do not require Webster's intervention. As independent narratives that has no bearing on his own life-story, they figure as "odd" elements that potentially undermine the consistency of his narrative. Webster is deprived of the opportunity to be the agent of consistency — recovering coherence and consistency is just as reassuring, if not more than, possessing a product that is already coherent and consistent. His narratorial role is rendered redundant because there is no need re-narrate his own or another's life-story.

Revelations related to Adrian's diary signify the outbreak of a new story, which is informative but also potentially threatening. They can undermine the formal consistency of Webster's narrative, which has consequences for its ethical integrity, that is, revealing its interpretations as false and unreliable. I suggest that the opportunity to recover, rather than simply maintain, consistency outweighs Webster's resistance to "messiness", and this is what motivates him to pursue Adrian's diary rather than let Veronica keep it — new information provides opportunity for storytelling. Nevertheless, this desire for story is sanctioned only in so far as the unexpectedness can be contained, categorised, and integrated, which depends upon Webster's creativity as a storyteller and also his willingness to discard or reinvent familiar categories when they prove to be inadequate.

Webster recalls from time to time what he said earlier to avoid being inconsistent in his narrative, even apologising to his narratee if he fails to retrieve a line of thought: "Sorry, that's a bit off the track. I wanted to get under [Veronica's] skin, that's what I said, didn't I?" (110). While seeming to get back on track, he

equivocates by responding with questions instead of answers: “Did I mean what I thought I meant by it, or something else? ‘I’ve Got You Under My Skin’ — that’s a love song, isn’t it?” (110). Contemplating what he meant by that idiom, Webster’s self-scrutiny suggests that he is now more discerning than before — anything he said prior to the narrating present is examined for its subtext and possible misreadings. This casts his previous narrative as less reliable than what he says *now*. In this way, he distances his previous narrating self from his current narrating self, “refreshing” his own discursive ethos as a way to uphold both the formal and the ethical integrity of his autobiography. However, despite this self-awareness, Webster also refuses to commit himself to a single interpretation, admitting at one point that “all my ‘conclusions’ are reversible” (44). Thinking how this “might affect my reliability and truthfulness”, Webster concedes, “I’m not sure I could answer this, to be honest” (45).

These metanarrative comments cue readers to shift to a different interpretative frame and evaluate the logic of Webster’s narrative representation, but this is what he is already doing himself. Webster’s acknowledgement of the impossibility to ascertain his own reliability and truthfulness is also paradoxically “a powerful topos of sincerity” (Korthals Altes 193). Recruiting his narratee to participate in this task, Webster selects which oddities or omissions are relevant for “you”, concluding that no answer — which is a refusal to decide — is the only possible answer. Webster’s self-criticism seems thorough, but it is not a safeguard against unreliability or oddness. Refreshing his discursive ethos does not guarantee his current narrating self as the provider of narrative truth, which is qualified by time and therefore always provisional. The end of the novel does not signify the pinnacle of Webster’s reliability; rather, he still does not “get it”, as Veronica continually tells

him and he consistently refuses to accept (126, 144). Webster wants to get it right; and yet, “rightness” requires a negotiation between self and other that acknowledges rather than excludes other forms of rightness.

The most significant act of Webster’s ethos management appears when Veronica gives him a copy of his letter written forty years ago in response to Adrian announcing his relationship with her.¹¹ The letter, reprinted in full in chapter two, significantly contradicts his account of it in chapter one. The first account begins with a qualification about his memory, “As far as I remember” (42). He remembers having advised Adrian to be prudent, informing him that Veronica “had suffered damage a long way back”, and wishing him good luck (42). This restrained account omits Webster’s bitterness and malice that is revealed in the original letter, in which he had cursed the couple with an unexpected pregnancy, calling it “time’s revenge”, then sarcastically retracted the evil wish because “[i]t would be unjust to inflict on some innocent foetus the prospect of discovering that it was the fruit of your loins, if you’ll excuse the poeticism” (95-96). Here, the letter shows that “time’s revenge” can refer to being Adrian and Veronica’s child as much as the child’s disability — the couple wronged Webster, and he condemns their progeny. It can be seen as referring to both, but not at this point in the novel when the child, let alone his disability, has not been revealed. The interpretation depends upon *when* the interpretative act is performed, which is conditioned by the information that is available — time controls and qualifies truth. Webster’s letter had also recommended Adrian to “check things out with Mum [Mrs Ford]”, who would

¹¹ Webster waits “for a day and a half” before opening the envelop that contained the letter, explaining this is to defy Veronica’s expectation that he would “have [his] thumb at the flap before she was out of sight” (93-94). However, this rationale is based upon an assumption about her attitude that is imaginative rather than true. Webster anticipates (false) criticism as a way to enhance his own rhetorical credit.

supposedly verify his claim that Veronica had suffered “damage a long way back” (96).

Rereading the letter forty years later, Webster’s main shock comes from the inconsistency between his memory and this newly surfaced evidence: “I could scarcely deny its authorship or its ugliness. All I could plead was that I had been its author then, but was not its author now. Indeed, I didn’t recognise that part of myself from which the letter came” (97). The younger self is rejected as uncharacteristic and inconsistent with both his sense of self and his self-representation up to this point in the novel. However, Webster’s claim to forgetfulness is immediately countered by his own scepticism: “But perhaps this was simply further self-deception” (97). The past tense indicates that this is the narrator Webster’s criticism of the protagonist Webster, whom he presents as self-deluding. The scepticism separates his discursive ethos from his character ethos. Webster’s self-distancing tactic, including the separation of his previous and current narrating selves that I discussed earlier, splits him into multiple selves with different accountability.

Webster objectivises himself in order to assume a sense of objectivity; he objectivises his younger self and his previous narrating self in order to enhance the objectivity of his current narrating self. We can see this as a resistance to the idea of the self as unified, but functioning for rhetorical, not existential, purposes. The novel challenges readers’ attempts to construct a single, unified narratorial ethos, drawing attention to the fragmentary nature of Webster’s own selfhood and selfhood in general. While Webster seems to be genuinely shocked, the letter reveals him to be even more unreliable than he has already admitted to being. His self-consciousness does not make him more trustworthy as an interpreter and evaluator; rather, it

presents an equivocal seriousness that makes his sincerity and stated remorse always rhetorically suspect.

Webster's old letter changes from being an evidence of his partial self-knowledge to a key event in the story of Adrian's suicide. In the letter, the young Webster wrote: "Part of me hopes you'll have a child, because I'm a great believer in time's revenge, yea unto the next generation and the next" (95). Recalling this after identifying Adrian Jr., the narrator Webster clarifies that "*Of course* I don't — I didn't — believe in curses ... in words producing events" (138; added emphasis). Webster's rejection of superstition is presented as a typical response. But the rhetoric of his statement suggests a need to prevent his narratee from thinking otherwise, that is, thinking that his beliefs might deviate from the norm. Rejecting superstition, Webster nevertheless needs to account for the unexpected coincidence, which he expresses as "the unshiftable truth of what had happened" (139) — the tone of certainty obscures the way that "truth" involves interpretation and not just objective facts, that there is more than one interpretation and thus more than one "truth".

Webster identifies this coincidence as part of the story of Adrian's suicide, thus making it not simply an isolated event but part of a necessary sequence. Its place in the series of events becomes an object of interpretation and contributes to the meaning of the whole affair. Webster had concluded his letter to Adrian and Veronica by addressing the latter with: "I can't do anything to you now, but time can. Time will tell. It always does" (97). In retrospect, he sees his curse as being realised in the form of "Time's revenge on the innocent foetus" (139), which establishes a direct link between his letter and Adrian Jr.'s existence. The interpretation also figures the abstract entity "time" as an agent aligned with himself, one that carried out his evil wish and thus shares his responsibility. As mentioned

earlier, while disability is an obvious answer for this promised “revenge”, we need to separate Adrian Jr.’s existence and his disability, not in order to mitigate Webster’s moral flaw but to acknowledge the way interpretations are conditioned by time. Webster registers Adrian Jr.’s disability before identifying him as Adrian’s child, and the order of the revelations is significant for the way it affords multiple interpretations of “Time’s revenge”. Webster’s conclusion contributes rhetorically to the novel’s communicative purposes, showing that the most obvious explanation may be false and is not necessarily the only one.

Webster first encounters Adrian Jr. when Veronica mysteriously takes him to an unfamiliar neighbourhood and tells him to observe a group of people walking down the street. He notices that the group dress and behave differently, using words such as “malformed” and “lopsided” to describe them (125, 127).¹² He asks Veronica bluntly, “What’s wrong with them?” (125). To which she replies, “What’s wrong with *you*?” (126; original emphasis). Webster’s normative vocabulary here functions in a similar way to his use of oddness that I discussed earlier. It classifies people and behaviours into exclusionary categories — being “normal” or familiar is “right” and acceptable, while being different or “odd” is “wrong”. Veronica’s retaliation exposes the reflexive potential of these categories. Labelling other as “wrong” or “odd” can make the charge rebound upon the self, “taint[ing] those who bandy it around as an insult” (Greaney 230). Webster first describes the adult Adrian Jr. as “a tall, goofy fellow with glasses” (125); after recognising him as Adrian’s son, he refers to him as “that poor, damaged man” (139). Disability comes to signify something more immediate than a marginal group beyond the sphere of Webster’s concerns.

¹² One of them reminds Webster of the “barker” at circus shows, inviting patrons to witness “the bearded lady or two-headed panda” (126-127). The discourse of disability and mental illness represented in Barnes’s novel is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I want to suggest that it has a fundamental relationship with the discourse of normality, which is central to my discussion.

Webster registers the existence of Adrian's illegitimate child and the child's disability simultaneously. While this suggests both constitute "time's revenge", I argue that the two should not be conflated even if Webster foregrounds the latter at the expense of the former. Carroll follows Webster's interpretation, that when he goes on to count his blessings for having "a child ... born with four limbs, a normal brain, and the emotional make-up that allows the child ... to lead any sort of life" (144), it "reinforce[s] the impression that life with a disability is inevitably a life of inferior value and meaning" (162). Considering Webster's normative value system, we might go further to say that for him, it is not only "life with a disability", but any life outside the norm is "a life of inferior value and meaning". Webster does not specify the norm but assumes this is already tacitly understood by his narratee. His endorsement of normality is expressed by a process of exclusion, banishing anything different from his own experience as "odd" or "wrong". But the more he upholds his consistency with the norm — which offers him the reassurance of being normal or "not odd enough" (55, 64) — the more unable he is to process things beyond his limited range of experience, to apply an interpretative logic suited to the situation rather than relying on generalised, normative ones to make sense of experience.

When reflecting on the connection between his letter and the outcome of events, Webster once again distances himself from his younger self. What he felt now was remorse, not his previously self-justifying vengeance. However, he does not retreat behind his current feeling, saying instead: "The fact that the young me who cursed and the old me who witnessed the curse's outcome had quite different feelings — this was monstrously irrelevant" (138). Webster dismisses his current remorse as "irrelevant" in the process of establishing himself as a relevant and even essential player in the whole affair. He recalls that, in his letter, he had suggested

Adrian to “check things out with Mum [Mrs Ford]”, and assumes that this is what led to the affair (96, 149). We can summarise the import of Webster’s reconstructed narrative of the affair thus: had he not made that suggestion in his letter, or even, had he not introduced his then-girlfriend Veronica to Adrian, none of what followed would have happened. He establishes his role in “the chain of responsibility” (149) by asserting this hypothetical, if seemingly plausible, narrative as the only explanation. As Greaney points out, “[i]n claiming responsibility for what happened to the Fords, Webster moves from overstating the harmlessness of his life to overstating its shattering dramatic impact” (236-237). There is a closed interpretative loop in the way Webster identifies Adrian Jr. as the product of his curse. A prior fact (his letter) is connected to a later fact (Adrian Jr.’s “damaged” existence) by interpreting the latter *as* “Time’s revenge on the innocent foetus” — his letter thus become “prophetic” by assuming this connection as necessary rather than accidental. In this way, he confirms an isolated incident — the coincidence of his curse being realised — as the relevant bridge between a then still open future and the present actual outcome. The coincidence is retrospectively identified as determining, so that his letter and himself are necessary to the turn of events.

The timing and circumstance of Adrian Jr.’s entrance into the story make it impossible to separate the two meanings of “Time’s revenge” — being Adrian and Veronica’s child and being disabled. Carroll chooses the latter as most relevant to her interpretation of the novel. However, besides the thematic function of disability — to characterise Webster’s moral failure and blunt sensibility as a representative of a certain cultural value system, a system that Carroll finds Barnes complicit — we also need to consider its synthetic function “within the larger construct of the work” (Phelan, *Living to Tell About It* 13). Framing Barnes’s novel as a fictional

autobiography also contributes to my different interpretation of its formal design and the authorial ethos.

Disability as the only interpretation of “Time’s revenge” is an effect produced by the structural design of the novel — essential information about Adrian’s suicide are separated but introduced in a significant, if seemingly arbitrary, order. Webster has no control over the order of the revelations, arriving at what seems to him the only possible explanation, if because it is the most immediate one. As I have shown, there are alternative interpretations implicitly communicated by the text, and thus an internal resistance to Webster’s conviction and normative logic. In this way, Webster’s interpretation both works, by having explanatory force, and does not work, by assuming the most obvious explanation is the only one. I suggest that Barnes’s novel, as a fictional autobiography, addresses a more fundamental concern — the constraints imposed by time in life and the consequences of this condition. Like Webster, we have no control over the distribution of knowledge in life and are therefore always at the mercy of chance and fallible in our judgments. Barnes’s novel shows the kind of interpretations one makes with incomplete information and the normative logic applied in such situations that excludes rather than acknowledges competing interpretations. It uses Webster’s insensitivity to disability to both illustrate and evaluate conventional responses to this issue — his inadequate response reflects our potentially inadequate response.

5. ENDINGS AND THEIR INEVITABILITY

The repeated revisions of Webster’s life-story implies the way present convictions are always subjected to future revelations. Webster muses about the future at one point in the novel: “What you fail to do is look ahead, and then imagine yourself

looking back from that future point. Learning the new emotions that time brings” (59). And yet, even if one practices his advice, “that future point” is nevertheless an imagined future conditioned by present knowledge. Webster’s exhortation to project an imagined but ultimately prejudiced future reflects his tendency to imagine others’ criticisms of him, which are plausible but not necessarily true, and which function for his own rhetorical purposes rather than as evidence of his humility. In the rest of the chapter, I foreground the authorial ethos and take a closer look at Webster’s coercive rhetoric in appealing to the value of consistency with the norm.

Webster contemplates the selectiveness of everyone’s life-stories prior to revealing his original letter to Adrian and Veronica:

How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts? And the longer life goes on, the fewer are those around to challenge our account, to remind us that our life is not our life, merely the story we have told about our life. Told to others, but — mainly — to ourselves. (95)

He recruits his narratee with the collective pronoun to argue that “we” all make “sly cuts” to our life-stories, implying that his own embellishments are expected and should not be held against him. Webster’s frequent but intermittent reflections on life, time, and memory form a separate line of thought running alongside his experience of these matters. Second-time readers may notice the places of these reflections in relation to key revelations, that they can figure as clues or foreshadowing of later events and not just Webster’s general musings on these subjects. In the above example, Webster’s reflection can be seen as delaying the imminent self-exposure that he, as narrator, knows is about to happen; it also functions as a pre-emptive strategy — positing his forgetfulness as a common

offense that is found in all acts of autobiography and thus dismissing it as negligible and, ultimately, forgivable.

Webster does not engage further with the difference between one's life and the story of one's life, but this thematic concern is engaged with implicitly on the authorial level throughout the novel. The negotiation between formal and ethical integrity is exactly what Webster is involved with and required to address, even if he does not always acknowledge the stakes involved in this activity. The discrepancy between life and life-story is nicely phrased by Barnes in the novel, a point made through the mediation of several characters. Webster reports that Adrian quoted a Frenchman in their history class in school: "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (17). The argument on collective history applies to the personal level — one's life-story balances precariously between flawed memory and incomplete documentation.

Webster counters the unreliability of memory by invoking the discourse of the law, using words such as "evidence (39, 43, 77, 137), "corroboration" (39, 59, 77, 98, 109, 116, 120, 137), "witness" or "witnesses" (59, 98, 109), and other legal metaphors to project a sense of objectivity, giving the impression that he is conducting a rational, not sentimental, inquiry. However, this strategy in defence of his discursive ethos does not extend to his character ethos — the two become forcefully separated upon the appearance of his old letter, as discussed earlier. There are many moments in which Webster interrogates himself to clarify what he means, as if he is in the witness stand, but playing the prosecutor, the defendant, and the judge all at the same time. Self-conscious, equivocal, and concerned for his reputation, Webster negotiates the correctness of his interpretations by arguing against himself. The legal terminology reminds us that guilt, blame, and

responsibility are involved in both the story that he is trying to tell and his storytelling.

Webster is prompted, by his efforts to recall one of his conversations with Veronica while they were dating, to concede that “[i]f asked in a court of law what happened and what was said”, he can “only attest to the words ‘heading’, ‘stagnating’ and ‘peaceable’ ... [and] swear to the truth of the biscuit tin”; that is, fragments of the conversation (35). This imagined legal scenario directly addresses the question of reliability in his narrative; but clarifying “what happened and what was said” involves interpretation, and this raises the stakes of his problematic recollections. Webster has come to see that conversation as “the beginning of the end of our relationship” (35); at the same time, however, he questions the correctness of this interpretation: “Or have I just remembered it this way to make it seem so, and to apportion blame?” (35). Webster seems no more certain of himself than he is of a stranger. He undermines his own narrative authority by drawing attention to the way the rhetorical implications of his words interfere with their straightforward meaning — his scepticism introduces a gap and leaves the ambiguity acknowledged but unresolved.

The courtroom scenario is invoked once again when Webster finds himself remembering a different version of the trip to Minsterworth while dating Veronica that he has already recounted. Previously, he said he had gone alone (35-36); now, he recalls that Veronica was with him: “My brain must have erased it from the record, but now I knew it for a fact” (119). Webster calls himself to the stand where he undergoes a “cross-examination” to defend his revised testimony (119). What follows is an imagined dialogue between Webster and Veronica’s barrister, who suspects this new recollection “is an entire figment of [Webster’s] imagination,

constructed to justify some romantic attachment” that he is now feeling towards her (119). Webster defends himself against his self-accusation by invoking the prevalence of “late-flowering love” to corroborate his change of heart (120); to which his imagination retorts: “Oh, please, Mr Webster, spare us your sentimental lucubrations. This is a court of law, which deals with facts” (120). Instead of facts, however, Webster only has “the impressions those facts left” — “That’s the best I can manage” (4). In what Greaney calls “the Barnesian courtroom”, “the imperfections of memory are systematically bullied by the institutional demand for objective truth” (234).¹³ Empirical consistency is valued above the changing nature of human emotions, even if they are attributable to the same person. Barnes’s novel shows that, by staging this dialogue inside Webster’s head, being aware of different sides of the argument does not necessarily lead to greater insight.

Webster prosecutes himself in order to claim impartiality, using the rigours of a hypothetical, universal standard as an excuse and foil for his personalised argument. This shifts attention away from his misrepresentations to the unjustness of demanding perfect memory. Webster’s appeal to the sincerity topoi, “which promise attempts at truthfulness without guaranteeing factual reliability” (Korthals Altes 193), gives the impression that it is enough to voice his intention to be truthful without needing to accept responsibility for all the possible interpretations of his own words. Truth involves empirical facts but without being reduced to them. Inflicting such impossible demands upon himself, Webster gives the impression that reliability — and therefore accountability — is only relevant when a one-to-one

¹³ This recalls a critical observation by Braithwaite in *Flaubert’s Parrot*: “we are tempted to throw up our hands and declare that history is merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report” (90). Braithwaite’s remark lumps together history and autobiographical fiction without considering the rhetorical distinction between these two different genres, a point I discussed in chapter one.

relationship between events and their interpretation is confirmed. I suggest that this absolute connection is a residual effect of Webster's repeated misinterpretations — his repeated failures to get it "right" reinforce the impression that "rightness" is necessary and exclusive. However, "rightness" is often only retrospectively confirmed and even then subjected to future reinterpretations. The urgency of being "right" is relieved by Webster's claim to remorse, "[w]hose chief characteristic is that nothing can be done about it: too much time has passed, too much damage has been done, for amends to be made" (99). Characterised by belatedness and finality, remorse cements the explanatory force of Webster's narrative as irrefutable and "right" by rejecting other possible interpretations.

Webster's use of legal analogies figures as part of a discourse of normality circulating within his and his narratee's — as well as the readers' — cultural environment. Webster imposes normative values in re-presenting the past, in which his use of rhetorical questions assumes his narratee always already agrees with and supports his interpretations. After giving a sweeping summary of his life at the end of chapter one, he concludes with the question, "And that's a life, isn't it?" (56), stressing the ordinariness of his life as well as the consensus of what "a life" is. The rhetorical question does not invite a real response but is a gesture of finality, a rejection of anything that is different from his own view. He portrays his opinions on certain issues as typical and unproblematic by using rhetorical questions instead of direct statements. This device mediates his opinions on what to expect in old age ("Later on in life, you expect a bit of rest, don't you?" (59)); on the economic use of time ("That's logical, isn't it?" (68)); on time revealing your secrets ("They say time finds you out, don't they?" (79)); on the possibility to be forgiven ("What if you can prove you weren't the bad guy she took you for, and she is willing to accept your

proof?” (107)); and on wanting life to be normal and predictable (“And is there anything wrong with that?” (110)). These assumptions are represented not as something personal and subjective, but general and universal.

The pronoun “you” is used frequently in the above examples and throughout Webster’s narrative, which functions not only to coerce the agreement of his narratee, but also in the sense of “one” — an abstract and universal subject. The use of this normative collective pronoun assumes what is “normal” to be tacitly agreed upon and final. Appealing to “you” and this unspoken normality, Webster relocates the responsibility for these assumptions to common sense, or what he calls the “philosophically self-evident” (32, 55, 124).¹⁴ Webster also uses the collective pronoun “we” to solidify this presumed agreement, such as how “we all suffer damage, one way or another” (44); how “we make an instinctive decision, then build up an infrastructure of reasoning to justify it” (53); that “[w]e muddle along, we let life happen to us” (88); and “that sense of harmony we all aspire to” in life (79). Webster uses the same strategy when explaining how he identified Adrian Jr. on his own: “We listen to what people say, we read what they write ... we interrogate the face ... and then we know. We recognise the hypocrisy or the false claim, and the truth stands evident before us” (137). While correctly identifying Adrian Jr. as Adrian’s child, however, Webster misjudges the identity of his mother. His conviction here is founded on the common logic of his deduction, as if this typical method cannot lead to a wrong conclusion.

