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This dissertation examines fiction writers who include themselves as characters within their fictional constructions. I look at the cultural emphasis on simulation in contemporary society which creates a context for these figures, hybrids of truth and fiction, to exist within a fictional landscape. In this way, by problematizing classification and rejecting fixed definitions of fiction, the authors included in this study use a poststructural paradigm to undermine conventional thinking about gender, the modern role of the writer, the function of the memoir, and life writing as a means of explaining a life. By creating a pseudo-biographical life within the fictional text, these authors have found a way to critique our culturally constructed ideas about truth, fiction, and identity.

I begin by looking at authors who investigate the imperative of locating authority in the writer and the failure of postmodern writers to live up to this expectation. Following this metafictional look at authors who find themselves unable to complete their own texts, I include an examination of contemporary rewriting of the trauma narratives associated with the Holocaust. In a world filled with simulations, telling the truth about this event, the responsibility of all those who write about the holocaust, is an impossibility and these authors all find an alternate mode of writing about this event. Next, I focus on authors who use themselves as characters to challenge conventional thinking about gender and identity, love and sexuality. These

writers all incorporate themselves into their work to critique how simulations (family stories, fictional texts, academic commentaries) have dictated contemporary thinking about gender and sexuality. Finally, I use Mark Leyner to point towards a new conception of the author figure, one that moves out of postmodernism into another literary movement, avant-pop. Leyner's view of "Mark Leyner," is all simulation—a writer who is not an outside observer but the center of society—and points to another use of this author figure, one who celebrates the impossibility of making distinctions between truth and fiction in life writing and revels in the simulated life he has created for himself.

FICTIONAL MEMOIRS: AUTHORIAL PERSONAS IN
CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject—it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing.”

--Philip LeJeune, *On Autobiography* (131-2)

“I could never be as honest about myself in a piece of non-fiction as I could in any of my novels.”

--Bret Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park*

In his discussion of contemporary fiction, Raymond Federman observes that “the New Fiction writers confront their own writing, insert themselves into their own texts in order to question the very act of using language to write fiction, even at the risk of alienating the reader” (32). This trend of authors inserting themselves as characters in fictional texts, creating the illusion of an autobiographical element of these postmodern works, may have begun as a high brow literary experiment, but it has since filtered down into mainstream popular culture. In 2005, the comedian Sarah Silverman began filming a show for Comedy Central, playing the part of “Sarah Silverman,” and Julia Roberts played a woman who was forced to impersonate “Julia Roberts” in the film *Ocean’s Twelve*.¹ Jules Feiffer’s *A Room with a Zoo*, a children’s book featuring a cartoonist named “Jules Feiffer” was published in 2005, along with Bret Easton Ellis’s *Lunar Park*, a novel about a writer named “Bret Easton Ellis” (written as “a mock autobiographical novel” [“Mirror” Wyatt]).² Inserting yourself into your own fictional work (such as these

novels, children's books, television programs, and films) has become a mainstream postmodern technique, but this approach is more than just a marker of a playful experiment. The pervasiveness of this maneuver in contemporary narratives both high and low proves that beyond this play lies a fascination with highlighting the constructedness of fiction (a hallmark of postmodern narrative) and a subsequent emphasis on the construction of the self. Just as late 20th century narratives disrupt form (think of works by Calvino, Eco, Nabokov), these types of narratives disrupt character. Authors that appear as characters within their own works force conventional thinking about identity and the self to be disrupted as well. And in doing this, these authors reconstruct an idea of identity that reflects our contemporary fascination for simulation at the expense of the real.