The coercive rhetoric of Webster’s narrative obscures the debatable nature of these issues and seeks to legitimate his self-made theories as general truths rather

¹⁴ At one point, Webster asks his lawyer for “the legal tag when something is blindingly obvious”, and the latter supplies the answer—“*Res ipsa loquitur*” (71). Webster’s penchant for what is “blindingly obvious” or “philosophically self-evident” shows him valuing what is expected, normal, and categorised.

than personal musings. By insinuating that “you” agree with him, Webster implies that “you” are sharing the responsibility for his interpretations. His use of rhetorical prolepsis distributes responsibility to the narratee and also potentially to readers of Barnes’s novel, implying that *we* are all guilty of “such easy assumptions” (63). The reappearance of Webster’s old letter is a critical turning point in the novel not only in relation to the affair between Adrian and Mrs Ford, but also because it prompts Webster to scrutinise himself more closely and more critically. He admits that his earlier portrayal of Veronica and their relationship — “The young heart betrayed, the young body toyed with, the young social being condescended to” — is “the one I’d needed at the time” (122). However, his admission that he had been “crass and naïve” is accompanied by a self-indulgent plea: “we all are” (121). Webster’s self-criticism does not address the normative logic of his interpretations, that is, not just what he understands but the *form* of his narrative understanding. Recalling his history master’s reminder that history is “the self-delusions of the defeated” and “the lies of the victors”, he asks: “Do we remember that enough when it comes to our private lives?” (122). Instead of acknowledging his own fallibility, Webster subsumes himself as part of a collective and thus renders his own personal flaw less distinct.

The discovery of Adrian Jr.’s existence provokes Webster to acknowledge that his previous self-justifications were merely self-delusions. Having insisted on his “peaceable” nature (35, 42, 54), “instinct for survival” (42, 131) and for “self-preservation” (64, 131), he now understands these qualities as manifestations of cowardice. He expresses this realisation in a series of self-accusatory questions:

What did I know of life, I who had lived so carefully? Who had neither won nor lost, but just let life happen to him? Who had the usual ambitions and

settled all too quickly for them not being realised? Who avoided being hurt and called it a capacity for survival? Who paid his bills, stayed on good terms with everyone as far as possible, for whom ecstasy and despair soon became just words once read in novels? One whose self-rebukes never really inflicted pain? ... one who always thought he knew how to avoid being hurt ... (142)

Besides assuming the difference between life and Literature as something regrettable, Webster's self-chastisement is oddly self-alienating. It uses rhetorical questions instead of direct statements in which the subject of these accusations changes from the personal "I" to the universalising "one", making the accusations abstract and generalised. His personal responsibility is blurred by being projected onto an indefinite and undefinable subject, who both is and is not him. Webster had "all this to reflect upon" while nursing his sense of remorse (142). Reflection defers action and goes hand in hand with the sense of belatedness characteristic of remorse, "that nothing can be done about it: that the time has passed for apology or amends" (107) — inaction becomes the only possible action.

Remorse, as Webster's ending sentiment, is a form of resignation and represents the way unexpectedness and curiosity about what the future might hold can decay into routine and indifference. Having suffered multiple surprises related to Adrian's diary, Webster has, perhaps paradoxically, come to expect the unexpected, which can be seen as a form of the future. At the end of the novel, he is no longer consumed with anticipation of when something will be revealed, but assured that it will be revealed eventually. The time it took for Webster to run into the group of people that Veronica mysteriously brought him to meet is not considered as "wasting my time" but rather "what my time was now for" (134). He is not trapped in suspense and at the mercy of surprise but dispassionately awaiting the inevitable —

the “moment of crisis” (*kairos*) transforms back into “waiting time” (*chronos*) (Kermode 47). After a social worker reveals that Mrs Ford is the mother of Adrian Jr., Webster ends his narrative by reflecting upon “the end of any likelihood of change” (149). The familiar past vanishes and leaves him with a sense of “unrest”, even “great unrest” (150). The repetition renders this feeling both significant and already in the process of becoming familiar and habituated.

Webster believes that it is too late to speak of reparative actions and accepts the finality and irrefutability of this conclusion. Ageing and approaching death, he does not entertain the prospect of change even if life remains ongoing. The sense of belatedness, however, is also a rationalisation of the needlessness to change — Webster remains *consistently himself* in spite of the revelations that challenge his self-understanding. He maintains the consistency of his character by separating his discursive and character ethos and by distinguishing between his current narrating self and his previous narrating self. Everything that is considered to be odd or out of the norm are fenced off and dismissed as irrelevant to his current identity. Webster’s consistency confirms his individuality even while he tries to blend in with the crowd. The disruption caused by his quest to obtain Adrian’s diary does not leave irreparable damage to his life-story — assuming amends are impossible as well as irrelevant, Webster returns to his routine life and leaves the reinterpreted past undisturbed.

Webster’s development as a literary character suggests a stunted growth, unlike the kind of characters in “Real literature” that he once aspired to. According to his English master, “Real literature was about psychological, emotional and social truth as demonstrated by the actions and reflections of its protagonists; the novel was about character developed over time” (15). The passing of time within Barnes’s

novel occasioned change in Webster's self-understanding, but without affecting change in the fundamental logic of his narrative understanding. Webster, as a representative of conventionality and an advocate of normality, contributes to the novel's rhetorical purposes, the way that consistency, as the narrative integrity of his autobiography, is an expression of his trustworthiness but also an imposition of form. Webster is not consistently unreliable, but unreliably consistent — his judgments are suspect in spite of being logically consistent. Conformity with the norm prejudices his interpretation and stops him from discovering and valuing his own individual response.

Webster's repeated failures to understand the story of Adrian's suicide due to incomplete information reflect the regular failures in everyday life caused by the discord between time and truth — knowledge may arrive only in the future, even if they were produced in the past. It is necessary that Webster fails and fails repeatedly for the novel's narrative integrity to work — the prospect of getting it wrong does not render meaningless the consistent effort and commitment to get it "right". We can sense this commitment within the novel by the saying, "the eternal hopefulness of the human heart" (118, 130), which Webster first cherishes then dismisses upon failing to win back Veronica's affections. His resignation reflects the kind of inertia that can result by assuming this outcome or "end" is final. However, such an assumption may offer a resolution but without being necessarily the only one, especially when there is still time, that is, when one is still living. In confronting our mortality, death is inevitable, but without determining the possibilities within what remains of life.

Chapter IV

The Truth of Coherence: Storying Lydia Davis's *The End of the Story*

“the idea of something lost and then found is more interesting than the idea of already knowing where she was ...”

— “What Was Interesting”, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009), p.206.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lydia Davis's *The End of the Story* (1995) is a novel about writing a novel that is based on one's life, and includes within it a half-formed novel. The relationship between time and truth, which forms the basis of my discussion in the two previous chapters, here becomes an investigation about the relationship between coherence and truth — the significance and necessity of form or shapeliness to the articulation of truth. This kind of truth depends as much on felicity as fidelity and speaks to the implicit tension between aesthetics and ethics encapsulated in the word *integrity* — the critical category of this thesis. Davis's novel has an unnamed narrator writing a novel based on her past relationship with a younger man. Her project does not advance towards a greater sense of completion but rather the opposite — she interrogates the requirements of the novel form to the point of threatening the formal integrity of the entire novel. With a first-person narrator recounting her past and present, Davis's novel as a fictional autobiography problematises the singular form of the narrating-I and stages the perplexity in writing the self.

The minimal details and the lack of proper nouns in *The End of the Story* have tempted critics to use facts from the author's life to clarify ambiguities in the novel. Christopher Knight speculates about the real-life counterparts of the fictional

characters and includes Davis's matrimonial history in a footnote — a gesture that seems to encourage a biographical reading of the novel even as he advises against “put[ting] too much faith in the correspondence” (222). The tendency to use sources outside the text to resolve ambiguities in the novel can be seen in the way critics describe the relationship between the narrator and the man, Vincent, whom she currently lives with. Knight refers to him as “her husband” (217) and Jonathan Evans calls him “the narrator's current husband Vincent” (77). While they are indeed living together and taking care of Vincent's father, the novel does not explicitly state that they are married. Knight's and Evans's inferences may be based on Davis's marital status at the time of the novel's publication. Maggie Doherty, in contrast, more appropriately refers to Vincent as the narrator's “partner” (163). This may be a negligible detail, but it demonstrates a certain intolerance to ambiguity and a desire to know what seems to resist comprehension, issues that are themselves thematised in Davis's novel.

A biographical reading overlooks the aesthetic integrity of the text, which does not require readers to ground it upon external information. My reading of *The End of the Story* foregrounds Davis's use of fiction as a rhetorical vehicle to engage with the project of autobiography, by writing a novel rather than an autobiography, in which this particular representation of autobiography functions to theorise the act of autobiography in general.¹ My concern here is with the formal characteristics of self-representation and their impact on interpretation. Auster's and Barnes's novels

¹ Evans addresses Davis's engagement with autobiography by way of her translation of Michel Leiris's autobiographies, *Scratches* (1991) and *Scraps* (1997), that they allowed her “to explore that genre without writing her own autobiography” (17). Evans's *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis: Translation, Rewriting, Intertextuality* (2016) is the first book-length study of Davis's work, in which he focuses on the dynamic relationship between her fiction and translation. His chapter on *The End of the Story* compares it with Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, that Davis's novel “rewrites Proust through a postmodern lens” (20). Davis translated Proust's *The Way by Swann's* in 2002.

engage with the issue of narrative artifice mainly on the authorial level and have narrators who do not scrutinise the formal logic of their own autobiographies. Davis's novel deals with narrative artifice on the narratorial level and shows the narrator reflecting on the process of transforming experience into narrative and the different forms in which truth can be rendered. She not only seeks to clarify what is ambiguous and inaccurate in her narrative account of the past but also wants to understand the logic of her own understanding, which changes over time. This places the metahermeneutic concerns of Davis's novel within the fiction, in which the narrator attempts to reconstruct her own interpretative pathways. Webster, whose autobiography I discussed in the last chapter, identifies and seeks resolution for the discrepancy between his memory and documentary evidence, and in a sense is also engaged with reconstructing his own interpretative pathway. However, the self-consciousness of Davis's narrator goes beyond Webster's retrospective concerns about the consistency of his life-story by taking into consideration the distinction between autobiography and fiction. This brings the discussion of this thesis to a different, more theoretical, level where fictionality is (potentially) redoubled in the fiction itself.

This chapter shows how Davis's novel explores the issue of narrative coherence in writing the self by confounding the coherence of its own narrative to a certain degree. The narrator's demand for accuracy in her understanding of the past represents a desire for coherence — a certain shapeliness that applies to both content and form, signifying order and comprehension. Michael Hofmann remarks on the sense of control over the unruliness of emotional experience in the novel: "Instead of a lush vocabulary, Davis offers the satisfactions of grammar and tone, and a shapeliness of thought ... Even where there is sensuality, the ordering mind will take

charge” (6). Shapeliness is a demonstration of formal integrity; however, felicity is not to be confused with fidelity. Narrative coherence is necessary for representation, but as an imposition of form it is also suspect.

The narrator’s evaluation of the accuracy of her account changes from discerning whether it is accurate to deciding which is the most accurate version; in the process, accuracy becomes a question of form rather than reference. Davis’s novel thematises the value of coherence in the project of autobiography and shows how the aesthetic allure of coherence, privileged in fiction, is in tension with the pursuit of authenticity. In the following, I discuss the ambiguities in the novel as a reflection of the narrator’s problem with memory and the dual quality of accuracy as concerning both form and ethics, showing the way coherence as the narrative integrity of her autobiography both does and does not work. Using the distinction between the narrator’s nonfictional story and her novel about her past relationship, I examine the way different forms of telling serve different rhetorical purposes. The latter half of the chapter offers a more theoretical discussion on “story” as a literary and analytical category and the multiple meanings of the novel’s title. I propose the verb *storying* as the narration of one’s form of understanding and argue that Davis’s novel can be understood as *a story of storying* — the narrator’s investigation of her own form of understanding that is communicated as a story.

2. CONFUSING TIMES

The End of the Story stages two series of events which are separated by a number of years: the narrator’s past relationship with a younger man and her present process of writing an autobiographical novel based on that experience. The two sequences of events are told chronologically but alternately in untitled sections, resulting in a

vague and tentative sense of temporal continuity. The silent deictic shifts make it uncertain whether the past relationship is communicated nonfictionally via her memory or fictionally, as a working draft of her novel.² It is possible to detect the shift by observing the different characters interacting with the narrator. Of the few that are named, Madeleine is the narrator's housemate while she was dating the ex-lover; Vincent is her current partner and they live together with Vincent's father. The character Ellie, however, is someone whom the narrator has known since dating the ex-lover and who remains in contact with her, offering advice for her novel intermittently. When the narrator reports that she talked "to Ellie recently on the phone" (65), it is unclear whether this took place within the prior or the later sequence of events. The duration of the past relationship is indicated with certain months and holidays, temporal markers which are included more for the sake of clarifying the sequence of events than for their import on the events themselves.³ In terms of the narrator's writing process, it is not specified whether she reports every day, week, or perhaps month, making it unclear whether her forgetfulness is something expected or out of the norm.

The temporal ambiguities are partly a reflection of the narrator's forgetfulness, and her narrative follows the associative logic of memory. She tries to treat this problem by making notes to herself, but this proves to have limited effect:

² Note that what is nonfictional for the narrator is fictional to the reader. For the sake of simplicity, I drop the indication of the fictional status of the narrator's autobiographical narrative, keeping in mind the distinction between autobiography and fiction within the text. Davis's novel provides a fictional representation of an act of autobiography. I am not assuming the narrator is a real person or equating her with the author Davis. The relationship between the narrator and Davis will be dealt with later on in the chapter in my discussion on the self.

³ The narrator met the young man in October (13), the uneasiness with him began in December and intensified in February (101), and she last saw him on "a hot day in June" (3). She went on her first solitary trip on Thanksgiving Day, the day after their third quarrel (92). She begins a section vaguely with "During this time" and only reveals a page later what it refers to: "At this time of the year ... it was close to Christmas" (105, 106). There is no reference to the time of narration except when the narrator mentions: "It is March, and cold" (21).

“I find things that disconcert me because I have no memory of them at all, such as an early plan for the novel which I jotted down ... as though someone else had made these careless notes” (139). Her knowledge of the outcome of the past events distracts and disrupts her recollections of them, and she in turn self-consciously questions the correctness and accuracy of her memory. Ambiguities on the representational level of the text invite readers to make sense of them by reconstructing the chronological order of events and the narrating-I’s time locus; however, the temporal logic that facilitates comprehension is also applied teleologically — the antithetical movements of narrative interpretation interfere and impede understanding, thus continuing rather than resolving perplexity.

We can reconstruct the steps or the order of the narrator’s activities thus: she needs to first organise her memory of the past relationship into a coherent and consistent narrative — to have a story of the relationship — which she will then use as a nonfictional foil for her novel. The process of transforming life into narrative is not necessarily a falsification of experience with the result being a work of fiction; it may be primarily a matter of selecting which aspect of the experience to foreground over everything else, and deciding a set of criteria to evaluate the relevance of individual events. Narrative forms, whether autobiographical or fictional, impose certain requirements on the way events are represented, such as the need to demonstrate a sense of cohesiveness and completeness. The narrator is aware of the constructedness of her representation, but this is a matter of the narrative mode, rather than a reflection upon her truth claims.

The narrator’s story of the relationship is nonfictional; it is her autobiographical novel that is fictional. She is hesitant whether the story, which is her interpretation of the past relationship, is objective enough, and this leads her to

re-tell the same episodes according to what she now remembers to be more “accurate”, which includes both formal and ethical elements. Her uncertainty delays the process of writing her novel, which requires this nonfictional foil to be finalised in order to be fictionalised. For readers, the uncertainty of whether the past relationship is related nonfictionally or fictionally produces certain problems — it invites more than one coherent interpretation. The narrator’s reports about her writing process may equally be interpreted as already part of her novelistic account, and therefore fictional rather than autobiographical. Davis’s novel is perplexing because either interpretation *works* — both offer a coherent understanding of the content that resolves ambiguities.

There are two different interpretations of the concept of “fiction” in play for the narrator.⁴ One assumes a distinction between narrative truth and narrative falsehood, and the other regards this distinction as meaningless given the fictional quality of any narrative artifice. Marie-Laure Ryan (1997) offers a discussion on what she calls “the doctrine of panfictionality” that is developed from Saussurian linguistics and Hayden White’s discussion on historiography, among others. Ryan welcomes “the postmodern attack on the dichotomy” of fiction and nonfiction, which “introduced the idea of degree in what was formerly thought of as a binary distinction” (180, 181). Ryan proposes a synthetic approach that introduces three categories instead of two: “nonfiction”, “classical fiction”, and “postmodern metafiction” (181). My selection of primary texts, fictional autobiographies, can be placed in the loose category of postmodern metafiction, in which the artifice of the narrator’s life-story is problematised in different degrees. Postmodernism

⁴ This is also something that Philip Roth engages with in his book, which I discuss in the next chapter.

foregrounds the problematic nature of representing truth in nonfiction, but this does not invalidate the fundamental distinction between truth and falsehood.

Davis's narrator upholds this distinction and signals what is true and what is invented: for example, she changes the ex-lover's name in her novel, but wants it to be another one-syllable English name, such as "Hank", in order "to match his own actual name" (39, 38). Nevertheless, her narrative concern here is not with truth but with mimetic accuracy, which foregrounds form rather than reference. The narrator's insistence on accuracy cuts across the distinction between her nonfictional story of the relationship and her novel, which "claims to be fiction and not a story about me" (128). The narrator's reluctance to exercise her poetic licence baffles even herself: "I was not willing to invent much, though I'm not sure why: I could leave things out and I could rearrange things, I could let one character do something that had actually been done by another, I could let a thing be done earlier or later than it was done, but I could use only the elements of the actual story" (203-204). It is unclear from this passage what she means by "the elements of the actual story" — a vagueness indicative of the narrator's equivocal language, which allows her pursuit of accuracy to be simultaneously an autobiographical and novelistic criterion.

After describing in detail the first night she met her ex-lover, the narrator offers alternative ways to represent the experience, which foreground different aspects of it. She lists a series of their interactions: "There was his invitation ... my hesitation, his boldness, my understanding, then the noise of his car, my fear .. my house ... our conversation..." (16); and then there is the series of her emotional reactions: "my hesitation, my sudden worry, my anxiety ... my lack of grace ..." (17). These two accounts supply different information and are told from different perspectives — both, nevertheless, are true. The narrator goes on to relate what

happened when they reached her house, and this is when her present knowledge intrudes and interferes with her recollection of the past. She says: “It seems to me that he stumbled in the dark ... but I may be confused about that, because I myself fell ... a few days later” (18). Such metanarrative comments alert readers to potential for a different order of inaccuracy in her account, which may be confabulated as well as selectively incomplete.⁵ The narrator supplies additional information to foreground the uncertainty, and this in itself increases the readers’ knowledge. However, the accumulation of information also compounds the confusion and disorder, afflicting the narrator’s search for narrative form and leaving readers oscillating between alternative interpretations.

The question of what is true and what is false in the narrative is a primary consideration for representational approaches to fiction that foreground the coherence of the represented content. However, my approach to Davis’s novel as a fictional autobiography places it within an evaluative framework in which formal coherence is the critical concept under investigation. The significance of a novel’s content, from this perspective, is less its representational coherence than the contribution it makes to the rhetorical, communicative effects of the work. The distinction between represented truth and falsehood in the narrator’s account is still relevant for interpretation, but it is necessary to move beyond that binary. A rhetorical approach evaluates the way accuracy is staged as a formal issue in the novel. Readers of Davis’s novel may remain uncertain about whether the narrator’s

⁵ Evans describes the narrator’s self-reflexive comments as the “metafictional aspect” of the novel, “regular reminders to the reader that this text is a novel, that it could have been written differently” (77). The text in question, however, involves both Davis’s novel and the narrator’s novel (which may or may not include the reports on her own writing process). As novels, they both “could have been written differently”. I distinguish between interpreting the narrator’s comments as metanarratorial and as metafictional, arguing that only when we assume the narrator’s novel includes her autobiographical reports can they be describe as “metafictional”.

past relationship is being represented fictively or nonfictively. The narrator's problem, however, is the same whether her narration is Davis's fiction or her own, and concerns how truth can be accurately represented. Narrative artifice does not undermine the notion of narrative truth, but it does create difficulties in evaluating the accuracy of its presentation — truth comes in different forms, there is more than one way to tell it and more than one version can be considered accurate. The narrator's problem is to decide which amongst the alternatives is the most accurate one.

The narrator draws attention to her unsuccessful attempt near the end of the book: "I have been trying to tell the story [of the past relationship] as accurately as I can, but I may be mistaken about some of it, and I know I have left things out and added things, both deliberately and accidentally" (233). She draws attention to the constructedness and incompleteness of her representation, indicating "a *hidden gap*" in her narrative (Sternberg, "Telling in Time (II)" 519). However, the sense of surprise prompted by this revelation is absorbed by the narrator's awareness of this problem and thus contained. Her posterior scepticism reveals the coherence of former accounts as artificial; that is, their previously assumed accuracy is now compromised. This demonstrates the way later revelations in the narrator's account alter our initial interpretation of its truth claims, which is a device also found in Barnes's novel, discussed in the last chapter.

A specific example is the narrator's two accounts of her fifth quarrel with her ex-lover. The first account is focalised through herself: "We quarrelled again, it must have been for the fifth time..." (115). She refers to this episode later on and comments on the way it was represented, saying:

“When I wrote down what happened during the fifth quarrel he and I had, I left out what he said when I was watching him sleep. I said it was a gentle and loving thing, but I did not say what his actual words were. He said, ‘You’re so beautiful.’ But now I don’t think it was gentle and loving, after all. I think it was a cry of frustration” (125).⁶

The narrator draws attention to the incompleteness of the earlier version, remarking that it “lost track of a few days, collapsing them into one” (125). She then gives what is supposed to be a more accurate version of the quarrel — one in which the sequence of events is in the correct order. Upon finishing, the narrator discovers the reason she omitted the ex-lover’s words in the first account: “because I was afraid this would seem vain, even though the novel claims to be fiction and not a story about me, and even though it was only his opinion, not necessarily the truth” (128).

Time, in this example, gives her a certain retrospective clarity about her intuitive decisions. It is notable that the narrator is here concerned about the accuracy of her novel, about a fictional character that is based on herself but is not her. Her later remark indicates that the earlier account was actually a working draft for her novel, a fictionalised version of the relationship rather than a nonfictional one recounted through her memory. The earlier account does not contain any reference to her novel and for first-time readers its truth claim may be ambiguous but not contested. What is revealed later changes the meaning of what is related previously, demonstrating the contingency of truth — “truth” being subject to mutable criteria of accuracy and correct interpretation.

⁶ The previous account appears on page 120: “in his sleep, he murmured something ... a purely gentle and loving thing.”

The narrator frequently re-narrates the past when she senses inaccuracy in her first account, but the usual result is to further obscure the original experience rather than elucidate it. The latest recollection is often deemed more accurate than the former account when she draws attention to the discrepancy between them: “I seem to have written two accounts of one of these phone calls [with the ex-lover] and the days surrounding it. I have just rediscovered the earlier one, and it seems less accurate and more sentimental” (140).⁷ She explains the earlier version includes too much of her life at the time, which “had nothing to do with the story [of the relationship]” (140). The narrator’s criteria for accuracy, then, includes the event’s relevance to the past relationship, a determination that involves interpreting the connection between the parts and the whole. However, the “whole” in question, which includes both the story of the narrator’s past relationship and the novel she is writing, is still in the process of being finalised, making the criteria for what is relevant provisional, and therefore what is deemed accurate is subject to change. The narrator’s scepticism is counterproductive to the completion of her project.

Knowledge of what happened later does not help the narrator to clarify matters or provide her with a sense of conviction; it instead disrupts and disintegrates her narrative. Time is a potential threat for the way it exposes easy coherence as inaccurate and full of gaps. When the narrator recalls the first night they met one last time, she draws attention to the difference between what she knew then and what she knows now, and the way this changes the meaning of their first encounter: “Looking back at that evening was almost better than experiencing it the first time, because ... I did not have to worry about my part, and I was not distracted by doubt, because I

⁷ The narrator indicates that this is a discovery that took place very recently — “just rediscovered” (140). This offers a sense of immediacy and authenticity to her reaction; however, it also typifies the way her first convictions are often later rejected. The novel presents the narrator’s writing as a process in which her self-knowledge is constantly challenged and refreshed.

knew how it would come out” (23). She acknowledges the difference between her experience and her recollection of that experience. Even if the narrative account is related from her own perspective, it is still a different and “inaccurate” depiction of the experience itself. The narrator is relieved by her advantage over her former self and the removal of surprise; however, her knowledge of the outcome interferes with her re-presentation of the experience, making it impossible to see the beginning without “it also contain[ing] the end, as though the very air of that room ... were already permeated with the end of it” (23). Time and the knowledge it provides change the interpretation of the past, and this confounds the narrator’s attempt to retrieve and represent the authentic experience of the relationship — the desire for accuracy proves impossible to fulfil.

The distinction between what is communicated nonfictionally and fictionally becomes more problematic as the temporal gap between the two series of events gets smaller, that is, when the end of the narrator’s story of the past relationship approaches the beginning of her novel-writing process. The disappearance of this gap represents the formation of a continuity between her present novel-writing process, which is evidently nonfictional, and the events leading up to the present, which are part of the story of the past relationship but related in a form that is ambiguous between fiction and nonfiction. The result is that the nonfictional status of her present novel-writing process becomes suspect.

Near the end of the book, the narrator reveals that, after their breakup, she used writing to vent her frustration: “I wrote down everything I remembered about him, even though I could not always remember everything in the right order” (200). Soon afterwards, it occurred to her that these self-therapeutic writings can be formed into a story: “I began to wonder how the things I was writing could be formed into a

story, and I began to look for a beginning and an end” (203). This decision signals the transformation of life into narrative — an imposition of form in which experience is organised according to requirements such as coherence and sequentiality. As I mentioned, this does not produce intrinsically false representations of the experience, but what is included or what is omitted can lead to different, even antithetical, interpretations of it. With the purpose of writing a story in mind, the narrator offers a representation of the relationship that is already inaccurate, in the sense that experience and narrative cannot be exactly the same — a correspondence theory of accuracy is ruled out from the start.

From the quote above we see that the narrator’s understanding of the story form requires it to have “a beginning and an end” (203). The story of her past relationship does not end at their breakup but continues long after, and the narrator explains how she tried to decide a suitable ending even as “it was still going on” (219). Her comment here draws out another issue concerning the transformation of life into narrative. While experience and narrative are separate things, there is a feedback loop between them in which the desire for story — the anticipation of narrative coherence — is already informing the behaviour itself. The narrator envisions a coherence that is later realised. She recalls that at one point she decided to let the ex-lover store his stuff in her garage because “it would give me an end to the story” (203) — this forged ending functions to conclude the story.

When her ex-lover later came to move his stuff out of her garage, this was the last time she saw him and the finality seems to justify her decision. However, she “did not know it would be the last” at the time (3); it just happened to be so. The coincidence retrospectively confirms the rightness of what was then an arbitrary choice, challenging the supposed anteriority of experience to narrative and showing

them to be interrelated instead. This feedback loop also has to do with the narrator's general problem with memory, the way her recollection of the past is confounded by her present knowledge. Her forgetfulness blurs the time of experience and the time of narration, making it uncertain whether coherence is achieved authentically or artificially. This issue extends to the separation between autobiography and fiction — later revelations influence the way we interpret her narrative representation as one or the other, but without excluding either interpretation.

As the sequence of prior events approaches the present of writing, the difference between these levels of representation becomes less sharply defined, and produces a hermeneutic crisis that destabilises readers' interpretation of the entire text. Mark Currie calls this a "logical regress" that is produced when narrated time catches up with narration time — a crisis in self-narration "which makes it impossible to reflect on anything except reflection itself" (*About Time* 59). Currie uses Saint Augustine's *Confession* to describe this effect, in which Book XI's discussion on the nature of time serves as an avoidance of this crisis (ibid 67-70). The erosion of temporal distance is an erosion of the moral distance between the sinner and the reformed confessor, which threatens to contaminate the present truth with the falsity that has supposedly been left behind. In Davis's novel, the "temporal crisis" (ibid 68) is seemingly averted by alternating between the two series of events — the past relationship and the narrator's writing process — which proceed independently from one another, even if they are related chronologically. However, this avoidance is obtained at a cost — the postponement of the crisis is a continual postponement of the "end", the cessation of the narrative that will resolve its purpose.

The deictic shifts in the novel, as I mentioned, are a formalisation of the associative logic of memory, which can be seen as proceeding according to phenomenological time rather than cosmological, clock time. Memory is a significant issue in Barnes's novel as well, and I discussed in the previous chapter its use of free indirect discourse to heighten the sense of surprise. In Davis's novel, the shifting nature of memory is demonstrated through the narrator's liberal use of the word "now". This allows her to shift surreptitiously between different time loci, such as her experience at the time narrated through self-focalisation and her present recollection of the experience.⁸ This implicit shift happens within the same paragraph when the narrator recalls the last time she saw the ex-lover. She says: "It was at some point *now*, in the middle of summer, that I saw him for the last time ... though I am remembering it a little differently *today*"; later in the same paragraph: "I remember *now* that he moved his things from my garage into the garage of a friend" (225; added emphasis). The time loci of the two "now" and "today" do not correspond; only the second "now" refers to the actual present of narration time.

The word "now" is used in such a way that it threatens to collapse the temporal distance between the two separate time frames. Truth is confounded by time, which is not signalled definitively according to cosmological time — past and present — but phenomenologically. "Now" refers to the immediate deictic context without requiring a past and a future to uphold its meaning. We can draw on Frank Kermode's pairing of *chronos* and *kairos* — "simple chronicity" and time that is "charged with past and future" — which I also engaged with in the last chapter (46). The temporal ambiguity that is produced by both the narrator's forgetfulness and the

⁸ In Auster's novel, the shift of perspective is performed through the use of quotation. The narrator Fogg often quotes himself instead of narrating what he said, producing a sense of objectivity and authenticity. Scepticism towards Fogg's conviction is realised on the authorial level, which frames and evaluates his autobiography.

novel's structural design resists the movement from *chronos* to *kairos* — maintaining a constantly refreshing present that has no beginning or end.

The passing of time on both the story level and the discourse level flows towards the future. However, the two series of events are sequential, which means that the end of one, the narrator's past relationship, is connected to the beginning of the other, when she is writing her novel — and this makes the future of one the other's past. There is a circular temporal structure inside the novel that is dissociated from its discourse time, which stops at the end of the book. I suggest that it is the incongruity between these two forms of time that produces the hermeneutic problems discussed above. The formal circularity reflects the narrator's perplexity in writing the self, which centres upon the organising principle of her autobiography — *coherence*, as both a formal and an ethical category.

3. COHERENCE AND ACCURACY

Experience exceeds what can be represented in a single narrative account, and this leads to the question of choosing which aspect of the experience to foreground and the order of telling — how to organise what is relevant in a way that demonstrates a sense of formal integrity. Sequentiality is one of the requirements of the narrative form — only one episode and one version of the events can be told at a time. The narrator says that she “wanted all the parts of the story to be told at the same time”, while acknowledging that this is “want[ing] more than is possible” (11). She proceeds nonetheless without making a firm decision, with the consequence that what is told fails to reach the desired state of orderliness.

In terms of her autobiographical novel, the narrator has trouble deciding what “belongs” in it, sometimes having the impression that “maybe there is nothing that

does not belong” (89). The abundance of possibilities for the way to order her novel proves overwhelming. Order, beyond the sense of temporal sequence, represents an aesthetic shapeliness that is characterised by formal coherence and cohesiveness. The narrator knows that her novel needs to subscribe to the literary conventions of the novel form, in which there is a standard for “how much description to have” and how “to be economical” (57, 108). But she wants more than the kind of easy coherence that is accomplished by complying with generic conventions. The most difficult problem of writing her novel, the narrator says, is “to find a good order” (84). The narrator’s impression of what “a good order” would be changes from day to day: “today I am feeling that chronological order is not a good thing, even if it is easier, and that I should break it up” (102). But immediately she questions this judgment: “Or is it only that I am irritable today?” (102). Her scepticism drives her investigation but prevents her from reaching a decision at the same time, suspending the moment of deciding and prolonging her investigation. Her concern with order applies to the sentence level: “changing just a single word in a bad sentence could make it good. In fact, changing a punctuation mark could do that” (88). There is a circularity between what is “good” and what is orderly that involves the necessity of coherence for evaluating these two formal features, which are not related causally.

Recalling the narrator’s insistence on only using “elements of the actual story” (204) for her novel that I mentioned earlier, “a good order” implies that her novel needs to be able to be identifiable as based on her real experience, even if this is only recognised by herself. Yet although her novel is inspired by her real experience, whether or not it correlates with that experience is not ultimately the point. The issue of reference is put aside, in the same way that what is true is not relevant to the narrator’s evaluation of accuracy. What matters is that her readers will

be able to experience the quality of her experience, to step into her mind and observe the *pattern* of her thoughts and less the thoughts themselves — to understand the *form* of her understanding and not just what she understands. This emphasis is in accordance with my argument against a biographical reading of Davis’s novel in favour of approaching it as a fictional autobiography. Davis reveals in an interview with Knight that the narrator’s problems with her novel include actual problems she herself encountered while writing *The End of the Story*.⁹ However, the similarities are less important for my purposes than the problems that are investigated, problems that are involved in all acts of autobiography. The narrator’s concern with order is an investigation about form in which narrative coherence is both necessary and perpetually suspect in self-representation. The circularity of the argument is reflected in the circular structure of the novel.

Coherence allows the narrative representation to function as a single construct in a way that serves certain expressive or communicative purposes; in other words, it allows the work to have integrity. The dual meaning of the word “integrity” encapsulates the negotiation between aesthetics and ethics in the project of autobiography, in which the fulfilment of this criterion in one sense can be confused with its fulfilment in the other. Such a negotiation is characterised in Davis’s novel by the narrator’s desire for accuracy, not just as an ethical imperative but also an issue of aesthetic form; that is, as a criterion that concerns both fidelity and felicity. The narrator’s demand for accuracy begins as a matter of ethical accountability, providing an impartial account of what happened; she had previously blamed her ex-

⁹ Davis said in the interview that she became so self-conscious at one point that she suspected herself of doing something “just so that I could put it in the novel” (Interview with Knight 540). The comment indicates a certain connection between autobiography and fiction that the narrator is also engaging with. We can relate this to the feedback loop between the narrator’s behaviour and her story of the relationship, which I discussed earlier.

lover's immaturity for the failed relationship, but comes to realise that the "emptiness" between them "was not his fault but mine" (104).¹⁰ Later on, accuracy becomes a matter of form rather than reference and her dilemma concerns which narrative version is the most accurate one, in a sense evaluated against criteria of order, coherence, and formal integrity. However, coherence is both the means and the object of the evaluation, which renders the investigation faulty from the start.

It is noteworthy that the narrator raises the issue of accuracy with respect to writing a novel and not an autobiography. Her novel, as an indirect representation of herself, makes demand on her which are perplexing. She wants the novel to have "a good order" that "use[s] only the elements of the actual story" (84, 204), achieving integrity in terms of both felicity and fidelity. These two separate purposes are in tension with one another, however, producing the incongruity of requiring a novel to be accurate to life, if only to a certain degree. The narrator acknowledges her incomprehension about this self-imposed requirement to reconstruct the original order of the relationship for her novel: "I don't know why I need to reconstruct all this — whether it is important for a reason I haven't discovered yet, or whether I simply like to answer a question once I see how to answer it" (145). It may be that knowing the actual order will help her to discover "a good order" for her novel, but this connection is never clearly established. It is possible that there are other purposes the actual order may serve, but these speculations remain hypothetical. The ambiguity of the narrator's motive suggests a certain openness to alternative possibilities, but this attitude also prolongs and defers the end of this investigation — the narrator may discover how to answer her question, but not the answer itself.

¹⁰ She also realises how much "nastier" she became around him, which was a side of herself "that was flippant, condescending, self-centred, sarcastic, and mean" (104, 105).

Writing the novel requires the narrator to possess a certain clarity about who she was then and who she is now — to portray herself accurately. She expects herself to be able to objectively re-present the past relationship: “At times the novel seems to be a test of myself, both as I was then and as I am now” (52). She assumes her moral character is relevant to her discovering the good order that the novel needs: “if there was enough goodness in me then, or enough depth or complexity, this will work ... But if I was simply too shallow or mean-spirited, it will not work, no matter what I do” (52-53). She finds herself in a passive role in relation to her novel, despite being its author: “this novel has a life and will of its own” (102):

many parts of the story either refused to be told or demanded to be told in only one way ... the novel had to be just this long, leave out this much, include this much, change the facts this much, have this much description, be precise here but vague there, literal here but metaphorical there, use complete sentences here but incomplete there, an ellipsis here but none there, contracted verbs here but not there, etc. (197).

The novel seems to make every choice critical, as well as resisting any kind of easy coherence. This abstract definition of what the novel requires, however, does not offer the solution she needs to write it. The narrator remains in the process of discovering the good order that she believes the novel must have — it is an order that cannot be known prior to completion; but the novel is incomplete until a good order is found.

Formal coherence is necessary for an accurate representation, but it is not a reliable criterion for evaluating accuracy. The narrator’s problems with finding “a good order” are caused by this asymmetrical logic — “a good order” must be coherent, but not every form of coherence is necessarily “a good order”. The

requirement for narrative coherence is always suspect, always a posterior imposition of form that may betray the inherent qualities of the object. Coherence constitutes the logic of our narrative understanding and is the precondition for comprehension. If coherence is suspect, then comprehension itself becomes problematic. To reject coherence is to reject comprehension, and this makes the project of autobiography impossible.

The circularity of the argument on the value of coherence, however, may just as well be a constructive aspect of the investigation rather than a flaw. The seemingly closed, self-contained hermeneutic system becomes open when we recognise that the issue does not only concern the narrator herself and her own form of understanding but also involves others. Her novel is written for others to read, unlike the nonfictional story of the past relationship which is for her own benefit. I mentioned earlier that she needs to conform to literary conventions. Here, I want to take that thought further — the issue does not only concern the represented events but also the representational logic of her novel. The narrator wants to make sure her novel's order facilitates, and does not impede, her readers' understanding of it: "I am rearranging what actually happened so that it is not only less confusing and more believable, but also more acceptable or palatable" (108). She rearranges the sequence of events if she thinks something happened prematurely and leaves out an event if it is "too dreadful" or else "describe[s] it in milder terms" (109). What is "palatable", then, concerns both what is told and the way it is told. The narrator is reworking her materials to make the story comprehensible to others — she employs general forms of understanding when writing her novel, rather than only considering how to make sense to herself.

The narrator's indecision about which version is the most accurate can be seen as a side-effect of the agility of her narrative understanding, that is, her narrative creativity. She often reports that "today" she changes her mind about a decision made previously, or notices a mistake in her memory (102, 129, 225). Each day she discovers new possibilities to arrange the materials for her novel, which is to say that each day she constructs a new coherence out of the same materials, each day turns a previously correct and final decision into a false one — false not in the sense of incoherent, but as less qualified because a new, better one becomes available. On the other hand, she suspects that what is considered to be accurate is contaminated by her knowledge of the end, suggesting that her changes of mind result from a retrospective logic that is unfit for her purpose — producing a perspective from which her memory of the past relationship always already "contained the end" (23). The narrator struggles to understand why a formerly accurate version seems less so now and her lack of resolve: "I can't decide why I was sure one day and less sure another" (141). She mentions "the unhelpful notes" to herself that, rather than helping her remember, remind her that she forgets (204). Time makes her realise the limits of her self-understanding. Her response is to focus on the form of her understanding rather than the knowledge itself — the pattern of her thoughts that provides her own unique experience of the world.

The narrator's problem with judging what is orderly can be seen as caused by the disorder of her own thoughts: "my thoughts are not orderly — one is interrupted by another, or one contradicts another, and in addition to that, my memories are quite often false, confused, abbreviated, or collapsed into one another" (84-85). We can see that the fundamental problem is the incongruity between her thoughts — they do not form a coherent whole to correspond to the singular self. Still, the narrator is able

to articulate this disorder coherently even if she is unable to treat it, drawing upon a second-order ability to organise confused information into an orderly form. The self becomes divided due to this self-awareness, which exposes the doubleness found in all acts of self-representation. The narrator nevertheless seeks to establish the continuity of her selfhood across time by re-membering — that is, re-assembling — herself according to *how*, not *what*, she understands. This is unlike Webster in Barnes's novel, who constantly distances himself from his narrated self in order to protect his discursive ethos. Davis's narrator wants to overcome her forgetfulness and be able to plot the changes in her interpretation of the past relationship.

In characterising the significance of narrative understanding, Davis's novel theorises the value of coherence and evaluates real, not imaginary, forms of understanding. What is under scrutiny is how to be comprehensible to others, including oneself at a future point in time, and to understand the self that is recorded prior to the present moment. The idea of self as other is inherent in all acts of self-representation, a relationship that is engaged with rhetorically, not autobiographically, in fictional autobiographies. I suggest that one of the communicative purposes of Davis's novel, as a fictional autobiography, is to show the necessary negotiation between general and individual forms of narrative understanding in writing the self. As Richard Walsh points out, the kind of truth communicated in works of fiction is “less a matter of any kind of representational accuracy than an appeal to a specifically *narrative* rightness”, a “rightness” that demonstrates a “concord between the story in hand and other, prior narratives” (146; original emphasis). This “rightness” can be seen as a form of coherence that facilitates comprehension. We can also say that comprehension realises the “rightness” invoked in fiction. Readers do not just process data that is already

coherent, but are required to organise the particular data offered by the text in a way that makes sense to them — there are different forms of coherence used by each individual. Davis’s novel foregrounds the negotiation between different forms of narrative understanding and scrutinises the coherence or “rightness” of their organising logic.

Davis’s novel as a fictional autobiography demonstrates a higher degree of theorisation and reflexivity than my previous cases, by engaging with issues of narrative artifice and narrative understanding that are involved in the project of autobiography on the narratorial level. The narrator explores this process of finding a “right” way to communicate her personal experience in a fictional form — her novel needs to have “a good order” (84). As mentioned, the narrator’s idea of a good order involves preserving a certain fidelity to her real experience and making it “believable and “palatable” (108). What is “right” or “good” is conditioned by this personal requirement, as well as the generic conventions of the chosen literary form. She tries to learn the “right” way to write her autobiographical novel, contemplating “how much description to have” (57).¹¹ The narrator’s novel communicates a kind of truth that is not associated with reference but form — the narrator values coherence but is uncertain about the rightness or coherence of her own form of understanding.

On the authorial level, Davis’s novel thematises this issue, questioning the rightness of narrative coherence itself in the project of autobiography. It challenges the value of coherence by showing the way that formal integrity can be taken, and potentially mistaken, as a demonstration of ethical integrity — an orderly form can be misleading as well as accurate. Davis’s novel, as an unconventional and self-

¹¹ The narrator is inexperienced in the novel form, being a first-time novelist: “I don’t always trust myself, because I have never tried to write a novel before” (102).

reflexive text, goes further and calls into question the rightness of classifying it as a novel. Hofmann describes *The End of the Story* as “a novel that doesn’t much want to be a novel, that barely is a novel, but can be nothing else” (6). *The End of the Story* challenges readers’ understanding of it using existing categories, showing the limit of their applicability while also needing them to claim legitimacy. As Walsh points out, the particular form of understanding that fiction offers “is legitimate only to the extent that it succeeds in assimilating to the extant repertoire of narrative understanding, or narrative competence, defined by its cultural context” (146). The tension between the particular and the general, between the pursuit of formal and ethical integrity, drives the investigation.