Becoming a fictional character then becomes a way for writers to deconstruct all traditional modes of thinking about narrative. But beyond that effort lies the serious project of deconstructing authority, romantic and modernist ideas about the writing process, and the notion of a stable, integrated self. Fracturing the author in this way, breaking down the narrative walls between author and character and autobiography and fiction encourages a poststructuralist approach. If we accept that the author is the center of the work, then according to Derrida, after the rupture of the

linked chain of determinations of the center . . . from then on it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. (960-1)

The author, contained within a myriad of different centers within these different structures, becomes a symbol of the decentering of authority inside this infinite field of freeplay. And, echoing Lejeune's thoughts on the impossibility of using a text to completely reflect a life, these author doubles themselves are incomplete. Essentially patched together, they represent the inability of the self to fully construct itself. The result of this failed attempt is a self that becomes a Frankenstein-like assemblage of truth and fiction, which mirrors the fusion of truth and fiction found in contemporary narrative. Martin Heidegger addressed the problem with self-fashioning in his discussion of the function of the poet:

If being is what is unique to beings, by what can Being still be surpassed? Only by itself, only by its own, and indeed by expressly entering into its own. Then being would be the unique which wholly surpasses itself . . . But this surpassing, this transcending does not go up and over into something else; it comes up to its own self and back into the nature of its truth. (131)

Heidegger emphasizes here the nature of individual truth—an issue repeatedly addressed by the authors in this study. As beings who cannot escape their essential qualities, these authors create an alternate version of themselves, one who has the capability of escaping the self. Reveling in this freedom, these doubles become markers of a schizophrenic postmodern existence, with unlimited possibilities.

The ubiquitous presence of these author doubles in mainstream popular culture urges readers and viewers to seriously examine the construction of the self within this postmodern paradigm. Moving past metafiction, these autobiographical yet fictional

characters present a world view of the self as an “I” that is erased and then reconstituted in a form that transcends generic classification. Part life writing (as in the work of Richard Powers in *Galatea 2.2*), part fiction (Charlie Kaufman has no twin brother, despite his creation of Donald Kaufman in *Adaptation*), these texts critique a universalist approach of rigid generic categorizations. As Philip Roth says of his use of “Philip Roth” living through the presidency of Charles Lindbergh in *The Plot Against America*, “it’s a false memoir in the form of a true memoir” (Tucker 45). The “Philip Roths,” “Kathy Ackers” and “Larry Davids” who populate the narratives of Philip Roth, Kathy Acker, and Larry David then all become author figures who intrude upon a fictional text to highlight the constructedness of all forms of discourse. And it is this idea of calling attention to the constructed self that unites all the authors in this study. Paul Auster claims that he has tried to “expose the plumbing” in his use of himself, and this attempt to expose the construction of characters and narratives is evident in the work of all these authors. And as these characters are extensions of the individual self, each of them is used to different effect by these authors. My chapters divide these author doubles into four categories (metafiction, trauma memoirs, gender politics, and 21st-century views of authorship). What unites all of these authors, despite the different uses of these author doubles, is the attempt to unmask the simulations of our contemporary existence. By creating these simulations, authors call the reader’s attention to the fabulated reality of everyday life, where signs of the unreal have everywhere replaced the real.

These authors also play with literary traditions and upend them using the cultural project of postmodernism to question the rigidity of generic narrative categories, such as

the *künstlerroman*, the *bildungsroman*, and trauma narratives. Though postmodern works have always featured a hybridity of genre, these new types of author figures find themselves in a landscape where the goals of genre fiction are mixed with the goals of the memoir, and both projects expand the ways of looking at these constructions. I argue that postmodern irony and the fragmented view of the self allow these fictional personas to transform genres into a metafictional blend that alters these forms, investing them with layers of indeterminacy. Incorporating these author-characters becomes a challenge to conventional thinking about the author and life writing. These unique author stand-ins create something entirely new; a fictional yet autobiographical figure who is present in the narrative, yet also hyper aware of the construction of that presence. These figures comment upon the limiting nature of such projects as the *künstlerroman* and the Holocaust narrative, and instead create a space where the boundaries limiting these genres can be expanded to include contemporary ontological concerns. Though Federman places these author figures firmly in postmodernism, they point out of postmodernism into new literary movements such as avant-pop.