Walsh suggests that forms of meaning or of understanding are culturally conditioned and can “effectively [usurp] the authority of logic” (146). We can see this played out in Davis’s novel, where the narrator uses logic or forms of coherence as a means to organise and so comprehend what seems to defy logic, such as the unexpected changes of human emotions and the way they destabilise interpretation. Doherty remarks that Davis’s fictions often demonstrate the way “the rigour of form controls unruly feeling”, and also the way “the intelligent mind that can break it down — that can observe and collate and analyse — might be the very same mind that is breaking down” (160). The threat of disintegration accompanies the process of integration, and the narrative proceeds in a delicate balance that must be sustained until the end. The narrator of Davis’s novel never decides which account is the most accurate one; however, she is able to formalise this problem, that is, to communicate her perplexity in a coherent way — the alternatives all qualify as accurate because they can all be understood coherently. The narrator’s narrative understanding is agile

and creative — she constructs narrative coherence in more than one way. But this also causes certain problems, because it produces rather than eliminates her options.

I want to take a moment to clarify my use of agility, an idea that implies a sense of speed and, perhaps, measure. It is not specified how frequently the narrator reports her writing process and so the turnover rate of her constructed coherence is unclear. Nevertheless, the narrator's narrative does embody a sense of speed by moving from one idea to the next, from one evaluation of accuracy to another, and between different forms of coherence. Therefore, I take agility to mean movement itself and not just speed, a dexterity of the mind that implies openness to what is different, and which is related to, but not the same as, creativity. The narrator applies existing forms of understanding to process her newly discovered feelings and also engages with the ways in which formerly established "truths" can be interpreted differently.

For the reader, reading Davis's novel exercises *our* narrative understanding. On this I second Walsh's point that, "[f]iction is able to undertake a constant renegotiation with the internal logic of mimesis, and so extend the scope of our narrative understanding, not least by appealing to quite different ways of making sense than the causal logic of Aristotle's model of action" (51). Fictions challenge our narrative understanding and train our capability to understand what is unfamiliar and to understand what is familiar in different ways. The exercise invited by fiction is "both an application of the capacity for narrative understanding we already possess and an opportunity to enhance it" (ibid 50-51). Davis's novel offers a representation of this exercise of narrative understanding while triggering the exercise of narrative understanding in its readers.

Walsh suggests that, for the sake of this exercise, imaginary data is used to demonstrate real forms of narrative understanding: “It is the particulars that are fictional, not the mimetic process” (51). However, it can also be the case that the particulars are real but used imaginatively. This is what the narrator is doing and, as I discuss in the next chapter, this is also what Philip Roth is doing, using his own life imaginatively to explore the project of autobiography. Writing an autobiographical novel, Davis’s narrator uses what is (to her) real data imaginatively to serve a real purpose, a purpose that is only revealed near the end of the novel. If we foreground the authorial communicative act, Davis’s novel as a fictional autobiography uses imaginary data imaginatively for a real purpose — to thematise and theorise a certain perplexity concerning narrative coherence that is experienced in writing the self. Davis may also be using “real” data for her novel — that is, using her own real experience of writing *The End of the Story*. Evidence of this can be drawn from her interview with Knight, which details the process and design behind her novel. However, this reading, which suggests that both the narrator and Davis are conducting the same *form* of writing — using real data imaginatively for a real purpose — requires evidence external to the text. My discussion foregrounds the aesthetic integrity of Davis’s novel that does not depend upon this outsourced information. *The End of the Story* scrutinises the value of coherence that both facilitates and confounds comprehension — forms of coherence convey meaning, but the meaning can refer to a purely formal content.

4. “THE END OF THE STORY”

The title of Davis’s novel, *The End of the Story*, also demonstrates the kind of ambiguity in interpretation that is found in the text. Different combinations of the

meanings of the words “end” and “story” produce different interpretations of the title. The word “end” can mean “a point that marks the extent of something”, “cessation of a course of action, pursuit or activity”, or “an outcome worked toward”, i.e. the purpose of the activity in question (“End”, *Merriam-Webster Online*). The title can thus be seen as referring to the “final part”, the “cessation”, or the “purpose” of the story. The compression of these multiple meanings in one word suggests that the purpose will be revealed or clarified in the final part of the story or once the story ceases — the three meanings coincide at the end of the book. The ambiguity of the word “end” can also be understood as entangling the representation and the rhetoric of the novel — interpretation of the title differs when we choose to foreground one or the other. The word “story” complicates matters because it can refer to a series of events or the act of storytelling, which can also constitute a story itself. The vagueness of the word “story” — not signifying a single meaning — can be seen as grounded in the basic ambiguity between the story level and the discourse level of narrative, which has been much debated in the field of narratology.

Formalist and structuralist approaches to the analysis of narrative introduce various binaries to account for its constitution, such as *fabula/syuzhet* (Russian formalists), story/discourse (Seymour Chatman), and story/plot (E. M. Forster). Boris Tomashevsky, one of the Russian formalists, defines *fabula* (story) as “the aggregate of mutually related events reported in the work” and *syuzhet* (plot) as the way those “events *are arranged* and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented in the work” (66, 67; original emphasis). Put simply, *fabula* is the informative content that is told, and *syuzhet* refers to the telling or the way the information is organised and communicated. Tomashevsky’s definition of

these two categories, however, does not specify what would qualify as an event and the criteria for its relevance.

Seymour Chatman uses a structuralist approach to formulate a model in which narrative has a “deep structure” (story) and a “surface representation” (discourse): “In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*” (*Story and Discourse* 21, 19; original emphasis). Chatman considers narrative as a structure of various components that is communicated between a sender and a receiver. In terms of “story”, Chatman sees it as an isolatable structure of narrative that is independent from the medium of representation, calling this the “transposability of the story” (ibid 20). Barbara Herrnstein Smith rejects this concept of an “ur-story” on account of the inseparability between narrative and its communicative context: “no narrative version can be independent of a particular teller and occasion of telling ... every narrative version has been constructed in accord with some set of purposes or interests” (218, 219). Smith’s approach foregrounds the communicative aspect of narrative and defines narrative discourse as “verbal acts consisting of *someone telling someone else that something happened*” (ibid 232; original emphasis). In this model, what is told depends upon the communicative context, which determines the way the information is interpreted.

Smith’s emphasis on narrative pragmatics challenges Chatman’s dualistic model for its assumption that these various forms of telling can be traced back to a single origin. Smith points out that narrative communication is conditioned by circumstantial and psychological variables — what would be considered to be the degree zero “story” is dependent upon “hierarchies of relevance and centrality”, which are context-driven and variable rather than universal (B. Smith 221). For example, to describe a narrative in which the sequence of events is rearranged or

reordered assumes the existence and relevance of a hypothetical, chronological narrative account that is independent from its utterance (ibid 228). Readers can reconstruct such sequences using their knowledge of conventions of literary genres or cognitive models of human behaviours (as I have done earlier for Davis's novel); however, this reconstructed narrative, according to Smith, is not necessary or universal, nor does it validate Chatman's theory that every narrative has a "deep structure". Smith's pragmatic approach directs attention to the reception of narrative communication and foregrounds the diversity amongst readers, expressing a critical interest in this kind of "messiness". Smith does not use the term "story" in her critical discussions, but she does argue that it does not refer, as Chatman understands it, to some kind of raw material for discourse to process.

In response to Smith's criticism, Chatman reasserts his view that the purpose of theory is not to account for every contingency but to establish "a logical model" of narrative communication ("Reply" 805). Indeed, Chatman's model does not concern itself with the actual transmission of narrative discourse, but the narratorial and the implied authorial communicative acts. Nevertheless, besides the abstraction that Smith criticises, Chatman's dualistic model is challenged when the story that is being told includes an act of storytelling, with the result being that there are embedded acts of telling and stories nested within one another — discourse is redoubled and the concept of an unmediated story becomes less distinct. This is what we find in Davis's novel — not only is there an evident story being told, the narrator's act of telling constitutes a story itself.

Different combinations of the meanings of the words "story" and "end" multiply the senses of the novel's title, "the end of the story", to embrace "the final part/cessation/purpose of the series of events/telling". The title's meaning is not

exclusive to one combination of the words; whichever combination is selected does not disqualify other ways to interpret the title — the ambiguity suggests a sense of openness rather than finality. I want to draw attention to the way these various meanings coincide in these five words, a coincidence that is realised in the final pages of Davis's novel, when the narrator contemplates why the final episode of the past relationship is the appropriate place to end the story of the past relationship. The discovery of an answer to this question allows her to cease narrating both the story of the past relationship and the process of her novel-writing. I suggest that this latter sequence of events constitutes the second "story" within the novel. The narrator's answer to her own question, however, is not *the* answer; her answer is nevertheless satisfactory because it *fits* the overall coherence of her narrative and does not upset its integrity.

The question of the final part of the narrator's story of her past relationship is introduced near the beginning of the book, which begins with the last time she saw the ex-lover and the last time she went looking for him at his last address, ending up at a bookstore resting over a cup of tea. After recounting these events at the start of the book, the narrator begins a separate section with a reflection on the place of this recollection in her story and her novel: "This seemed to be the end of the story, and for a while it was also the end of the novel — there was something so final about the bitter cup of tea" (11). The narrator returns to the bookstore episode again in the final pages of the book and considers its place at "the beginning": "I have not moved the cup of bitter tea from the beginning, so it may make no sense to say that the end of the story is the cup of bitter tea brought to me in the bookstore" (235). She does not indicate what the episode is the beginning of — it is at the beginning of her narrative but also at the beginning of the published book, which is a novel. The ambiguity

suggests that the narrator is making a metaleptic remark by gesturing towards the structure of the book that she is within. She argues that having the cup of tea as both the beginning and the end “make[s] no sense” (235) — a repetition that disrupts the order of her story. However, it is a repetition only if the “story” in question is what I am calling the second story — the story of her novel-writing which contains the story of her past relationship. The beginning of the story of the past relationship should be the first night they met, and not the cup of tea. And yet, this interpretation would still be problematic because the end of the second story is not the cup of tea but a reflection about that episode and its place in her narrative. The narrator assumes a symmetry that is flawed rather than true. The vagueness of her phrasing here and elsewhere engages with the thematisation of accuracy on the authorial level — accuracy is both a subject matter of and enacted discursively by the narratorial communicative act.

The narrator, putting aside her uneasiness about this supposed repetition, discovers a way to see this bookstore episode as nevertheless a fitting end: “I still feel it is the end, and I think I know why now” (235). The time it took for her to arrive at this conclusion is the duration between the beginning and the end of the book. Even though she makes the decision at the beginning, time is required for her to understand why it is appropriate — it is coherent with the inner logic of her whole project. The narrator’s statement here is a rare show of conviction, unlike her persistent doubt and oscillation between different forms of accuracy. However, the authority of the explanation that she supplies depends upon its appearance at the end of the book. Even if she does change her mind and doubt herself again, we will never know because the book ends here — the sense of conviction is final. She goes on to give her full answer: “I think one reason the cup of tea in the bookstore seems like

the end of the story even though the story went on afterward is that I did stop searching for him at that point” (236). The bookstore episode is a fitting end for the story of the past relationship because it represents the cessation of her obsession with the ex-lover. This more concrete explanation is better than her intuitive justification at the beginning of the book, “something so final about the bitter cup of tea” (11). In the longer quote above, the word “story” is used twice but does not refer to the exact same thing. The first “story” refers to the story of the past relationship, which has the bookstore episode as the end; the story that “went on afterward” is what I call the second story, which retells and reinterprets the meaning of the first story in the light of her novel-writing.

Knight points out that these two stories “seem to inhabit one another” and regards them as a single continuous story (215). However, despite the embedding and their chronological connection, I suggest that the stories are separate narratives each with their own organising logic — they need to be distinguished because each revolves around a different subject matter and serves different communicative purpose(s). A major part of the second story, the one that “went on afterward”, concerns the narrator writing a novel based on this past relationship. The purpose of her novel is never clearly stated, but we can see that writing it required her to organise her disordered and emotional interpretations of the past relationship into a coherent and more objective account. The narrator only becomes concerned with accuracy when she is writing her novel; her nonfictional story of the past relationship foregrounds her own experience and is expected to be subjective.

Accuracy, the narrator’s self-imposed requirement, informs both the formal and the ethical integrity that this act of self-writing required, and is only meaningful when demonstrating narrative coherence. The narrator uses real data imaginatively to

produce a work of fiction, which serves a real purpose, even if not deliberately — it makes her understand the past relationship and herself more clearly. The final part of the second story has her reflecting on the meaning of the final part of the other story, that is, the bookstore episode. The endings of the two stories coincide by focusing on the same episode. The end of the book represents the final part of the two series of events and the cessation of the storytellings. In this way, the separate threads of the narrator's narrative converge at the book's ending, revealing the *telos* or "final cause" of the work and activating the different meanings of the word "end" — final part, cessation, purpose. The different meanings of the book's title are realised and synchronised at the moment of its completion.

The ending of Davis's novel signifies finality, but it also gravitates towards its beginning and thus seemingly reopens the investigation. A detailed account of the bookstore episode is placed at the beginning of the book, and the narrator's reflections of it at the end invites readers to revisit it. This dovetailing of the end to the beginning bends the novel's trajectory into a circular rather than a linear, progressive form. The narrator explains that the cup of tea represents the cessation of her attachment to the ex-lover, but she also gives a second reason why it is an appropriate ending:

this cup of tea, prepared for me by a stranger to give me some relief from my exhaustion, was not only a gesture of kindness, from a person who could not know what my trouble was, but also a ceremonial act... And since all along there had been too many ends to the story, and since they did not end anything, but only continued something, something not formed into any story, I needed an act of ceremony to end the story. (236)

Interpreting the cup of tea as “an act of ceremony” makes it purely formal, in which its meaning is confined to its performance. Her decision to regard it as a ceremonial act puts aside the overwhelmingly plural and indeterminate possible meanings that the bookstore episode offers. It avoids the retrospective bias of her memory that obscures the exact expression on the bookstore assistant’s face when he brought her the cup of tea — the impossibility to confirm an accurate recollection of his face makes it impossible to settle on a single, exclusive interpretation.

The narrator says that this second reason is “maybe even more important” than the other one (236), and this suggests that formal coherence is valued as an antidote to psychological perplexity. This can be considered as an “ethical” resolution. Geoffrey Galt Harpham suggests that ethical enquiry is more about the formalisation of a problem and less about providing a solution: “Ethics does not solve problems, it structures them. And yet the durability of ethics, the fact that we continue to have what Žižek calls ‘ethical intuitions,’ suggests an ongoing commitment to the task” (“Ethics” 404-405). Form facilitates comprehension, which offers a sense of clarity and encourages action. In this way, ethics is understood as a practice, and autobiography as an ethical project can be seen as a *work* that involves *working*, an activity that has the potential to change the agent her/himself. We can relate this to Derek Attridge’s idea of “creation”, which includes both “working actively towards a goal and passively allowing oneself to be surprised by what one could not have foreseen” (*Work of Literature* 5). The sense of surprise appears in realising the self as also other to oneself, and this is one of the sources of the narrator’s perplexity in Davis’s novel, which she investigates rather than resigns herself to this unknowingness or insists on the finality of a chosen interpretation, as Webster does in Barnes’s novel.

Knight takes issue with the narrator's displacement of the problem that confuses ending with closure: "[t]he bitter cup of tea offers something more akin to a psychological, rather than a genuine, closure" in which the narrator achieves "a degree of closure but no final resolution" (207). It may be worth asking what "genuine" closure Knight has in mind, and whether its abstraction justifies the precedence it assumes in his account. Davis's novel enacts a sense of proximity rather than the absoluteness of touch, and this unreachability is critically significant. The opacity of the narrator's memory and the minimal details of the novel sustain the multiplicity rather than the exclusivity and finality of interpretation — the impossibility of accurately representing her past relationship is not a failure, but an accurate demonstration of the inaccuracy of language in expressing human relationships. Her alternative strategy, then, is to find an answer that fits, one that makes the entire construct coherent and integrated, and not one that trumps and disqualifies every other possible answer.

The concept of integrity expresses this sense of openness and tolerance of ambiguity. Coherence, as the narrative integrity of the narrator's autobiography, represents a certain shapeliness that can be seen as the aesthetics of this openness — the imposition of form shows that there is more than one way to construct coherence, acknowledging the existence of other possibilities as well as other forms of integrity. The point becomes, to use John Guillory's formulation once again, a matter of choosing *between goods* that are all coherent, not between what is "good" (coherent) and what is "bad" (incoherent). Coherence, as also a form of understanding, indicates the way that ideas need to be arranged together in a certain manner for an argument to be valid, but without needing to exclude other arguments, even if one can disprove them. Davis's novel as an aesthetic whole integrates separate lines of

reasoning into a single argument about “the end of the story”. Readers produce different interpretations of this argument and are called upon to defend their “rightness”, which does not exclude other forms of “rightness”.

Davis’s novel as a fictional autobiography offers an accurate representation of the inaccuracy of self-representation. The self is messy, contradictory, incoherent and in the process of being formed rather than a finished product. There is no unitary self to be articulated in the first place, and the narrative product inevitably displays the seams and gaps of this artificial construct. Josh Cohen’s psychoanalytical reading of Davis’s novel sees the narrator’s hesitation and insecurity as demonstrating the void of consciousness — resorting to a ceremonial interpretation of the cup of tea is “an affirmation of the impossibility of subjective completeness” (“Reflexive Incomprehension: On Lydia Davis” 514). This echoes Knight’s criticism that, “[t]he narrator and reader ... conspire to forge a sense of ending, even as we know that this ending is both artificial and incomplete” (207). However, readers need not participate in this conspiracy and agree with the narrator’s interpretation of the end of her story (Cohen and Knight do not), nor does the authorial communicative act necessarily align with the narrator’s and endorse her argument. Cohen and Knight evaluate the narrator’s narrative against a hypothetical state of authenticity and wholeness — in the sense of formal completion as well as mental constitution — but these categories are more appropriate in theory than in practice. Davis’s novel offers a particular example of autobiography as a way to think about the act of autobiography in general, and it is important to understand why the narrator’s particular method of engaging with the project of autobiography works and works *for her* — the integrity of her autobiography is singular.

The narrator resolves her perplexity not by finding the solution and thus eliminating the problem, but by understanding why it is a problem in the first place — the matter *is* the manner, that is, the form of her narrative understanding.

Interpreting the cup of tea as a ceremonial act works because it represents a formal coherence that befits her investigation of form, which makes the investigation itself consistently about formal coherence. The coherence of her investigation represents her coherent understanding, but a degree of incomprehension about herself nevertheless remains. Instead of focusing on the narrator's lack of knowledge, we can reconceptualise it as partial knowledge — the self is partially knowable, not wholly unknowable. The “genuine” closure that Knight values (207) assumes a position that is able to judge objectively what is genuine and what is not; but this is exactly what is put into question by Davis's novel — it shows such a position to be uninhabitable; time overturns the conviction required to sustain that affirmation.

The narrator's past relationship retreats further into obscurity the more she recalls it in the name of accuracy. The difficulty, however, makes accuracy more desirable. In a similar way, awareness of the incompleteness and inaccuracy of one's self-representation reinforces the impression that the self is complete and unified, but happens to escape representation due to one's inherent weakness. This impression, however, is a residual effect of self-narration rather than a natural state of being prior to the narrative act. Instead of Cohen's argument that “the novel can only be thought in terms of its own failure to fulfil itself” (“Reflexive” 510), I suggest that *The End of the Story* communicates the realisation that the project of autobiography is not something fulfillable — consciousness cannot grasp the self in its entirety not because one is weak, but because the self is not something that is graspable as a coherent, unified whole. The self exceeds what is narratable as a single construct,

and the question becomes finding a way to narrate it that nevertheless sustains a sense of integrity, in terms of both formal coherence and an ethical commitment to undertake the project of autobiography despite the challenges. Davis's novel shows the necessary tension between these dual demands in writing the self.

5. STORYING (IN) DAVIS'S FICTION

There is a sense of self-alienation and uncanniness in the way that the narrator is constantly in disagreement with herself about what happened in the past relationship and about the adequacy of her work-in-progress novel. She says at one point: "At times I have the feeling someone else is working on this [novel] with me" (67). This is partly caused by her forgetfulness, producing "the curious feeling" that her own editorial decisions were "made by someone else" (67). The narrator seeks to overcome her self-forgetfulness by investigating the logic behind her own decisions, which involves clarifying how her thoughts came to be and not just what they are. Davis's novel foregrounds the logic of the telling rather than the content of the told, and this emphasis is staged in the way that the narrator's primary concern shifts from accuracy to the evaluation of accuracy, which involves the form of her understanding.

The End of the Story challenges the novel form and fits uneasily in this literary category. Story as a looser category may be more applicable, but this ambiguous literary and theoretical term deserves a sharper definition, one that clarifies its currency in common and critical usages. Walsh's reversal of Chatman's definition of story and discourse is a good starting point. As mentioned earlier, Chatman's structuralist model of narrative specifies that, "story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*" (*Story and Discourse* 19). Walsh's

pragmatic model reverses Chatman's formulation: "sujet [discourse] is *what* we come to understand as a given (fictional) narrative, and fabula [story] is *how* we come to understand it" (68; added emphasis). In this sense, story or fabula does not have a prior existence residing in the text itself or on an abstract level; it is "a by-product of the interpretative process by which we throw into relief and assimilate the sujet's rhetorical control of narrative information" (ibid 67). Story as rhetorically defined is "a means rather than an end in itself" that facilitates our understanding of "the rhetorical weight and distribution of salient values in the narrative itself" (ibid 68, 67). What is valued in works of fiction is not just having an interesting story, but telling it interestingly. To identify the "story" of a narrative facilitates one's understanding of just how interesting that is.

Fiction exercises our narrative understanding and extends its scope by challenging our ability to make sense of its content. Understanding it requires us to process these materials into a coherent order — a coherence that does not disqualify other forms of coherence, but is congruent with one's own faculty of understanding. Walsh's pragmatic model views the act of reading fiction as an "exercise" (50), a practice rather than a passive activity, and I propose to describe this activity as an act of *storying*. One's interpretative process can be conceived as a story in the restricted sense of the word, as having a beginning (when one encounters the text) and an end (arriving at a coherent interpretation of the text). Storying is performed on a higher level when readers not only understand the way the fictional content is presented but are able to articulate how they arrived at that understanding *as a narrative* — to narrate the form of one's understanding and not just what one understands. This metahermeneutic exercise can be told as a story — *a story of storying* — which communicates how and why one arrives at such an interpretation of the text, while

others may proceed through different or even antithetical interpretative pathways. My proposal of story as a verb and as a practice supports the currency of the word and adds value by emphasising the work — the mental effort and the reflexive exercise — involved in this concept. Storying also provides a way to understanding Davis’s practice as a fiction writer and the reason her main literary productions are aptly called “stories”.

Davis has published seven collections of stories with the latest *Can’t and Won’t* appearing in 2014. Some of these short pieces have been collected in anthologies of short stories or prose poems. In general, however, Davis offers a unique collection of works that traverse these literary categories in the variety of their subject matter and length — ranging from a single sentence to several pages long. Davis herself sees her stories as loosely categorised into “plotted stories” of the more conventional kind and “logical argument stories” (Interview with Prose 51). The second kind are partly inspired by her struggle to write them and deals with the kind of questions arising in the writing process. They examine the inner workings of the story itself, revealing the nuts and bolts, the mechanics that makes it work, that is, achieve formal coherence as an aesthetic whole. For example, Davis’s stories “What was Interesting” and “The Centre of the Story”, originally collected in *Almost No Memory* (1997), examine the process of storytelling that applies to their own makings. These two stories are told through internal focalisation upon a third-person female protagonist, who analyses what belongs to a story and how to measure the level of interest that justifies its inclusion. There is a circularity in the argument — a “centre” needs to be identified first in order to set the criteria of relevance, but this centre relies on the collective contribution of its parts in order to be justified as such, parts which are still in the process of being selected. The dilemma is articulated but

not resolved, and is similar to the way formal coherence serves as an answer to perplexity in *The End of the Story*. I suggest that Davis's stories and her novel can be understood as *stories of storying*, showing the process of organising seemingly irrelevant and isolated materials and making them fit together as a coherent whole. This "fitness" is realised in the way that they are finished pieces of work, or stories in the restricted sense with a beginning and an end.

The End of the Story contains traces of some of Davis's stories published prior to her novel, and the order of reading them can influence our interpretation. "The Letter" and "The Mouse", originally collected in *Break It Down* (1985), both portray an uneasy relationship between a woman and a man and are similar to the narrator's experience in Davis's novel. The speaker of "Story", originally collected in *Story and Other Stories* (1983), confronts her lover about meeting his ex-girlfriend, which appears in Davis's novel as one of the quarrels between the narrator and her ex-lover. Knight suggests that if *The End of the Story* is read first, the age difference between the narrator and her ex-lover, which she acknowledges when recalling that "[i]t surprised me, over and over, to find that I was with such a young man" (77), would be applied to the lovers in "Story", which does not specify their comparative age. This external influence heightens the woman's sense of defeat in "Story". Davis's novel "forces a reconsideration of the past narrative. It transforms, or rewrites, the other, without materially altering it" (Knight 206). Time transforms truth by producing knowledge. Davis's published works enact the way the present rewrites the past, which is a common feature of self-narration. *The End of the Story* shows the narrator aware of and seeking to overcome this retrospective bias.

"Story" and *The End of the Story* are also related in the main characters' forms of understanding, approaching their respective problems by organising

possible answers into sets of either-or alternatives. “Story” shows the speaker trying to reconstruct the motive and the truth behind her lover’s explanation for seeing his ex-girlfriend, paring down the possibilities into binaries but also complicating matters by wanting to measure the extent of his feelings: “whether he is angry at me or not; if he is, then how angry; whether he still loves her or not; if he does, then how much; whether he loves me or not; how much; how capable he is of deceiving me in the act and after the act in the telling” (*Collected Stories* 6). “Story” ends with this formalisation of the jealousy and hurt in a lover’s quarrel.

The End of the Story stages a similar kind of analytical diligence as a way to treat emotional pain. The narrator realises her memory of the ex-lover is often contradictory and thinks this is “either because he was inconsistent or because of my own mood now” (176). Later on, she comments on this contradiction again: “Either all these things were true at different times or I remember them differently depending on my mood now” (234). Her mood influences her memory of the ex-lover and her interpretation of his behaviour. The narrator’s imposition of form as an attempt to achieve order is counterproductive because the either-or alternatives are not exclusive — deciding one is true would not disqualify the other. In this way, the attempt to simplify matters instead produces more materials to inspect and sift through. This flaw in her reasoning does not suggest that the narrator is irrational; rather, the flaw in her logic is staged for the novel’s rhetorical purposes, which shows that the imposition of an orderly form does not work because human affairs exceed the coherence of logic. One of the challenges of autobiography is grounded in this idea of excess — life overwhelms narrative; the self exceeds its own attempt to comprehend itself. The project of autobiography is driven by this tension between

the desire for formal completeness and the ethical imperative to be true to the unruliness of experience.

The “story” in the title of Davis’s novel can refer to story in the restricted sense of the word — the story of the narrator’s past relationship, which is part of the story that “went on afterward” (236), both terminating at the end of the book. It can also refer to the story of storying in the novel — the narrator’s attempt to understand herself by reconstructing her own interpretative pathways in which the logic of her own particular form of narrative understanding becomes clearer. There is a step missing, however, because the narrator is not necessarily articulating this metahermeneutic exercise *as a story* and may be simply documenting this process. And yet, if her novel includes a representation of herself writing the novel, this suggests that the entire text of *The End of the Story* is her novel, making her novel and Davis’s novel textually identical. This makes the narrator simultaneously within and outside the fiction, simultaneously synchronic and posterior to the fiction. She crowds Davis’s role as the “author” of the text, but the two “authors” of *The End of the Story* claim that role in different capacities. The text is an autobiographical novel for the narrator based on what she reveals in the text; for Davis, it is a fictional autobiography.¹²

Davis said in an interview that one of her designs for the novel is to “give the impression that you’re stepping inside someone’s mind” (Interview with Aguilar and Fronth-Nygren, par. 24) — a mind that is watching itself think. From a different perspective, this implies the sense of being intruded upon by a foreign presence, which can be oneself — *a self*, not *the self* — which one does not recognise. *The End of the Story*’s reflexive structure renders more explicit the doubleness intrinsic

¹² It is Davis’s autobiographical novel only by considering evidence external to the text.

in all acts of autobiography. This doubleness offers a gap that can be capitalised upon, as with Webster's ethos management in Barnes's novel, but it is also one that can undermine the integrity of the self-representation.

The relationships between Davis and the characters in her fiction are not necessarily autobiographical, despite there being recognisable similarities.¹³ Doherty emphasises the female perspective in Davis's fiction, which mainly has female characters, starting from the impersonal parables depicting female pain in *The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories* (1976), the confessional style in tension with analytical rigour in *Break It Down* (1986), a philosophical curiosity focusing on formal experiments after *The End of the Story* (1995), and then an unapologetic wilfulness in her latest *Can't and Won't* (2014). For my purposes, the interest of Davis's fiction is the experience of the "I" that is being represented and self-reflexively scrutinised. The self as a fascinating study is less a sign of narcissism than a demonstration of a curiosity for the unknown or the partially knowable.

Davis's fiction foregrounds the pattern of thought with which the protagonist comprehends the world — the how of representing a life, not just the particularity of the life lived. *The End of the Story* shows the mental processing of life experience performed by a particular person who is and is not Davis. It is "autobiographical" in the sense that we have an autodiegetic narrator performing self-narration, regardless of whether the representation is pure invention or based on Davis's real life. *The End of the Story* is a performance of self-reflection, in a sense that includes both the narrator, who is and is not Davis, and the text that turns back on itself, remembers

¹³ On the autobiographical elements in her fiction, Davis said in an interview that: "I'm selecting from my experience, skewing it and slanting it, taking things out, adding others"; "But then another kind of taking-from-life is taking not the incident but the pattern" (Interview with McCaffery 73). This suggests that Davis's fiction engages primarily with the forms or patterns of life, not seeking to re-present her own life but using it as inspiration.

itself by referring to earlier passages as well as dis-membering or dis-integrating itself by discounting their meaning and relevance. Both Davis and the narrator are writing a fictional version of themselves and are concerned less about whether this made thing *is* them than with how to make this character *like* themselves — to show what it is like to experience the world in their shoes, stepping into their minds.

Davis's novel formalises the perplexity of autobiography caused by narrative coherence and, in storying the investigation of the self, shows the way coherence enables, but also disables, the text's narrative integrity. *The End of the Story* invites readers to exercise their narrative understanding and challenges them to produce, and perhaps to share, the story of their storying. Here, my own storying of Davis's novel ends.

Chapter V

On the Contrary:

The Rightness of Philip Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*

“The writer redefined the permissible. *That* was the responsibility.”

— *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), p.377; original emphasis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The last text that I discuss in this thesis raises the stakes by using the author's own life to explore the tension between aesthetics and ethics in the project of autobiography. Philip Roth published *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988) after two productive decades of writing fictions, marking the beginning of a turn in his career that directly incorporates his identity and real life within the fictional realm. There is a factual narrative within the book about Roth's personal life, from his childhood until the publication of his breakthrough novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). However, this avowedly autobiographical narrative is nested within a frame narrative that is clearly fictional, consisting of a pair of letters between Roth himself and one of his fictional characters, Nathan Zuckerman, who is the protagonist and the narrator of Roth's previous five novels.¹ The opening letter shows “Roth”, a textualised version of the author, addressing and seeking advice from Zuckerman about the accompanying “manuscript”, asking whether it should be published and if it is “any good?” (10).² The ambiguity of the word “good” embraces both moral and

¹ These are *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Prague Orgy* (1985), and *The Counterlife* (1986).

² The frame narrative refers to the embedded narrative both as a “manuscript” (4, 6, 9, 161, 170, 187, 188), indicating that these are private letters exchanged before publication and reprinted here, and as a

aesthetic evaluation, and indicates a possible tension between the moral characteristics of the life-story and its aesthetic value.³ Roth's letter does not specify which interpretative frame to use, thus prompting reflection on the necessity of contextual information for making value judgments; that different framings of the text result in different assessments of its merit.

Roth's book playfully violates the ontological separateness between the creator and the creation, signalling its fictiveness from the very first page. The text's double consciousness — presenting itself as nonfiction while revealing itself as fiction — disperses and undermines the authorial ethos, making its purported sincerity simultaneously ironic. Zuckerman, in his reply at the end of the book, vehemently objects to Roth's intention to publish and criticises the genre of autobiography as deceptive rather than enlightening: "With autobiography there's always another text, a countertext, if you will, to the one presented. It's probably the most manipulative of all literary forms" (172). Zuckerman's letter also includes his wife Maria's opinions about Roth's autobiography, which offer a different kind of argument against its truthfulness: "Nothing is random"; "This is just such an extraordinarily, relentlessly coherent narrative" (189, 190). Maria draws attention to the essential difference between life and narrative, that one cannot be contained by the other, even if it can be confused with the other: "Existence isn't always crying out for the intervention of the novelist. Sometimes it's crying out to be lived" (191). Maria sees the project of autobiography as narcissistic and unnecessary, but

"book" (8, 10, 162, 164, 165, 178, 179, 187, 192), as if it is already typeset and published. The inconsistency plays with the book's own conceit.

³ The doubleness of "good" is comparable to the doubleness of "integrity", which encapsulates ethics and aesthetics. I subscribe to John Guillory's formulation of the difference between morality and ethics, as discussed in chapter one, but Roth's book uses them interchangeably as a foil to aesthetics.

simultaneously acknowledges her lack of authority on the matter given that she has never attempted it herself (190).

Readers evaluate Roth's authorial ethos indirectly through his characters and switch interpretative frames according to the textual cues, which reorient and disorient us at the same time. The book is a case of nonfictional life writing that uses both fictive and nonfictive discourse, making it difficult for readers to choose a single, appropriate interpretative framework from which to evaluate it. The explicit fictiveness of the book and the dichotomy between fact and fiction that it sets up suggest the idea that fiction is both anathema to the project of autobiography and a resource to explore its challenges. This "play" of fiction entangles two different interpretations of the word. Fiction is used both in a negative sense, as a product that is subjected to the distortion of narrative artifice and confabulation, and in a positive sense, as referring to the use of fictive rhetoric in which the (fictional) representation is offered less for its informative value and more for its contribution to certain communicative purpose(s). There is also a conflation between fiction and narrative, in the idea that narrative artifice renders any autobiography a product of fiction. In "display[ing] the artifice of no artifice" (McCrum, par. 57), Roth's book resists the crude attempt to categorise it as either fictional or nonfictional, offering its own distinct sense of "rightness" that can only be characterised as "Rothian".

Zuckerman, in the concluding letter, displays a critical sensibility that overrides the author-narrator "Roth" figure in the opening letter, but his own ethos in turn is brought into question towards the end of the book.⁴ The contrariness of the

⁴ Robert Lehnert distinguishes between the *protagonist* Roth narrated in the autobiography, the *author-narrator* "Roth" who signs his name at the end of the opening letter and is understood as the author of the embedded autobiography, and the flesh-and-blood *author* Roth, whose presence is first of all established in the title page (780). My discussion uses Lehnert's terminology flexibly rather than systematically, such as when it is useful to separate the different voices in order to draw attention to the layeredness of the book.

textual voices taking turns to criticise and undermine each other's authority also undermines their own. It calls into question the proper name as a form of identity, showing the way it can be forged by the author himself. Liesbeth Korthals Altes, in discussing the authenticity of the self-reflection on display in autofiction, points out that, “[t]hematisations of the impossibility of being true, sincere, and authentic have unsurprisingly become themselves a powerful topos of sincerity” (193). I dealt with the issue of sincerity in chapter three on Barnes's novel and its unreliable narrator, whose repeated refreshing of his discursive ethos serves as a way to demonstrate his sincerity. Roth's book uses a different strategy — it refreshes the fictiveness of the narrative, using the negation of truth, sincerity, and authenticity as a way to assert them on a higher, rhetorical level. The use of metalepsis within Roth's book, as a demonstration of the text's self-consciousness, does not signify authenticity but rather demonstrates the regress of self-knowledge — readers' interpretations of Zuckerman's insights regarding Roth's character, which are credible because Zuckerman *is* Roth, nevertheless oscillate between attachment to and detachment from the author himself.⁵

The object of criticism in the frame narrative is the embedded text, that is, Roth's autobiography, but the target is also autobiographies in general. Brian Finney suggests that Roth's book communicates the idea that “[t]here can be no full closure in autobiography”, that it is designed to allow him to “go on proliferating these [alternative] perspectives indefinitely” as a resistance to closures that are always provisional (385). The critical response in the frame narrative can be seen as an

⁵ Susan S. Lanser distinguishes between “attached” and “detached” texts, the former “depend for their significance — that is, for their value and arguably also for their meaning — on the equation of the work's presumptive author with the text's primary ‘I’”, while the latter “are conventionally read in detachment from and usually in indifference to their authors’ — though not, of course, their culture's — identities” (208, 209). Roth's work both invites and resists an “attached” reading.

attempt to counter the embedded autobiography's supposed lack of "full closure" by openly acknowledging this problem itself; but it also presents counterarguments to its own arguments, subverting its own closure as well. In spite of raising this issue, Roth's book does indeed reach some form of "artistic closure" by coming to an end (Finney 385). Zuckerman's concluding letter presents itself as giving the verdict on the "goodness" of Roth's life-story; however, the inquiry goes on. Both the embedded life-story and the book as a whole suggest that self-reflexivity as an ethical attribute both facilitates the project of autobiography and renders it always unfinished. Recollections about one's past prepare one for future recollections about the present — the project of autobiography is a movement across time that forms and re-forms its own integrity.

In previous chapters, I foreground the character narrator's act of autobiography and put aside references to the author's personal experiences. In the novels by Auster, Barnes, and Davis, the "author" of the life-story is a fictional character, whose (fictional) experience undergoes transformation into a narrative. Roth's book turns this the other way around — the life experience is avowedly real but undergoes a treatment that is both real and imaginary. The frame narrative offers a secondary representation of Roth's life from an external perspective that counters the one explicitly attributed to himself. In this way, the embedded life-story becomes more expansive, not in terms of the length or the quantity of the narrated content, but by having multiple, rival interpretations of the narrated life placed in a sequence, embedding one another, and co-existing. The denial of closure stemming from this regress of self-consciousness opens up the life-story for other inspections and evaluations, including by future selves. However, the hyperactive self-consciousness of Roth's book also anticipates and provides its own criticism, rendering external

input unnecessary and irrelevant. While it stages a contextualised approach in order to investigate the project of autobiography, using multiple figures to provide alternative perspectives on critical issues, the book's proliferation of voices simultaneously gives the impression that there is nothing else left to be said.

The expansiveness of Roth's book insulates it from outside criticism, and it is easy to be led by Zuckerman's criticism to agree that the embedded autobiography is a "failed" attempt. David Denby follows the line of argument in Zuckerman's letter and concludes that the "clear point of the book, with its intentionally inadequate narrative, is that a novelist cannot write an autobiography ... [and] is almost haplessly condemned to fiction" (40). Roth's book is thus considered to be a "negative accomplishment, like building a ship you know will sink in order to prove the weakness of the hull" (ibid 40). Stefan Kjerkegaard takes a more optimistic standpoint but nevertheless describes the embedded life-story as "failed": "What we can learn from this intentionally *failed* autobiography is that it *intends* to tell the truth, but that truth must sometimes be framed by fiction in order to come across as truth" (127; original emphasis). Kjerkegaard suggests that Roth's book promotes "a dialogical approach toward reality", in which the "mediatisation of the literary system" is recruited as part of the author's "intentional aesthetic strategy" (132, 141, 140). Both critics align themselves with the book's own evaluation, in which referential accuracy is a prioritised criterion. Roth's (indirect) critique of his own autobiography and autobiographies in general, both intratextually and extratextually, has a certain critical leverage that is important to consider. However, by incorporating such criticism, the book carves out an imaginary critical position within itself that resists critical engagement from the outside — it is a self-contained, closed system, seemingly complete in itself.

My discussion in this chapter makes an intervention by foregrounding the issue of form rather than reference, and argues that Roth's autobiography, despite its shortcomings, does work, that is, has integrity. The conceits in the book — that this is a private exchange before publication and that the created character overrides the creator's authority — allow Roth to explore issues that a more conventional autobiography cannot do. Finney considers that "Zuckerman is a much more convincing verbal construct than is 'Philip Roth'" (385). I suggest that Roth's construction of multiple, textual selves serves to address the epistemological opacity of the self. Autobiography as an epistemological project is necessarily incomplete — Zuckerman's critique at the end of the book does not move beyond this point. I propose an alternative approach that reconceptualises autobiography as an ethical project, foregrounding formal issues and exploring different ways that truth can be told. There is more than one way to tell the truth; there is more than one form of integrity.

Roth's book engages with both formal and referential issues in self-representation on different levels, its insistence upon questions of mimetic accuracy obscuring the way narrative artifice does not just undermine the representation of experience but can facilitate the exploration of personal truths. There are competing interpretations of what is "right" and what is "wrong" regarding the embedded autobiography; at the same time, Roth's book implies that what is "right" and "wrong" depends upon the chosen evaluative framework, that such determinations are context-driven rather than absolute. Generic framing is the first challenge of Roth's book, given that the claim to nonfiction, signalled by its title, is immediately and provocatively subverted on the very first page, which starts with the words "Dear Zuckerman" (3). The imaginary letter to a fictional character infringes the

rhetorical claim to nonfiction presented by the book's title, that this is a work about "facts". Zuckerman, using the collective pronoun to assume an authoritative role, points out in his letter that: "we judge the author of a novel by how well he or she tells the story. But we judge morally the author of an autobiography, whose governing motive is primarily ethical as against aesthetic" (163). Roth's book is not to be taken either as a work of fiction or as an autobiography, but needs to be evaluated both aesthetically, as a work of art, and ethically, as an attempt to convey personal truths that are non-exclusive. I suggest that the idea of integrity is the place for us to begin a critical discussion about its ethical and aesthetic merits.

This chapter shows how Roth's book, through an explicit use of fictionality, approaches the project of autobiography as an ongoing negotiation towards a sense of rightness that is never final. The book, as an exceptional fictional autobiography, uses fictionality to critique the use of novelistic rhetoric in real acts of autobiography. The self-reflexivity compounds readers' understanding of the real act of critique that the book performs on itself with a critique of all self-representation. I will be exploring the sequence of arguments and counterarguments that cuts across narrative levels, in which the seemingly mutually exclusive binaries are undermined. Roth's book theorises the project of autobiography in a telescopic fashion that simultaneously exposes and fills its own gaps. It is covered with seams at bursting point — almost, but not quite. The tension within such counterpoints itself upholds the book's formal integrity, but the assimilation of counterarguments also renders it a self-contained and closed system, thus undermining its ethical integrity.

There remains a distance between the anticipated and the actual response to the text by its readers. Speaking of metalepsis in postmodern novels, Mark Currie draws attention to the way that, "there always remains a layer, or a further

dimension, which cannot be fully appropriated by the self-conscious discourse itself, namely, the reaction of a given reader to that self-consciousness ... which cannot coincide with the thing responded to" (*Postmodern Narrative Theory* 176). The autocritique of Roth's book can be seen as an attempt to fill this intertextual space itself, a space which nevertheless "cannot be appropriated or controlled" (ibid 176).⁶ My discussion in the following will be guided by the question of whose ethos is at stake in relation to different parts of the book, whether that of the author Roth, the author-narrator "Roth", Zuckerman, or Maria. I start with the frame narrative and unpack the entangled ethos of Roth and Zuckerman. I consider Roth's idea of counterlife and the provocative use of his proper name and life experience in his novels. I then move on to the embedded autobiography and discuss the way its narrative integrity is founded on the idea of counterpoint, whose ethical attribute is eroded by the requirements of the narrative form. I conclude with Maria's comment in the frame narrative on the relationship between life and narrative, and suggest a way to understand the narrative integrity of the book as a whole.