Of course, all authors who incorporate themselves into their narratives can trace this heritage back far beyond the beginnings of postmodernism. There is a direct link between what these writers are doing and the beginnings of the autobiographical genre. As Leigh Gilmore observes of those who write about themselves to ease the pain of the trauma they have endured,

Although those who can tell their stories benefit from the therapeutic balm of words, the path to this achievement is strewn with obstacles. To navigate it, some

writers move away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography's central questions" (7).

Though experimental artists like Kathy Acker and Mark Leyner have left the generic conventions of recognizably autobiographic forms far behind, they are still linked to this tradition by their desire to explain their lives and use their fictional texts to construct their identities.

According to James Goodwin, the earliest autobiographies date back to the late 18th century, after both the French and American revolutions, and were likewise revolutionary in their emphasis on revealing the individual's inner truth (8). Historically, American autobiography has not only served as a vehicle for self-knowledge, but also as a means of education, empowerment, and as a kind of object lesson for readers. Benjamin Franklin, Booker T. Washington, and Harriet Jacobs all wrote autobiographies that attempted to do more than just record their version of the events they lived through and witnessed. Readers were urged to use these texts as a means of self-improvement, a call to action, or a tool to be used for moral enlightenment. With the modern and postmodern questioning of the self, autobiographies which instructed were replaced by those that questioned identity, ideas of the self, and the impossibility of establishing a stable and cohesive identity. Confessional poetry of the 1950's and 60's, practiced by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell emphasized using verse to express complex psychological states within an openly autobiographical context; Lowell's *Life Studies*, in its attempt to understand and unknot Lowell's own life, provides a telling mid-century view of identity formation. In the prose section of *Life Studies*, Lowell imagines what his

ancestor Mordecai Myers would say to him about inheriting his family's psychological legacy: "If he could have spoken, Mordecai would have said, "My children, my blood, accept graciously the loot of your inheritance. We are all dealers in used furniture" (45). In a recent article in *The New York Times*, responding to the current glut of memoirs and autobiographies being published, William Grimes references Paul John Eakin's work on autobiography: "[Eakin] has argued that human beings continuously engage in a process of self-creation and self-discovery by constructing autobiographical narratives. In a sense, we are the stories – multiple, shifting and constantly evolving – that we weave about ourselves." Lowell's image as himself as a piece of used furniture reflects his own story as a continuation of family stories from past generations that help him to construct and understand his contribution to the chain of connections.

Confessing these inner fears and anxieties creates a surprisingly direct line from the confessional poets to the postmodern authors in this study. Richard Powers, Charles Baxter, and Charlie Kaufman all reveal their fears to their audiences, among them the crushing anxiety produced by writer's block and the terror that results from days spent staring at a blank page. Larry David and Kathy Acker both admit to acts and desires that would alienate them from polite society, but their work becomes a testament to the freedom that writing about the true self can create. Even Mark Leyner's megalomaniacal egotism (portraying himself as "the most significant young prose writer in America" [*Et Tu, Babe* 16]) is an aspirational wish that every author might feel but would dare not express in print. This type of writing about the self then embodies the confessional spirit, transforming it into a formal experiment in life writing. Of course, these confessions

sometimes read like Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which in its satirical look at autobiography, the author figure, and a flawed use of autobiographical details to understand literature, illustrates the shifting definitions of genres and critical approaches, leading into postmodern and self-conscious authorship.