2. THE IM-PROPER NAME

In previous chapters, I discuss the relationship between the experiencing-I and the narrating-I of autobiographical narration, the way the dual perspective and double temporality of self-representation can be compressed, used as a rhetorical resource, and as a subject of philosophical investigations. Roth's book approaches the project of autobiography by drawing attention to the difference between the person and its

⁶ Currie goes on to point out that: "any effort to appropriate the response to narrative by narrative's self-knowledge, or to preclude resistance by anticipating its objections, will only modify that response and that resistance" (*Postmodern Narrative Theory* 177). We can also consider this in the way that the timelessness of the text lags behind "living" readers, whose interpretations operate and develop over time and are renewable.

textual existence, which can be a product of one's own making as well as one that is constructed by the public's imagination. Roth's presence as a character in his novels following *The Facts* draws attention to himself and his personal history, compelling readers to confront the difficult task of ascertaining the author's elusive and contrary ethos. This is unlike Paul Auster's strategy, which explains the autobiographical elements in his fiction as a way "to explore certain questions that are common to us all ... Myself, yes — but myself as anyone, myself as everyone" (*The Art of Hunger* 307). I want to suggest that Roth's work uses an opposite approach for a similar purpose — it is concerned with self-representation in general *in spite of* the author's overbearing presence. The rhetorical dimension of Roth's work challenges readers to think beyond the particular and to engage with issues regarding aspects of self-representation that concern us all.

Korthals Altes identifies six "facets of authorial image" that contributes to readers' interpretation of the authorial ethos, including the kind of authorial posture the writer adopts based on his own conception of his social role, and readers' preconceptions of the authorial image based on his previous oeuvre (157-159). Roth's authorial posturing external to the text contributes to readers' interpretations as much as the text itself, and can even be regarded as part of the text. His comments in interviews, despite being extra- and para-textual, can be seen as part of the text's internal logic, as an attempt to impose a final evaluation of the work. The character "Roth" or "Philip" is a textual construct that functions to demonstrate the potential misalignment between the flesh-and-blood author and readers' conceptions of the author based on our partial knowledge of him. *The Facts* actively recruits paratextual materials to theorise the project of autobiography, doing this by foregrounding, not displacing, the author's personal experience, which is used both autobiographically

and rhetorically to critique the kind of misleading assumptions that one can have in processing one's own as well as others' self-representation. Fact and fiction, life and narrative, can be false or misleading dichotomies; self-consciousness is suspect, if also a sign of authenticity.

Hermione Lee notes that, during the 1960s, there was a shift in Roth's writing, from the earlier more impersonal novels, "in which the characters' struggles are continued within a solid, externalised reality with fixed moral and social values, to the more 'Rothian' works of the late sixties and seventies ... in which the characters' self-describing, self-conscious voices *are* the narrative, and the writer ceases to be separable from his material" (17; original emphasis). We should bear in mind that the writer in question in *The Facts* is both the author Roth and his character Zuckerman, whose profession is also a writer. Zuckerman can be seen as Roth's "artistic alibi", who in turn has his own alibi in *his* character Carnovsky in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) (De la Durantaye 329). The relation between Roth and Zuckerman is a complicated one — Zuckerman both is and is not Roth. And this, I suggest, is to say that Roth — and anyone, for that matter — has a complicated relationship with himself (oneself).

In *Philip Roth — Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004), Debra Shostak points out that Roth often "tak[es] the transgression against norms and borders as the subject and mode of his fiction", presenting this in a dialogical fashion in which one force is always in response to and provoking a countering force (19). Roth's novels "talk to one another as countertexts in an ongoing and mutually illuminating conversation, zigzagging from one way of representing the problems of selfhood to another, often by conceiving of such representations in terms of oppositions and

displacements” (ibid 3).⁷ *The Facts* enacts this motif of counterpoint and dialogism, not just in the way Roth and Zuckerman respond to each other, but in the way the self is conceptualised as a *counterself*, as always already embodying an alternative, countering side to whatever is regarded to be the case. Roth’s book problematises its own use of the name “Philip Roth” and the seemingly direct link between the proper name and the man, diluting the reality of the man Philip Roth by distributing it among multiple artificial constructs, including the one named “Roth”.

Between the publication of *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000), Roth changed the ordering of his novels from a chronological list to a grouping according to different “voices”, those of Kepesh, Zuckerman, and Roth (Shostak 10). The “Roth books” include *The Facts; Deception: A Novel* (1990); *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991); *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993); and *The Plot Against America* (2004).⁸ The grouping suggests that these books are autobiographical, but at the same time resists any unequivocal reading. These texts invoke the author’s real experiences and have a character named “Philip” or “Philip Roth”. However, with the exception of *Patrimony*, which is a memoir about Roth’s father, these texts dispute the factualness of their own content by introducing explicit fictional elements that threaten to outweigh references to the author’s real life.

Roth’s work readily acknowledges the relevance of narrative artifice to life writing, the way that experience and its narrative re-presentation are essentially

⁷ Shostak finds a “verbal echo” (5) amongst Roth’s *Sabbath’s Theatre* (1995), *American Pastoral* (1997), and *I Married a Communist* (1998): “Everything he hated was here” (*ST* 451), “Everything he loved was here” (*AP* 213), and “Everything he wanted to change was here” (*IMC* 84). The “echo” expresses an ambivalent view about the position of being a Jewish male subject, but it is a movement that breaks out of the pairing of love and hate to the sense of transformation itself.

⁸ Critics offer their own grouping of what is “autobiographical” among Roth’s books: David Gooblar leaves out *The Plot Against America* based on archival research that finds Roth had intended to publish the four in one volume (35); Hana Wirth-Nesher considers *The Facts*, *Patrimony* and *The Plot Against America* as the more remarkably autobiographical (159); and Elaine Kauvar groups *The Facts*, *Patrimony*, and *Operation Shylock* as “Roth’s autobiographical trilogy” (413).

different. What is scandalous is not the discrepancy between them, but the expectation that it can be otherwise. There is commonly a higher level of inquiry going on in which the confrontations staged in the text are a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. In *Deception*, the character Philip protests against his wife's literal reading of his notebook as evidence of his adultery. The notebook contains several dialogues between a man and a woman, and the verisimilitude convinces her that these are transcriptions taken from actual conversations between him and another woman. Philip argues that the dialogues are an imaginary exercise: "It is *not* myself. It is *far* from myself — it's play, it's a game, it is an *impersonation* of myself! Me *ventriloquising* myself. Or maybe it's more easily grasped the other way around — everything here is falsified *except* me. Maybe it's *both*. But both ways or either way, what it adds up to, honey, is *homo ludens!*" (190; original emphasis). Philip defends the right of the "playing man", that the aesthetic value of his imagination outweighs its infringement of moral propriety. Unlike his wife, Philip sees potential misreading by the public as inevitable rather than something preventable: "I write fiction and I'm told it's autobiography, I write autobiography and I'm told it's fiction, so since I'm so dim and they're so smart, let *them* decide what it is or it isn't" (190; original emphasis). The outcry rings true to Roth himself, who experienced such criticisms from early in his career.

The character Philip in *Deception* acknowledges the entanglement and the blurred line between fact and fiction. His argument lies in the impossibility of separating the two and accuses others who think otherwise of naivety. Pointing out that the man in the notebook both is and is not himself, Philip seems to be rejecting the writer's authority over the meaning of his own words, with the implication that readers are solely responsible for their own interpretations, to defend the "rightness"

of their interpretations. It is difficult not to regard Philip as voicing Roth's true state of mind, but such an interpretation would be too reductive for the same reason. What the novel suggests is that any single interpretation is always insufficient, that it is never an either-or option but more often than not a case of both. Roth's work challenges readers to decide what is undecidable. It provides countering arguments to show that a single interpretation does not do enough justice to the play of art. In Korthals Altes's words, which I previously quoted in chapter three, "the art experience is the cognitive oscillation about how to frame a particular event of artefact", which in the process "calls attention to these framings themselves" and invites reflection upon one's own value judgment (165, 229). A countering interpretation always accompanies the chosen one, complementing and undermining it at the same time. In this sense, artistic licence does not free the text from ethical criticism.

"How to read Roth?" is a question not just posed by Roth's fictions but also absorbed into the text and analysed from within. Problems arising from misunderstanding others and being misunderstood frequently plague Roth's characters, and we can find a counterpart in Roth's career as a writer. Upon publishing his short story "Defender of the Faith" in the *New Yorker* in 1959, Roth encountered harsh criticism which accused him of being a self-hating Jew and exposing the Jewish community to anti-Semitism.⁹ *Portnoy's Complaint*, published in 1969, brought a new level of attention and popular interest to the relationship between Roth's private life and the drama staged in his fictions. Irving Howe, an

⁹ These accusations are recounted at length in *The Facts* (115-130). Roth considers the difference it might have made at the time and to his career if he had chosen to publish the story in *Commentary* instead of the *New Yorker*, whose "privileged, unequivocally non-Jewish aura" may have been too provocative (117). *Commentary*, as a magazine published by the American Jewish Committee, would have "certified [the story] as permissible Jewish discourse" (116).

early supporter of Roth, became his harsh critic after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*. In "Philip Roth Reconsidered", Howe says: "*Goodbye, Columbus* [Roth's short story collection published in 1959] rests in the grip of an imperious will prepared to wrench, twist, and claw at its materials in order to leave upon them the scar of its presence — as if the work of fiction were a package that needed constantly to be stamped with a signature of self" (69). Howe objects to the overwhelming presence of the author's "signature", something that he finds saturating every aspect of Roth's work.

In an interview with Alain Finkielkraut in 1981, Roth argues against making such unwarranted connections between his life and work:

To label books like mine 'autobiographical' or 'confessional' is not only to falsify their suppositional nature but, if I may say so, to slight whatever artfulness leads some readers to think that they must be autobiographical. You don't create the aura of intimacy by dropping your pants in public; do that and most people will instinctively look away. (qtd. in Shostak 169).

Roth criticises the reductiveness of a biographical approach to his work, which slights the writer's effort and skill in accomplishing verisimilitude in the first place. In *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power* (2014), Patrick Hayes suggests an alternative way to appreciate Roth's work: "Roth's importance lies in the depth and sophistication with which he has explored the ramifications of a distinctively post-Nietzschean way of valuing literature" (3). Hayes foregrounds the relationship between power and art, in which Roth's work "suggests that literature of the highest stature explores life in an extra-moral way through a fascinated delight in 'power-seeking'" (3). While there is indeed a need to move beyond the over-simplistic categories of good and evil, fact and fiction, ethics and aesthetics, I want to suggest that Roth's work engages with

the tension between these countering forces rather than achieves transcendence, doing this by implicating the author himself in the power-seeking activity. The self-exposure in Roth's novel concerns both what is exposed and how that exposure is occasioned. Readers are also exposed in the process of reading, in the sense that our interpretations reveal our own personal beliefs and values, which are not necessarily "right". That Roth conducts this investigation imaginatively through the vehicle of fiction does not disqualify his work as raising serious questions about the ethical stakes of representation and accountability.

Leland de la Durantaye draws attention to Roth's "bad faith", that despite his protest, his "books and statements actively court such speculation" about the relationship between his art and life (320, 319). Jonathan Wilson also faults Roth for being "oddly provocative": "having set up a series of unmistakable identities between author and protagonist (including the identical protest of being taken for their characters: Roth for Zuckerman, Zuckerman for Carnovsky), Roth then proceeds to exert enormous energy asserting the tenuousness of the connections" (397, 398). Shostak finds that Roth "makes capital out of his readers' inclinations toward biographical interpretations of his work" (158-159). Indeed, Roth seems to encourage the kind of voyeuristic pleasure surrounding his work, and in turn exploiting it for his own aesthetic agenda. In the "Roth books", the characters who share Roth's name become some form of poetic licence that allows him to communicate personal opinions and deny them at the same time. And yet, Roth's slipperiness need not be seen as an avoidance of accountability. I suggest that Roth implicates himself in his fictions as a way to engage with, not to dismiss, the inextricability of art and life. Even as his work attempts to move into the "extra-moral" realm, as Hayes suggests, it nevertheless acknowledges the tentative but

ineradicable bond between the author and his work, between accountability and artistic achievement — the breakability of that bond is evidence of its ongoing existence.

Roth's work addresses the ambiguity of "I" as well as the risks and responsibilities of saying "I". No matter how ambiguous the line between fact and fiction becomes, it refuses to let us forget the existence of that line or the consequences of that forgetfulness. De la Durantaye suggests understanding Roth's ambivalence in terms of experimentation and exploration, that his novels are "seeking out their own sense of the relation between ethical and aesthetic judgment", in which readers are urged to approach and evaluate the adequacy of the line drawn by the author himself (330, 307). As mentioned earlier, Zuckerman's counterargument in *The Facts* is forceful and persuasive, and it is easy to be led by him when making our own critical evaluations of the book. However, it is precisely such coherent explanations and arguments, whether provided by the text itself or other critics, that Roth's work is both tempting readers to accept and challenging them to resist. The overbearing presence and play of the author's identity in the texts, whether as "Roth" or in the guise of other fictional characters, is not to be taken as sidestepping important ethical issues but as inviting readers to engage in a deeper understanding of the subject at hand beyond the deliberately pronounced dissimulations and critical noise.

3. THE DIALOGICAL SELF

Shostak foregrounds the dialogical mode of Roth's work and emphasises the element of self-reflexivity, the way that "he has not only provided critiques of postmodern epistemologies of identity but has also offered fresh angles on the problem of writing

the self in a variety of genres, from autobiography and memoir to dialogue and reflexive fiction” (17). The author’s signature is signalled both explicitly and implicitly in the texts. However, as I argued earlier, the particulars in his work are a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Roth engages with the project of autobiography by writing fiction, through an imaginary exploration of what a self is and has the potential to be. His novels with Zuckerman as the autodiegetic narrator can be regarded as fictional autobiographies, as representations of writing the self that serve to theorise self-writing in general. *The Facts* takes things a step further, and also brings this thesis’s discussion forward, by a closer scrutiny of the blurred line between fact and fiction.

Roth’s work re-presents the author’s experience of being misread in both fictional and nonfictional narratives, in which the point is less about factual reference and more about what it is like to undergo such an experience. This relates to my discussion in the previous chapter, that Davis’s narrator is concerned about the pattern of her thoughts and not just the thoughts themselves, the form of her narrative understanding and not just what she understands. In *The Counterlife* (1986), Roth develops the ideas of counterlife and counterself as a way to negotiate the relationship between appearance and substance in self-representation. The character narrator Zuckerman argues that people impersonate rather than being themselves: “It’s *all* impersonation — in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through” (324; original emphasis). In other words, the self is a construct and identity is performative. Zuckerman goes further to claim that not only is *the* self a fantasy, but that one embodies many selves instead of *a* self: “I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self”; “I am a theatre and nothing more than a

theatre” (ibid 324, 325). Zuckerman’s claim here does not dismiss the importance of identity but implies that identity need not depend upon consistency or unity.

Shostak draws upon the idea of *counterlife* to suggest that the primary notion of Roth’s work is the embrace of contradiction, and that this proliferation of selves does not weaken the uniqueness of one’s identity:

a person can invent many selves to accommodate both desire and the environment to which that person must or will answer; that such self-invention is at once both deeply conservative — conserving, one assumes, some fundamental moral and perceptual subjectivity — and deeply transformative, making the whole of the subject potentially open to change; and that the many selves or positions one occupies nevertheless do not deprive the subject of always, in some sense, being singularly *itself*. (19; original emphasis)

Shostak’s discussion engages with the ongoing negotiation between aesthetics and ethics encapsulated in the word “integrity” — the conservation of one’s ethical integrity in the transformative process of shaping life into narrative. The singularity can be seen as the result of internal countering forces that produce a unique combination of objective facts and personal truths. The singular self is always already a *counterself*, and its life-story is reconstructed over time, that is, remembered and dis-membered in the process of one’s life. The question of identity becomes one in which change is the only constant, in which transformation rather than consistency or coherence serves as evidence of the living person. The idea of counterpoint serves as the narrative integrity of such a counterself’s life-story, and I suggest that this is what we find in the embedded autobiography of Roth’s book. The formal integrity of such a life-story depends upon the tension, rather than the

reconciliation, of countering forces, and the co-existence of counterarguments represents its ethical integrity.

The Facts violates the autobiographical pact established on its title page — a character with a different name overrides the one named after the author himself and is more knowing of what is “wrong” with the whole project. Philippe Lejeune’s contractual theory of the genre of autobiography defines the autobiographical pact as one established between the author and the reader by virtue of the identicalness of the names of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist of the text (14). To recapitulate briefly what I already mentioned in chapter one, the autobiographical pact can be established explicitly or implicitly, for instance by including the first-person possessive pronoun “my” in the title or by the narrator “acting as if he were the author, in such a way that the reader has no doubt that the ‘I’ refers to the name shown on the cover” (Lejeune 14). The autobiographical pact is contrasted with a “fictional pact”, which is when the character and the author do not share the same name or when “the ‘fictional’ nature of the book is indicated on the cover page” (ibid 16). Naming is an important factor in Lejeune’s theory, but we see this problematised in Roth’s book where the identicalness of the name is a source of ambiguity rather than a definitive indicator of its nonfictional status.

Roth’s book draws attention to its own fictiveness to show that the proper name and critical self-awareness are inadequate criteria upon which to establish authenticity. The proper name is not a guarantee of identicalness between two subjects, and an elusive difference remains between the proper name and the real man as well as between iterations of the same name. The Roth on the title page is not the same as the “Roth” in the book, who is presented as the writer of the opening letter and the author-narrator of the embedded autobiography. By employing fictive

rhetoric from the start, the book presents itself less as documenting the historical truths about the author's life (though his personal interests are also invested for that purpose), and more as drawing attention to the difference between life and narrative, the way that the novelist's agility and creativity in constructing narrative coherence can be a liability rather than a blessing.

The design of the book — embedding a factual narrative within an imaginary dialogue — invites scepticism, but it also openly, if indirectly, acknowledges this as a rhetorical strategy. Zuckerman points out in a conversation with Maria quoted in his letter that: “the book is fundamentally defensive. Just as having this letter at the end is a self-defensive trick to have it both ways. I'm not even sure any longer which of us he's set up as the straw man. I thought first it was him in his letter to me — now it feels like me in my letter to him” (192). Zuckerman, in choosing to quote himself instead of narrate what he said to Maria, invokes a kind of testimonial objectiveness that guards his current discursive ethos from his previous emotional outburst.¹⁰ The metaleptic remark violates one of the conceits of the book, that this is a private exchange about an unpublished manuscript. Contrary to the rhetorical implications of Zuckerman's remark itself, this display of self-consciousness does not set him apart from the manoeuvring of which he accuses Roth — the metaleptic breach by a fictional character instead signals a “refreshing” of the book's fictiveness and neutralises any claims to *metafictional* insight. Zuckerman's ethos is undermined rather than strengthened, but without thereby making Roth's authorial ethos any less ambiguous. The text implies that the evaluation of both the embedded autobiography

¹⁰ Another example of Zuckerman's knowingness is when he slyly acknowledges the relation between him and Roth: “By the way, if I were you (not impossible), I would have asked myself this as well...” (185).

and Roth's authorial ethos needs to be conducted on an-other level and through other forms of evidence that the text alone cannot supply.

The metalepsis demonstrates a case of what Currie calls "self-conscious self-consciousness", which places the book "in the same logical position as lying in the sense that when one is self-consciously self-conscious, the veracity of self-narration is questioned and any therapeutic value may be lost" (*Postmodern Narrative Theory* 132). Therapy is the motive behind Roth's autobiography, or so he claims in the opening letter. Having suffered a breakdown due to complications from a minor surgery, he finds himself "involuntarily" recalling his past and discovers that there is "no one moment of origin but a series of moments, a history of multiple origins" (5). The autobiography represents his attempt "to repossess life" (5), both the life lived and the life he is living now. There is a need to obtain a sense of clarity regarding how he became the person he is today, and to justify the inevitability of that process, that is, why he could not have become anyone else. This can be related to my discussion in chapter two on Auster's *Moon Palace*, in which Fogg's autobiography exhibits a different kind of ambivalent balancing of necessity and contingency. And whereas in the last chapter I argue that Davis's book puts into question narrative coherence, Roth's autobiography sees the imposition of formal coherence as an argument in favour of, rather than detracting from, the necessity of his life-story — the explanation *works* as one among many explanations, not because it is the only one. The frame narrative places the coherence of the embedded autobiography under critical scrutiny, and we need to keep in mind the layeredness of Roth's book, which extends beyond the text itself. This means to challenge the implied finality of Zuckerman's evaluation of "Roth's" autobiography.

“Roth” explains in his letter that: “I’ve intended to make myself visible to ... myself”; “to retrieve my vitality, to transform myself into *myself*, [and so] I began rendering experience untransformed” (4, 5; original emphasis). He calls this process “demythologising to induce depathologising” (7). There are two different concerns implied here: one is to undergo the transformation and the other is to enhance the self’s visibility, so as to witness its transformation. In other words, Roth is simultaneously inhabiting two different positions: as the object undergoing the transformation and as the agent of that transformation — both are regarded as “myself”. This duality spells out one of the challenges of the project of autobiography, something that Paul de Man finds to be the reason autobiography is an impossible genre, as I mentioned in chapter one. The singularity of the author’s signature is split between “the author *of* the text and the author *in* the text”, a “specular pair” that renders the text’s factual status undecidable (De Man 923; original emphasis). Roth’s book challenges general assumptions about the genre of autobiography and does this by drawing attention to the author’s identity as a novelist, and to the way that a text’s coherence and unity are never accidental, that impersonations can be both real and a ruse.

Roth claims in his letter that he had “to resist the impulse to dramatise untruthfully the insufficiently dramatic ... to abandon the facts when those facts were not so compelling as others I might imagine”, summoning as evidence that he suffers from “fiction-fatigue” (7). Zuckerman dismisses this as a deceptive ploy and accuses Roth of pretending to be unaware of autobiography’s “fiction-making tricks” (164). We have Roth versus Zuckerman, which is also Roth versus himself because Zuckerman *is* Roth, just as much as “Roth” *is* Roth. Both Zuckerman and “Roth” are mediated versions of the author, in which the proper name is a superficial claim to

both non-identity and absolute identity. Zuckerman's accusation is Roth's indirect self-accusation, and the co-existence of counterarguments is, as mentioned earlier, a demonstration of the ethical integrity of the text. However, there is an ambiguity here that undermines both sides of the argument.

I mentioned earlier that the word "fiction" is used ambiguously in the book. The example here concerns a conflation between narrative and fiction, that is, between narrative artifice and narrative imagination. Roth says in his letter:

I'm not arguing that there's a kind of existence that exists in fiction that doesn't exist in life or vice versa but simply saying that a book that faithfully conforms to the facts, a distillation of the facts that leaves off with the imaginary fury, can unlock meanings that fictionalising has obscured, distended, or even inverted and can drive home some sharp emotional nails.