And as the number of these author doubles grows, the question of why this idea is so popular right now must be addressed. According to Baudrillard and many other philosophers and theorists, we live in an age of simulation. Reality television, hypertext, the pervasiveness of the media—all of these phenomena are hallmarks of a culture obsessed with alternate realities. The current debate over the form of the memoir is the perfect example of the allure of the simulation. Grimes posits that “the public has long since gotten used to the idea that you do not have to be a statesman or a literary commander . . . to commit your life to print,” and the recent surge in the number of autobiographies being produced is a testament to this acceptance of life writing as a democratic and ever popular genre. In 2006, one particular memoir ignited a vitriolic debate over the loosening boundaries of the autobiographical form, and the ethics of blending fact with fiction in the guise of writing about the self. The truthfulness of James Frey's “memoir” *A Million Little Pieces*, a story of his drug addiction and subsequent recovery (and a problematic blend of fact and fiction), was questioned upon its initial publication in 2003. The mild controversy over Frey's work might have remained an academic debate had it not been for Oprah Winfrey, who chose the book for her television show's book club in September 2005. The book became a bestseller, but questions of veracity resurfaced in January 2006, and Frey and Winfrey were forced into

a face-to-face confrontation on her show. As Winfrey discussed her feelings of betrayal over having promoted the memoir as non-fiction, she challenged Frey and his version of life writing: “I feel duped. I don’t know what is true and I don’t know what isn’t. Why did you lie?” Following the show, Random House, the book’s publisher, was forced to re-issue the book with a disclaimer, stating that the book contained fictional elements and offered refunds to disgruntled readers, and Frey was scorned by the press and by the public. The controversy forced public attention onto questions of truth and fiction in the memoir and whether or not writing about yourself can ever be a completely truthful endeavor.

The crucifixion of Frey reveals our culture’s basic confusion over the genre of the memoir and about life writing in general. Clearly, “memoir” meant one thing to Frey (he stated that the book was 95% factual, a percentage that he felt was appropriate for a memoir [Kakutani]) and another to Winfrey and her readers. Winfrey’s confusion is understandable, as the boundaries of these categories have become extremely porous. But Winfrey misses the point by being angry about expecting these lines to be so clearly drawn between fact and fiction. Michiko Kakutani claims that Frey’s blend of fact and fiction represents a very real danger, that by eroding these categories, we open ourselves up to linguistic manipulation by those who feel they can use language to influence the public for political purposes. But both Winfrey’s and Kakutani’s adherence to such rigid definitions of reality and fiction miss the point.

Even more surprising, however, is their failure to recognize that we confront and accept these hybrids of fact and fiction everyday. Photoshopped images, cloning,

artificial intelligence, and Disneyland are all simulations that have been accepted as part of our contemporary landscape. These simulations challenge our ideas of truth and non-truth as they substitute appearances for reality. And into this landscape come more examples of simulations: author doubles in contemporary narrative. As art both reflects and responds to society, so contemporary authors have become fascinated with simulation and many have used themselves to illustrate our confusion over what is real and what is fiction. But, instead of forcing readers to ask what is real and what is not, these authors force their audiences to confront what happens when we start to view the simulations as natural.

In a passage from Lee Siegel's *Love in a Dead Language*, Professor Leopold Roth remembers his visit as a child to the set of a movie in which his parents were starring, an epic love story set in India. Thinking back on his feelings about watching the Indian backdrop being constructed on the movie set, Roth reveals, "when I went with Sophia to the Taj Mahal for the first time, I was not as enchanted by the real mausoleum as I had been by its plaster, paint, and paper replicas in the studio" (35). Siegel here reflects a cultural feeling of regret that the simulation is usually preferable to the real object. And the popularity of these simulations in our contemporary culture is a testament to the fact that Leopold Roth is not alone in preferring the copy over the original. Roth's reasons for choosing the set over the real Taj Mahal result from feeling that the original is a "dreadfully seductive promise in cool marble of a strangely painful loveliness, a lover's lie that death itself might in some mysterious way, be lovely" (35), which hints at an explanation for the popularity of the simulation over the real. The promise of the ideal

lures us into the real of simulation; Leopold Roth's ideal Taj Mahal is untouched by the human element that he encounters in India (the smells, the heat, the crowds), marking it as a perfect image, with no connection to reality. The unreal promises perfection that reality can never match. These authors then create a vision of themselves that populates a world of inhumanity, a world of limitless possibility with no connection to the real world with its boundaries and limits.