(7-8)

There is a series of steps in this quote that collapses the distinctions I am trying to untangle. The word "fictionalising" refers to the production of works of fiction, which is opposed to "a book that faithfully conforms to the facts". In further setting up the opposition between "facts" and "the imaginary fury", Roth conceives of facts as eschewing narrative altogether, as devoid of both narrative artifice and narrative imagination. This overlooks the distinction between fictional and nonfictional narrative — both involve narrative artifice but they are ontologically and rhetorically distinct. As Nielsen et al. point out in their rhetorical theory of fictionality, "while all narratives are constructed, some are fiction, some are nonfiction, and some play with the distinction" ("A Response" 108). Narrative artifice is inevitably involved in the representation of life, but without being necessarily undermining. Roth's comment shapes the complicated relationship between life and narrative into exclusive

categories of life and fiction, or fact and fiction, that are potentially misleading. In making the narrativisation of life comparable to producing fiction, Roth renders all truth claims suspect and self-reflection always equivocal between sincerity and irony.

Claiming that “fiction-fatigue” (7) renders him incapable of falsifying his experiences does not thereby absolve Roth of other kinds of distortions, such as those resulting from narrative artifice or confabulation. And yet, Roth has already anticipated this counterargument:

There is something naïve about a novelist like myself talking about presenting himself ‘undisguised’ and depicting ‘a life without the fiction.’ ... It isn’t that you subordinate your ideas to the force of the facts in autobiography but that you construct a sequence of stories to bind up the facts with a persuasive *hypothesis* that unravels your history’s meaning. I suppose that calling this book *The Facts* begs so many questions that I could manage to be both less ironic and more ironic by calling it *Begging the Question*. (8; original emphasis)

Roth suggests that constructing a “hypothesis” and proceeding to prove it by only collecting favourable data is precisely what autobiography is all about. While the constructedness of the life-story is understood as inevitable, Roth does not address the way that this provisional “hypothesis” can nevertheless contain a kind of personal truth. There is no single, exclusive hypothesis for one’s history; it requires multiple hypotheses to gain insight into the meaning of one’s life, something that is suggested by the multiple voices included within Roth’s book. Without requiring Zuckerman’s intervention, Roth’s letter already undermines its own arguments.

Narrative orders experience into “a sequence of stories” (8) that serves to reveal the meaning of one’s life. But this revelation is gained in retrospect, by tracing life backwards to justify its chronological progression as necessary and inevitable. Roth’s letter makes explicit what remains implicit in the texts that I discuss in previous chapters. But this self-reflexive move is not made in defence of his own autobiography’s retrospective logic; rather, by suggesting that this is something *all* autobiographies suffer from, Roth immunises his own autobiography from criticism on a higher, rhetorical level — the flaws of his own autobiography are part of the norm and unavoidable, which makes them forgivable.¹¹ In a way that is more explicit than Webster in Barnes’s novel, Roth renders himself guilt-less in spite of admitting the self-interestedness involved in his own life-story.

Zuckerman takes a different stance from Roth and regards the distinction between narrative truth and narrative falsehood as meaningless. The fictional quality of narrative artifice, “fiction-making tricks” (164), renders every truth claim suspect. He says to Roth in the tone of authority: “you’ve written metamorphoses of yourself so many times, you no longer have any idea what *you* are or ever were. By now what you are is a walking text” (162; original emphasis). In making this remark, however, Zuckerman draws attention to an essential flaw in his arguments, which is that it is indeed *already* a textualised “Roth” that is on offer here.¹² Narrative re-presents and interprets life, rather than being identical with it. However, the difference between the flesh-and-blood Roth and the textual “Roth” is non-existent to Zuckerman, who as a fictional character is a “walking text” himself. Lehnert suggests that if Roth

¹¹ Hillel Halkin, in discussing Roth’s autofiction *Operation Shylock*, suggests that “by inoculating his life with his own fiction, Roth has formally signed the waiver of release to it” (47). Life and fiction, as seemingly mutually exclusive categories, become mutually contaminated.

¹² Lehnert points out that, “[t]he reader of *The Facts* encounters Philip Roth only in his textual manifestation, i.e., as protagonist and as author-narrator” (780).

equals “Roth”, Zuckerman’s accusations are justified (780). But this is precisely what the book is denying its readers — the proper name is useless as a sign of identity. The book already violates the ontological separateness between the creator and his creation, but we see it is selective regarding Zuckerman’s knowingness on this matter. This selectiveness indicates that the author Roth remains in control and is to be separated from the straw man “Roth”. Zuckerman’s protest also fails to hold because these explicitly textualised versions of the author — the author-narrator “Roth” and the protagonist Roth of the embedded autobiography — are partial, with the former also fictional and imaginary, images of the author himself, which all contributes to the articulation of his personality. Zuckerman does not detect the double-degree fictionality that the book operates upon. No matter how self-righteous Zuckerman is, posing as a seeker of truth and honesty, he makes the mistake that people often make with celebrities or public figures — the oversimplification of equating appearance with substance, of assuming there is no depth beneath the surface, or perhaps worse, assuming one already knows what is underneath.

De Man argues that the writing of an autobiography can only result in a kind of “de-facement”, as “the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration” (926; original emphasis). It is also a process of de-naming, that “one’s name ... is made as intelligible and memorable as a face” and subjected to disfiguration (ibid 926). Roth, in naming himself as the letter-writer “Roth” and also de- or re-naming himself as Zuckerman and Maria, both attaches and detaches the proper name to and from the narrating-I of the text. In this way, the name disavows its own history, reshapes and reinvents itself into new existence.

Both Roth’s and Zuckerman’s letters contain counterstatements or counterarguments within themselves that offer alternative explanations to the one on

offer. Thus, they undermine the formal integrity of their own argument but contribute to the ethical integrity of the whole book, offering a kind of context and perspective for investigating the project of autobiography. Having explained the origin and the necessity of his autobiography, Roth supplies several reasons against publishing it: that “no one ordered it”, that “[t]here’s also the problem of exposing others” and himself, and that he is uncertain whether it is “any good” (4, 9, 10).

Zuckerman seconds each of these counterarguments in his letter, that it is uninteresting, incomplete, deceptive, and self-interested: “Don’t publish — you are far better off writing about me than ‘accurately’ reporting your own life” (161).

Zuckerman is not only criticising the autobiography itself as misleading, but arguing that Roth is knowingly misleading his readers. This accusation is only reasonable if we embrace Zuckerman as part of the author himself, as a partial authorial perspective within the text, which means also acknowledging that Zuckerman is a fictive construct in spite of his true insight — fiction and true insight are not incompatible. The author Roth both avows and disavows his own knowingness.

Roth claims in his letter that the autobiography is “the first thing that I have ever written *unconsciously*”, to which the sceptical Zuckerman asks: “Is all this manipulation truly unconscious or is it pretending to be unconscious?” (9, 164; original emphasis). According to Zuckerman, the true purpose of Roth’s autobiography is to ingratiate himself to his critics: “Thirty years ago, the ‘good’ boy is thought of as bad and thereby given enormous freedom to *be* bad; now, when the same people read those opening sections, the bad boy is going to be perceived as good, and you will be given the kindest reception” (167; original emphasis).

Putting aside the problems with literary genres themselves and the categorisation of the embedded narrative, Zuckerman’s most severe objection is this — Roth is

attempting to change people's mind. The objection makes two questionable assumptions: one is that people should not change (Roth should remain consistent with his established authorial image as the "bad boy"), the other is that people should not have to change their minds, even in the name of truth — they should be allowed to remain prejudiced as well as ignorant of their prejudice, for the benefit of the status quo. Again, there is a hint of Barnes's narrator Webster here, the way consistency trumps all other considerations. Zuckerman sells his argument by appealing to Roth's profession as a novelist: "But because some people get it wrong ... doesn't suggest to me that you have to straighten them out. Just the opposite — consider having tricked them into those beliefs a *success*; that's what fiction's *supposed* to do. ... For a novelist, that predicament is to be cherished" (167; original emphasis). A good point, except that Roth is attempting nonfictional life writing that seeks to communicate his own sense of truth and not just any truth.

Zuckerman, in his letter, also indirectly criticises his own reductive method of analysis. He remarks on the erroneous assumption people make when something is labelled as "fact": "Why is it that when they talk about the facts they feel they're on more solid ground than when they talk about the fiction? The truth is that the facts are much more refractory and unmanageable and inconclusive, and can actually kill the very sort of inquiry that imagination opens up" (166). By not conceding to Roth that his autobiography can contain facts of this "refractory" kind, Zuckerman stops short of the kind of inquiry that the authorial level of the text is opening up — both the necessity and the inadequacy of the fact and fiction divide. Another point in relation to general assumptions about autobiography is the way the re-presented experiences are expected to be ordered. Zuckerman, besides accusing Roth of omitting inconvenient truths, finds fault with the way his life-story is told: "There

has to be some natural link between the beginning ... and the end, and there isn't. Because what's left out is the motive" (170). The appeal to a "natural link" is rather problematic, for this sense of coherence is an imposition of form and thus always constructed and never simply found or "natural" to begin with. The "motive" that Zuckerman speaks of seems similar to Roth's "hypothesis", which I discussed earlier. It is not that Roth's autobiography lacks a motive, but that Zuckerman rejects it as the "true" or "right" one.

The author Roth, in an interview with Mervyn Rothstein in 1988, warns readers against accepting Zuckerman as an objective critic: "one shouldn't accept what Zuckerman says at face value. He has self-interest operating there — he wants to exist, he wants me to write about him, not about myself" (Searle 227). Roth has a firm understanding of the difference between himself and Zuckerman, whose letter is the author imagining what this character would do in such a situation. In another interview with Linda Matchan, also in 1988, Roth goes further to say that: "Zuckerman is wrong ... I think the book is pretty candid. I've come as close to the truth as I can ... Zuckerman can say whatever he wants. That's *his* business" (Searle 241; original emphasis). In a real-life setting, Roth seems to take his fictional character's comments seriously; at the same time, he also anticipates and takes care to point out that this is not to assume he is schizophrenic: "it's not called schizophrenia if you're in charge" (ibid 240). Roth asserts his authorial control extratextually and supplements the counterarguments against Zuckerman already provided by the text itself. However, while providing counterarguments and a different perspective on the matter, Roth's extratextual intervention is also a gesture of closure — he completes the text himself and concludes the inquiry by asserting himself as the one "in charge". In a way, Roth insulates the text from readers'

participation, leaving us to wonder why we should bother to invest ourselves in the project of someone else's autobiography, or why we should indulge in a voyeuristic pleasure in the first place. Perhaps the barrier makes what is hidden more desirable and feeds our curiosity. At the same time, however, Roth's authorial posture also relegates us to the role of a spectator that is left to be impressed by the master's work.

4. SELF-FORMATION

If we put aside the conclusion that Roth's self-exposure is simply an egoistic self-inflation, there is something else that the book can offer. For this, we can turn to examine the way Roth forms his life into a life-story, the way he goes about proving the "hypothesis" of how he became the person he is — a successful novelist. I suggest that attending more to the form and less to the referential accuracy of Roth's autobiography can yield insights into the value of life-storytelling and the way life-stories *work*, that is, have integrity. This is something that can benefit one's own project of autobiography and facilitate the sharing of life-stories.

The embedded autobiography returns us to the more familiar set-up in writing the self, that of the narrating self and the narrated self. Roth's life-story includes a prologue, which gives an emotional tribute to his parents, and five chapters about his "intensely secure and protected childhood" in New Jersey (23), his education at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, his relationship with his first-wife "Josie", the hostility caused by his satirical short story "Defender of the Faith", and his resurgence from the disastrous marriage with Josie to the publication of his

breakthrough novel *Portnoy's Complaint*.¹³ Roth provides the dates and places of actual events and quotes testimonials from other people to support his life-story. This “official” version of his life is supposed to be more accurate than those already circulating in the public, which creatively imagine his life based on allusions in his fictions. We see that the factualness of Roth's autobiography is challenged by the imaginary dialogue in the frame narrative. However, while the borders between the narrative levels in the book are deliberately compromised, it is important to suspend those criticisms for the time being to examine the life-story in its own right.

Roth's autobiography shares the contrapuntal structure in the frame narrative. Here, the duality is represented by the narrating self and the narrated self, with the former having the upper hand. Roth writes mainly in the past tense, but often gives commentaries about his present state of mind on the narrated events and their impact on his career.¹⁴ The narrating Roth's perspective is foregrounded at the beginning and end of each chapter, when he gives generalised statements about certain periods of his life. Overall, the narrative evinces a self-assured tone, rarely hesitant about what is being remembered. There are, however, some repetitions left unobserved. For example, after introducing Ted Solotaroff on page 90 as one of the “[t]hree close friendships that I made at the university during my first months back in Chicago”, Roth introduces Solotaroff again on page 114: “Ted Solotaroff — with whom I

¹³ “Josie” is the pseudonym for Roth's first wife Margaret Martinson Williams. Zuckerman criticises Roth's reluctance to use her real name: “There's no legal reason to prevent you from using her name ... you owe it to her not because it would be a nice thing to do but because it's the narratively strong thing to do. ... Josie is the real antagonist, the true counterself, and shouldn't be relegated like the other women to a kind of allegorical role” (178-179). Zuckerman argues that naming, as “the narratively strong thing to do”, is necessary to provide coherence, but does not address the way the proper name can just as well become something “allegorical”, which is what Roth is exploring with his own name. Despite his protest, Zuckerman does not name Williams in his letter either, which confirms that he and his argument are subject to the higher rhetorical purposes of the book.

¹⁴ It may be worth pointing out that Roth's memoir *Patrimony*, another relatively straightforward account of his life, does not contain the kind of intrusive asides and commentaries that we find in the embedded autobiography.

profitably debated for years after I returned from the Army in 1956 and entered the Chicago Ph.D. program...”. Perhaps a new chapter requires a reintroduction, but such repetition also appears in the same chapter, such as when Roth mentions twice that he was teaching at a Writers’ Workshop in Iowa City (142, 153).

The repetitions in Roth’s narrative can be seen as an expression of consistency, and as a way to emphasise the “facts” contained in it. At the same time, however, they can also be a form of inconsistency, by offering more than one perspective on and interpretation of the same event, keeping in mind that inconsistency can contribute to without necessarily being evidence of unreliability. In the fifth and last chapter, Roth twice explains how he fell ill in 1967, first detailing its effect on his writing and then on his relationship with Josie at the time. The first account starts on page 138, Roth recounts the illness (not blaming it entirely on “Josie’s handiwork” (138)) and the long convalescence afterwards. He was eager to get back to writing and to finish his new book. After progressing to the time of his recovery and imminent success with *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth begins the next section by rewinding back to the point of his emergency appendectomy: “By the time I’d fallen ill in the autumn of 1967, the worst of my separation seemed to be over” (141). He then proceeds to recount his relationship with Josie up to the time of his illness and after. Roth’s narrative separates his experience into one that has Josie at the periphery and the other with her at the centre, suggesting the incompatibility of these two “lives” and the inner countering forces of his life-story.

The narrator Roth is less intrusive in the first chapter of the autobiography, and his comments that indirectly counter the seemingly objective facts he is recalling are expressed through parentheses. Such asides can function to supply additional details, such as his father’s and uncles’ mixed feelings towards their father (12), but

they can also be rather provocative. When describing his father's boss, Mr Peterfreund, Roth includes his personal comments within factual statements: "A large, bald-headed man with a gold chain across his vest and a slightly mysterious German accent, whose family lived (in high style, I imagined) in New York (*and* on Long Island) while (no less glamorously to me) he slept during the week in a Newark hotel" (23; original emphasis). The asides give a more personal touch by offering a glimpse of his emotional reactions at the time, that of a boy very much impressed by his father's boss. At the same time, the past tense asserts a distance from his younger self, that he is not that easily impressionable boy anymore.

Such interruptions to the flow of the narrative signify an undercurrent of self-consciousness, ever ready to make its opinions heard. Shifts within the double perspective of autobiography can be made more subtly, for instance by using internal focalisation. Roth's narratorial choices instead draw attention to the separation between the two, as in counterpoints, which are nevertheless related. We can find rival interpretations of the same event when he recalls the bonfire celebration after a rare victory of his high school football team, the Weequahic Indians. After successfully fleeing from the angry students of the defeated team at the stadium, whom Roth describes as ready for a "postgame pogrom" (27), the Weequahic students received a second attack: "the same guys who'd been pounding on the sides of my bus (or so I quickly assumed) were racing onto the field, some of them waving baseball bats" (29). Roth's aside undermines the dramatic tension that has been building up to this moment. Assuming they were "the same guys" renders the violence more comprehensible and less arbitrary. It provides meaning and shapes itself into a story — it was an act of revenge on himself for injuring an angry student trying to enter the bus (27); the karma thus completes itself. However, by pointing

out that this is only a hasty conclusion, the narrator Roth simultaneously undermines the integrity of this self-made story.

Roth's asides become more frequent and intrusive as the narrative advances, becoming integrated into the main narrative instead of being side-lined in parentheses. Textual cues such as "in retrospect" (64) and direct address to the reader shift the focus from the experiencing self to the narrating self, from recollections of the past to the narrative representation itself. For example, recounting his notorious attack on the student newspaper *Bucknellian*, Roth speculates his animosity may or may not have been directed at its editor, who was captain of the cheerleading squad, and due to his failure to impress two other cheerleaders: "the reader is free to wonder how much of the animus directed against Barbara Roemer might have been inspired by my failure to impress either Annette Littlefield or Pat McColl" (65). In the third chapter, "Girl of My Dreams", Roth recounts his relationship with Josie and the way this period of his life afforded rich materials and inspirations for his later novels, *When She Was Good* (1967) and *My Life as a Man* (1974), both dominated by a female character. The narrator Roth already hints darkly at the future of their relationship in the midst of explaining the first time they met: "I got her finally to accede — I would rarely ever get her to do that again — and to walk down the block and sit with me in a booth in the window of Steinway's" (80). Discarding the use of parentheses, the comment is now simply hyphenated and contrasts with the light mood of the rest of the sentence. Later on, Roth's aside resumes its place in a parenthesis, but as a stark contrast to the assertiveness of his younger self, through whom the narrative is focalised: "Our evenings in Josie's apartment signalled to me that the aspiration that had carried me away from Newark and off to Bucknell at eighteen had been triumphantly realised at twenty-three (despite the fact that I was

still a student and, except for my year in the Army, had been one since I was five): I was at last a man” (86). The aside ironises the younger Roth’s self-assurance and signals once again the dual perspective and countering forces within his narrative.

Roth related many things about his childhood to Josie, who was “enchanted ... by my Jewish idyll” (93). Here there is a double mediation of the past in two acts of remembering — the narrating Roth recalls the way he, in 1956, recollected his childhood in the 1940s. At the time, Roth describes his life to Josie as an “unbroken progress from the hands of the *mohel* to Mildred Martin [my seminar tutor at university]” (93). Now, the narrator Roth reflects: “Was I exaggerating? Did I idealise? I don’t know — did Othello? Winning a new woman with one’s narratives, one tends not to worry about what I once heard an Englishman describe as ‘overegging the custard’” (92). Roth’s self-examination seems to conclude that, even if he was indeed “overegging the custard”, it was for a worthy cause and excusable. He puts aside the question of whether he intentionally or accidentally misled Josie and uses instead his aesthetic taste as way to explain his behaviour: “I think now that what encouraged me ... was an innate taste for dramatic juxtaposition, an infatuation with the coupling of seemingly alien perspectives” (92-93).¹⁵ This predilection for countering forces, or counterpoints, refers to the contrast between him and Josie, who was four years his senior and came from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background — they were both “exotic” to the other (81). The narrator Roth suggests that the hidden motivation of this “egoistic young lover” (93) was grounded in art as much as love: “I was telling her who I thought I

¹⁵ Zuckerman also points out this aspect of Roth’s personality in his letter: “... *needing* that battle, that attack, that kick, needing that *wound*, your source of invigorating anger, the energiser for the defiance. ... you hate it but you thrive on it. Because the things that wear you down are the things that nurture you and your talent” (174; original emphasis). This last sentence is repeated almost verbatim and with emphasis on page 184.

was and what I believed had formed me, but I was also engaged by a compelling form of narrative responsory. I was a countervoice, an antitheme, providing a naïve challenge to the lurid view of human nature that emerged from her tales of victimised innocence...” (93). Notice the way Roth qualifies his self-representation, not who he was but who he thought he was. The young lover’s infatuation was at least partly sincere and not wholly contrived. However, the second half of the quote shifts the focus away from his responsibility of misleading Josie to an aestheticisation of his reaction to her.

The aesthetic integrity of Roth’s life-story, as the *Bildung* of a novelist, seems to outweigh concerns for the ethical integrity of his character, both as a young lover and as a narrator. Roth’s autobiography prioritises the history of the novelist over the man, not just for the way it ends with Roth’s breakthrough with *Portnoy’s Complaint*, but also how a good portion of it is devoted to explaining the origins of his future novels. The frame narrative, as Roth’s indirect self-critique, addresses this imbalance of aesthetics over ethics and offers alternative interpretations of his motive(s) from different (imaginary) perspectives. Yet, as I have been attempting to show, the embedded autobiography, with its frequent asides and multiple hypotheses for the motive behind his former behaviours, does not offer a unified voice either.

Roth often narrates his decisions with a kind of helplessness, not appealing to fate like Fogg in Auster’s novel, but also suggesting that he had no choice in the matter. He regrets the distress to his parents for failing to refuse Josie’s request to visit them: “*I could have spared Josie her humiliation, I could have spared my mother her unhappiness — and myself my mounting confusion — if only I hadn’t*

been so frightened of appearing heartless” (106; added emphasis).¹⁶ This self-accusatory tone, however, becomes more defensive towards the end of the narrative, as the need to conclude and to reinforce the necessity of that conclusion becomes more urgent. We can see this from a change in Roth’s use of rhetorical questions, from a fairly neutral tone, “Could I have been any more naïve?” (90), to a brazen self-righteousness.