I will explain how this unbounded hybrid form of truth and fiction, the author's appearance in a fictional work, has not only been accepted but become an unlikely convention of postmodern literature and popular culture. Not explicitly autobiographies and not purely fictional, these texts exist in a liminal space where the author works with the reader to construct a text that is not bounded by conventional thinking about fiction, non-fiction, or autobiography. Each of the authors that I include uses their own appearance in the work to different effect, and clearly this conceit is one that allows great freedom for both author and reader. These author figures represent a new means of locating the author in their own work, and also ironically comment on the inability to ever adequately create a fictitious space that can be separated from the author. I investigate the ways that these self-conscious author figures point to a new way of thinking about fiction that leads out of postmodernism and into other movements (for example, avant-pop). I argue that a new conception of the relationship between the author and their work and the reader and their text, one that invests the "I" of the author with attributes of metafiction and autobiography and adds to the game of interpretation the work undergoes at the hands of the reader, are the ultimate results of the blurring of these

lines. While these texts by Paul Auster, Philip Roth, and Mark Leyner are not autobiographies, they can be viewed as ruminations on identity, authorship, and authority in general. I view these autobiographical author figures dialogically and argue that each author is adding an innovative “stylistic unity,” in Bahktinian terms, that forms something new when combined with the conventional system of the novel. These author figures, and subsequently these texts, invite a conversation between styles, and demand the reconciliation between the languages of memoir and fiction, author and character, and writer and reader. The message communicated by this new conception of life writing is the deconstruction of modern views of the author and the reformulation of this figure as a mixture of many “I”s (biographer, psychoanalyzed subject, and metafictional character). This study will examine the shift in the concept of the author as a character in fiction from being a mark of playful textual intrusion to becoming a symbol of postmodern literature itself—fragmented, non-authoritarian, and illusory, as well as self-consciously ironic.

Previous work on this phenomenon has been reductive, viewing the self-conscious author figure as a playful postmodern quirk, while ignoring its larger thematic implications. Too easily dismissed as a *Seinfeld*-like sitcom conceit (a “real” person in the midst of fictional characters), I argue that behind the play, larger concerns lurk to be examined. Cameo appearances, a convention of films (consider Alfred Hitchcock’s appearances in his own movies as well as the celebrities who give a cinema verité quality to Robert Altman’s *The Player*)³, must not be dismissed in literature as an amusing distraction, but instead viewed as instruments of critique and subversion. The appearance

of these authors as characters then becomes emblematic of Baudrillard's simulacrum, as authors recreate themselves as reflections of reality.

The chapters within this project are organized thematically, and I use each chapter to focus on one of the ways in which this type of autobiography challenges preconceived notions of the authority of the author and deconstructs the cult of the author figure. I begin with four writers whose fictional versions of themselves appear within their own fiction. Paul Auster, Charles Baxter, Jerry Seinfeld, and Charlie Kaufman are four authors who, superficially, share very little. Auster is an artist who has written novels, poetry, and films (and directed several feature films) and Baxter is a novelist and theorist who has published works of fiction and literary criticism. Seinfeld and Kaufman both have backgrounds in television—Seinfeld as the writer and co-creator of *Seinfeld*, and Kaufman toiled for many years as a sitcom writer before winning an Academy Award for his screenplay *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. But all of these artists share a preoccupation with exploring conceptions of identity and of the self. I demonstrate in my chapter “Metafictional Mirrors: Reflections of the Writing Process,” that the appearances of these authors are in reality organizing principles, that while two of these writers focus on comedy, all of their fictions are serious attempts to deconstruct the authority of the author, and ultimately decenter the text; in Auster's postmodern world, as in Baxter's, Seinfeld's, and Kaufman's, readers are constantly being removed from a stable reality.