After Josie’s second (fake) abortion, Roth decides to keep his promise and marry her instead of running away once and for all. The narrating-I defends this decision by saying:

How could I *still* have stayed with her? The question really is how could I resist her. Look, how could I ever have resisted her? ... how could I be anything *but* mesmerised by this overbrimming talent for brazen self-invention, how could a half-formed, fledgling novelist hope ever to detach himself from this undiscourageable imagination unashamedly concocting the most diabolical ironies? (111; original emphasis)

The defensive tone continues when Roth relates the harrowing experience of being attacked by the Jewish community: “I still don’t think it was innocent of me to have been as astonished as I was at twenty-six when I found myself up against the most antagonistic social opposition of my life” (113).¹⁷ The present tense indicates that this is the narrating Roth’s perspective, which earlier might have been expressed in asides but now appearing as a legitimate, if not a dominant, part of the narrative.

¹⁶ In Dannenberg’s taxonomy, Roth is using “*upward* counterfactuals”, imagining a better scenario, to indicate his regret (*Coincidence* 112).

¹⁷ Roth offers a positive interpretation of his youthful rebellion indirectly through Zuckerman, that his intervention as a writer “upset the tribal balance — and perhaps even invigorated the tribe’s health” (173).

Roth accepted an invitation to speak at a symposium hosted by Yeshiva University in 1962, a response to the success of his first collection of fiction, *Goodbye, Columbus: And Five Short Stories* (1959). The symposium turned out to be a “trial (in every sense)” — the moderator “grilled” him and the audience “hated” him (127). The experience of the “Yeshiva battle” left Roth seeing the Jewish community as “itself fanatically insecure”, defending this by saying: “How could I conclude otherwise when I was told that every word I wrote was a disgrace, potentially endangering every Jew? Fanatical security, fanatical insecurity — nothing in my entire background could exemplify better than that night did how deeply rooted the Jewish drama was in this duality” (129-130). Similar to Webster in Barnes’s novel, Roth’s use of rhetorical questions serves as a strategic defence that insists upon the irrefutability of his interpretations. His narrative seeks to persuade his readers that these are indeed “the facts” of his life and not simply a subjective retelling of his experience. The emphasis shifts from the told to the telling, from what happened to the inevitability of what happened, in which Roth, in retrospect, fashions his life-story as one of ultimate triumph. The antagonist Josie becomes, in hindsight, “the greatest creative-writing teacher”; the humiliating Yeshiva incident, “the most bruising public exchange of my life”, becomes “the luckiest break I could have had” (112, 129, 130).

Near the end of the autobiography, the narrator Roth discards his previous reserve and instead unapologetically champions his behaviours. After Josie’s funeral, he sat on a bench in the park and basked in the sun. The narrating-I taunts the reader by saying: “Like it or not, that’s what I did: gloried in the sunshine on my living flesh” (155). Roth explains that he attended the funeral out of his considerations for Josie’s children, and would not want anyone to assume that “my heart was anything

other than flint” (153; original emphasis). Josie’s death allows him to be able to marry his long-time partner, May Aldridge, whose companionship, after his separation from Josie, contributed to his recovery from the disastrous marriage. But now, he finds the idea of marriage “intolerable” (159). That May would never act like Josie was irrelevant: “I simply could not unlearn overnight what the years of legal battling had taught me” (159-160). Contrary to this recollected explanation, the narrator Roth also offers an interpretation of his reaction based on his artistic sensibility, that his “innate taste for dramatic juxtaposition” (93) is the reason behind this decision — without a menacing antagonist, he no longer needs May as a “countervailing balm” (160). Roth ends his autobiography in an optimistic tone: “I was determined to be an absolutely independent, self-sufficient man” (160).

The Facts was published in 1988, but the narrative ends prematurely in 1969. Roth fills the 19-year gap by intermittently explaining the real-life inspirations behind his subsequent novels, including *Letting Go* (157), *When She Was Good* (74, 144-145, 149), *My Life as a Man* (89, 107, 108, 111, 149, 152), and *The Ghost Writer* (68, 127), which were published in 1962, 1967, 1974, 1979, respectively. The most significant of these is *My Life as a Man*, in which Roth transforms his disastrous marriage with Josie into “a fiction with a persuasive existence independent of myself” (152). This reimagining of real life offered the distance he needed to process his own “moral simpletonism” and “grotesque deference” to Josie (108). The novel serves as evidence that he “had managed to outlive the waste of all that youthful strength” (108). *My Life as a Man* is divided into two sections, one is “Useful Fictions”, which consists of two stories written by the character narrator Peter Tarnopol about the character Nathan Zuckerman, and the other is “My True Story”, in which Tarnopol relates his own disastrous marriage with Maureen without

the mediation of fiction.¹⁸ Roth's use of Tarnopol mirrors Tarnopol's use of Zuckerman, as a way to transform a traumatic marriage into something managed, mastered, and prevailed. *My Life as a Man* explores "the moral and aesthetic question of whether a writer can or should gain 'proper distance' or 'detachment' from the details of his past" (Shostak 161). We can see a continuation of such reflections in the frame narrative of *The Facts*, which self-reflexively reveals the biases of the embedded autobiography and (implicitly) conducts its own self-critique.

5. THE RIGHTNESS OF LIFE

Roth's autobiography stages a process of negotiating countering forces that reaches an end, however unsatisfactorily. The narrating-I voices contrasting and sometimes contradictory explanations for what happened in the past, but the life-story converges on a single note of optimism. The end is provisional, however, and we see the frame narrative opening up questions that the autobiography has found a way, though not the only way, to resolve. Roth's book as a whole contains a tension between its ethical integrity — staging alternative explanations and perspectives — and its formal integrity — the voices stop talking but without settling the dispute. Maria's remark about the relationship between life and narrative is one of the issues broached but left unresolved. Communicated by Zuckerman in the concluding letter, Maria's point is that the randomness of life does not require narrative to make it meaningful — its integrity lies in its being lived, not in being understood.

¹⁸ The note to the reader at the beginning of *My Life as a Man* states that its contents "are drawn from the writings of Peter Tarnopol". Roth attributes authorship to a fictional character, and in this way the novel's paratext already operates as fictive rhetoric.

Maria's response to Roth's autobiography is organised by Zuckerman into eight items, which are more observational and less judgmental. Contrary to Zuckerman, Maria does not find Roth to be "presenting a deceptive image to make himself look terrific ... it's rather the other way" — Roth's self-representation is unflatteringly "narrow and driven and ... so pleasureless" (190). Maria does not share the knowingness of Zuckerman, who evaluates Roth's self-representation based on what is left out (because he knows about it), rather than simply the embedded text itself. Maria identifies recurring themes in Roth's life-story, such as Jewishness, childhood, narcissism, and the value of freedom (188-189). Her most significant objection is her dissatisfaction about Roth "making everything *signify* something, when in life I don't believe it does" (190). Through the mask of Maria, the author Roth indirectly draws attention to the imposition of form in autobiography, and the way that it renders a life transformed, which counters the claim in the opening letter that the embedded autobiography offers "experience untransformed" (5). In writing the self, independent events are arranged as a sequence and interpreted as part of a whole. The formal requirements of narrative render it essentially different from experience itself, which is not subject to the same boundedness.

Maria's remark shows "how far-reaching but, at the same time, contingent an author's decisions in the process of writing an autobiography are" (Lehnert 778). In other words, narrative overpowers the randomness of life, but simultaneously implies that there is more than one narrative that life can be made into — the one on offer has no more authority than an unwritten one, and its "rightness" is argued rather than unquestioned. We can find a related remark by Zuckerman, who accuses Roth of giving in to the allure of novelistic coherence at the expense of authenticity:

“you say it to be interesting, not because you believe it” (178). The remark is indicative of the conflict between telling a compelling story and telling a true story, the tension between the life-story’s aesthetic value and its ethical integrity. Narrative representation inevitably involves interpretation, which makes truth claims unavoidably subjective and disputable. But the project of autobiography is not simply an accumulation of facts that would confer a degree of absolute objectivity upon the life-story; it is a means to communicate the autobiographer’s personality and shows the way those pieces of information are processed and arranged. That is, “truth” also resides in the form of the life-story, which is a reflection of the form of the autobiographer’s narrative understanding and makes visible how s/he experiences the world. Life writing invite its readers to enact that process of transforming life into narrative by following and seeking to understand the writer’s life experience in the way s/he understands it.

The representation of one’s life is circumscribed by the sequentiality and the boundedness of narrative — time flows but also comes to an end. Self-narration has to be selective because it is impossible to include everything in a life-story or to tell everything at the same time, an issue that I discussed in the last chapter where Davis’s narrator acknowledges this limitation but finds it unsatisfying. Embarking on the project of autobiography means that one is taking a specific approach towards life, which is not to look down upon “mere” living, but only to affirm that there is more one can do with life than mere living. The quoted dialogue between Maria and Zuckerman in the concluding letter represents an exchange between different interpretations about the project of autobiography. Zuckerman seconds Roth and points out to Maria that his autobiography has a purpose to achieve: “the subject ... *is* his formative experiences as a writer. Randomness is not the subject” (189;

original emphasis). The omissions that Zuckerman criticises concern the life of Roth the writer, not the life of Roth the man. Whereas for Maria, the latter is a more interesting subject, and Roth's autobiography leaves out "lots and lots of other facts, all the stuff that spins around and is not coherent or *important*"; "The stuff people take for granted" (189, 190; original emphasis).

Both Roth and Zuckerman foreground the profession of the autobiographer, that the work *is* the life. Maria's response suggests an attempt to address and to redress the balance between life and work. Behind the mask of Zuckerman, the author Roth indirectly poses the question: "Are you suggesting that without the fights, without the anger, without the conflicts and ferocity, life is incredibly boring[?] ... the pallidness of all this — this randomness?" (194). Zuckerman's scepticism makes the question verge on becoming a rhetorical one. It implies that, to the novelist, life is meaningful only to the degree that it can be useful for his work. We can relate this to the desire for story and the role of storyteller which I have been discussing in this thesis. For Roth, without the "conflicts and ferocity" (194), there is no story, or, no opportunity for storytelling. In writing fiction, which as a creative enterprise is a process of inventing and assembling imaginary selves, Roth shows that this process also throws into relief, if indistinctly, the singular self.

Zuckerman's question is also an indirect rephrasing of Maria's criticism given earlier in the letter: "Nothing that he says happens to him in his life does not get turned into something that is useful to him" (189). In a rather obscure way, Maria goes on to suggest the way retrospection in autobiography lends itself to prospection in life: "Things that appear to have been pointlessly destructive and poisoning, things that look at the time to have been wasteful and appalling and spoiling, are the things that turn out to be, say, the writing of *Portnoy's Complaint*" (189). In other words,

what seems to be “random” at present might become significant in the future. The evaluation of “randomness” is context-driven and contingent, and the same goes for the sense of necessity and inevitability argued in life-stories.

The fashioning of other selves in Roth’s book, as a project of autobiography, can be seen as fashioning of oneself as other, as engaging with “otherness of a kind that can be constitutive of selfhood as such” (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 3). Such multiplicity affords a chance to discover the singularity of one’s identity as it inhabits a place amongst others and other others, and also as a receptacle that embraces countering forces. Autobiography, as an ethical project, regards the self as partially knowable rather than either completely knowable or utterly unknowable. The desire for story, which represents closure and comprehension, gives way to a tolerance for ambiguity and an acceptance of one’s unknowingness. The point is less about verifying the factualness of the life-story and more about the way the act of telling is an attestation to one’s identity, that this is the story a person like Roth would tell. Counterpoint, as the form of narrative integrity of Roth’s book, on separate levels and as a whole text, suggests that truth is substantiated when placed in a context of oppositional perspectives that challenge and engage with one another. I suggest that the “end” of this process is not reconciliation or harmony, but rather a willingness to participate in such activity, which is renewable and ongoing; to engage with others and with other ideas, especially those that are unfamiliar and startling.

The epigraph of Roth’s book, taken from *The Counterlife* and attributed to Zuckerman rather than the author Roth, addresses the kind of refractory truth that can be found in life-stories: “And as he spoke I was thinking, *the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into*” (*The Counterlife*

115; original emphasis).¹⁹ Life-storytelling transforms life by ordering it into an integrated whole, not necessarily falsifying the life that is represented but neither offering an exclusive way to re-present it, that is, an exclusive truth. The epigraph draws attention to a two-way traffic between life and stories, which relates to the feedback loop between behaviour and story-making that I discuss in the last chapter on Davis's novel — the desire for the shapeliness of coherence informing one's (future) actions. A related remark can be found in Roth's *Deception*, when the man recalls a comment made by the woman several years earlier in a literary course on the relationship between Kafka's life and his fictions. That while the other students assume the fictions are derived from Kafka's relationship with his father, the woman opposes this majority and said: "No ... it's just the other way around. His idea of his relationship to his father derives from 'Metamorphosis' and *The Trial*. ... By the time a novelist worth his salt is thirty-six, he's no longer translating experience into a fable — he's imposing his fable onto experience" (125). The imposition of formal coherence onto experience renders it comprehensible to oneself and to others; it communicates a personal truth, but without the authority to exclude other forms of truth. The defensive measure of preventing misunderstanding or misreading gives way to an exploration of why this occurs in the first place — the normative assumptions of what is "right" and "wrong" are destabilised by the inquiry opened up in the project of autobiography.

In Roth's *American Pastoral*, published nine years after *The Facts* in 1997, Zuckerman discusses the "rightness" of living:

¹⁹ As mentioned earlier in a footnote, Roth's *My Life as a Man* also uses this device. Barnes in the author's note of *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) is more subtle and only attributes the translations in the text to the character narrator Geoffrey Braithwaite rather than himself.

The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again.

That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride.

(35)

The sentiment seems to advocate a way of living that is unreflective and extra-moral. And yet, it is not for oblivion or meaningless free play that life is desirable.

Zuckerman also suggests that: "The illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on" (ibid 63). The pursuit of rightness, which is a sense of justness, does not flounder in the face of the unexpectedness of life, nor does it justify oblivion to other forms of rightness. The regress of certainty in *The Facts*, reflected in the accumulation of counterarguments that extends beyond the text, shows that the ongoing inquiry is an act of living — being surprised and getting it wrong are more part of life than the assurance and finality of getting it right. The integrity of life-storytelling suggests an openness to the knowledge that is always to come. Not knowing makes it a better story, and the capacity to be surprised represents our humanity towards the other.

Chapter VI

Conclusion: Life and Integrity

“It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting-place from which to understand it — backwards.”

— Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, entry in 1843, pp. 127.

Fictional autobiographies explore self life writing at one remove and engage with the challenges of autobiography through the rhetorical vehicle of fiction, by using a particular representation of autobiography to theorise autobiography in general. The fictional nature of this investigation is crucial — it puts aside reference in order to foreground form, which is both necessary and potentially problematic in communicating personal truths. The informative content of the text is less an end in itself and more as contributing to the text’s communicative purpose of examining formal and thematic issues that are involved in all acts of self-representation. My discussions in this thesis foreground the form or shape of the autodiegetic narrator’s life-story that communicates this person’s personality and interpretation of life. The point is less what is represented and more about how and why it is re-presented in a certain way.

Fictional autobiographies stage the necessary negotiation between form and ethics in writing the self and engage with critical issues involved in this activity on the narratorial and/or authorial level. My analyses of the four texts show that

narrative integrity, as a form of the life-story's "rightness" that resolves the dual demands of aesthetics and ethics in self-narration, *both* does and does not work, that as an imposition of form it may undermine the ethical commitment to authenticity. I argue that this is less a flaw and more an inherent characteristic of all life-stories, requiring our engagement rather than resignation. The constructedness of integrity signifies an openness that embraces multiple forms and different interpretations of life. The project of autobiography involves experimentations with both familiar and unfamiliar forms of integrity to arrive at one that is "right". Fictional autobiographies offer representations of this experimentation and invite readers to reflect on our own practices of self-representation and the narrative integrity of our own life-stories. A rhetorical approach to fiction goes beyond the fictional representation itself and considers the ways in which the text is engaging with certain aspects of autobiography in general. The ambivalence of the represented life-story's integrity invites reflection upon the ambivalent integrity of all life-stories.

My conception of narrative integrity addresses the singular integrity of each life-story and its writer, acknowledging the life-stories that could but are not told as well as those that remain to be told in the future. The project of autobiography is other-oriented both in the sense of enacting a kind of self-dividedness in recognising the self as other and in the way that one is both the agent and the witness of this process, attesting to one's own as well as others' lives. The four forms of narrative integrity discussed in this thesis offer ways to make sense of the autodiegetic narrators' lives and their personalities, inviting reflection upon the way these forms function in real life. Contingency upholds the way that there is *more than one* truth in life-storytelling, which requires coherence and consistency but without being

reduced to pure formalism or fulfilling this requirement by excluding other, countering interpretations of the life lived and its “rightness”.

Coherence and consistency as formal requirements in writing the self afford a sense of seamlessness that contributes to the reassurance of self-understanding, by casting and making visible the continuity of one’s selfhood. And yet, this seamlessness, which also implies a sense of effortlessness or “naturalness”, underplays the work that is involved in telling as well as living — the self and the life-story are pieces of work, whose integrity *works* by engaging with the necessary negotiation between aesthetics and ethics in the project of autobiography, which is an act, a practice, and not a passive recording or mere description. One’s integrity is constructed rather than found, nurtured rather than natural. In this way, the seamlessness of the life-story is a means to an end rather than an end in itself — it facilitates our understanding of the life and the person that is being re-presented, which can be oneself. In helping us process the autobiography, however, form facilitates but can also potentially mislead our judgment. The speed of arrival at a judgment, elicited by the coherence and consistency of the narrative, is not a measure of the ethical quality of the life-story told and its telling. In the same way that formal beauty is not a necessary reflection of ethical integrity, ease of comprehension is not evidence of grasping “the truth of the person”, which as Judith Butler cautions “might well become more clear in moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness — in enigmatic articulations that cannot easily be translated into narrative form” (*Giving* 64). Life comes to have integrity by being transformed into narrative. Narrative facilitates the articulation of truth, but without being its sole provider.

The epigraph of this chapter, perhaps an epitaph for this thesis, articulates the necessary unsatisfactoriness of the “rightness” of one’s autobiography, a kind of perishability in the face of time, which flows and washes over what remains of the past and washes away further into the distance the incoming future in which our lives remains. The boundedness that Kierkegaard seems to desire may well be found in death — a resting place that is inevitable if also unpredictable. However, while death enables the formal integrity of one’s life, it disables ethical integrity by terminating action. The difference between life and narrative can be seen in the way that only the former achieves integrity in an absolute sense by coming to an end that is final — such an end would be absolutely “right” because one has no more opportunities to challenge the finality of this rightness, an enquiry which can be opened by others but not oneself. Every autobiography arrives at a different “end”, which may concern the same life episode but which is interpreted differently according to the specific circumstances of the narrative act and contributes to different, even antithetical, purposes. Autobiography is renewable in the sense that one performs this activity more than once in a lifetime but without necessarily producing the same life-story, that is, the same interpretation of life. The passing of time changes our relationships with ourselves and the world, provoking change in our interpretation of ourselves, the world, and the relationship between the two. The pursuit of self-understanding and life’s meaning is fulfilled in the act itself and not in its completion, in which “rightness” is an ongoing negotiation.

The ongoingness of life shows the finality of the life-story to be necessarily false, but without denying its sense of “rightness” as an attestation to the life lived. I argued in the last chapter, with the help of Maria, that the integrity of life lies in its being lived, not in being understood, that is, formed into a narrative. The

unboundedness of life renders it absent of integrity in a formal sense, and the lack of formal integrity risks making it incomprehensible, which would undermine its ethical integrity, for example in the sense that accountability becomes problematic because one is never simply oneself but always already other to oneself. It would thus be plausible to assume that life is without integrity, or, has an integrity that is always already compromised. However, as I mentioned, this is less a liability than “a constitutive aspect”, as Korthals Altes puts it (43), and calls for, rather than dismisses, our engagement.

While there is no integrity of life as a whole, there is integrity in life. We are called upon to re-member and re-present ourselves daily if not constantly, to form and re-form ourselves in a way that has integrity in both senses of the word, and so the question of ethics is never far away and always relevant in spite of formal resolutions. Death resolves this ambivalence, but it also deprives us of the final pleasure, that is, to witness and embrace ourselves as wholes. However, as I have shown throughout this thesis, form is meaningless without ethics, and so this “wholeness” — as mental constitution and formal completion, as I discussed in chapter four — is meaningless without an ethical commitment to resist the emptiness of form as well as the sense of finality in reaching resolutions. Such a commitment engages with the way forms collide but also co-exist and signifies an openness — there is more than one way to live and to tell, more than one kind of life that is lived and told, and more than one form of integrity that is “right”.

Narrative integrity as an analytical concept may be challenged when the object of investigation is a process rather than an integrated whole, as in life-stories. A possible direction for future research is the question of ageing, which is not only relevant to old age but can be seen as ongoing since one’s birth. If life is a process in

which the project of autobiography is renewable, what of the in-between time before arriving at that provisional end? The duration of ageing as a process requires a certain durability in confronting its specific challenges, in which the idea of integrity may offer some insights. The challenges of ageing are related to but not the same as those encountered in the project of autobiography. How does one age with integrity? Keeping in mind that both form and ethics are involved in this enquiry, that form facilitates ethics even if it can be potentially problematic. How to narrate a process that involves slow change without reducing it to a before-and-after representation, a formalisation that rather defeats the purpose of the enquiry? I suggest that a rhetorical approach to narratives about ageing or *ageing narratives* may reveal ways in which integrity, as a formal and an ethical quality, is both durational and durable.

Ageing is a form of life that requires a certain way to understand its meaning and logic. In speaking of ageing I am also engaging with the value of speed, both in terms of acceleration and retardation. The slow violence of climate change, the 24-hour news cycle, the infinite company offered by the internet present challenges to modern living in the twenty-first century. Change has paradoxically become both faster and slower to realise. There is need to reconsider our relationship with time, perhaps so as to live it rather than to speed past it, that is, prioritising the “end” at the expense of experience, which can be seen as “time-engaging” rather than time-consuming (Korthals Altes 247). The convenience provided by new technology contracts both time and space to make us live in close proximity but arguably without breaking down boundaries that discriminate between what is “right” and “wrong”. Integrity, as both a formal and an ethical category, perhaps can help elucidate ways to think and rethink speed as a modern form of time that discursively and rhetorically shapes the human experience and its meaning.

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