“Paul Auster” appears in *City of Glass* to assist Daniel Quinn in his detective work, becoming a repository of information and knowledge in this story where nothing can ever be known, where “nothing [is] real except chance” (4). Within Auster's

postmodern detective story, “Auster” becomes someone who has answers in a story where answers only beget more questions. Appearing as a source of information, and a reminder of the life that Quinn is leaving behind by assuming the role of detective (successful author and family man) allows Auster to initially appear as a powerful character, but by the novel's end, he has become another victim just like Quinn. “Charles Baxter” in *The Feast of Love* attempts to write his novel *The Feast of Love*, but is superseded in the narrative by Bradley, who gives him inspiration and direction for his book. This version of Baxter de-stabilizes the very idea of “authorship” by abnegating responsibility for his entire book. “Charlie Baxter” essentially hands over the writing of the book to Bradley, who decides the title, theme, and content. More than a playful organizing system, this use of an alter ego allows Baxter to meditate on the very nature of narrative and authorship, demanding that that his readers reframe the Foucaultian question, “What is an author?” into “who is the author?”

All of the works in this chapter are metafiction, as they all comment on the writing process of the authors themselves and the texts they are currently producing. “Paul Auster,” in *City of Glass*, appears to assist another author, Daniel Quinn, in his ersatz detective work. Similarly, “Charlie Baxter” ultimately cedes power over his manuscript *The Feast of Love* to another character. Jerry Seinfeld in *Seinfeld* writes the script for a television show based on his life, which is cancelled after only one episode. Instead of the romantic ideal of the artist at work, the texts in this chapter all show the writer suffering for their art. “Charlie Kaufman” a miserable, fat, sweaty mass of insecurities in *Adaptation* becomes metonymic for all these authors, as they all suffer for

their art. Not just humorous satires on those who are tortured by writer's block and the methods they must use to conquer it, these works probe deeper into the writer's world of weaknesses and insecurities. The fact that all of these author figures find that they must collaborate with others or fail points to a new conception of the author and the life of the artist. The texts become multivocalic as each of these writers must turn to other voices to help them create. The end result is a dialogic writing process, one that succeeds only when these other voices are welcomed into the writer's formerly solitary process. Each author finds in their double another simulation, and subsequently reflects the cultural fascination for and fear of the unreal.

Next, I move on to examine another more political use for this autobiographical author figure. Philip Roth, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Larry David have all created fictions which feature versions of themselves confronting the legacy of the holocaust. Throughout his long and prolific career, Roth has toyed with his audience by including himself within his plots (in *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* and *Operation Shylock*). Nathan Zuckerman has become a veritable stand-in for Roth for decades, and Roth has relished incorporating characters (including Tarnapol and Kapesh) that he knows will be mistaken for the real Roth. As Roth is confronted by his doppelgänger in *Operation Shylock*, a man who claims to be the author Philip Roth, so does he also confront the rules that apply to autobiography and systematically dismantles each one. In the "real" Roth's quest to regain his name and identity, he finds himself increasingly doubting the stability of either of these possessions. This postmodern memoir then claims to be many things simultaneously, and in turn, casts doubt on the essential nature of the

autobiographical genre itself. In *The Facts*, *Operations Shylock*, and *The Plot against America*, the reader is confronted by a text that, though it claims to be truthful, constantly undermines the notion of truth and destabilizes all assumed knowledge.

The Plot Against America features another version of “Philip Roth,” this time an adult looking back on his childhood in an alternate history of American politics. This fictional vision of America takes off from a “What if?” premise (What might have happened if Charles Lindbergh had become President of the United States in 1940?), and uses Roth’s real family and experiences growing up in Newark, New Jersey, to examine a fictional scenario. The false memoir then imagines verifiable facts and fiction in a dialogic conversation with each other. This kind of imaginative historiographic fiction (similar to Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*, a false history of 20th-century America) then leads into a more political use of this trope than the metafictional games of Baxter and Kaufman. Beyond blurring the lines between fiction, autobiography/memoir, and non-fiction, Roth explores writing about the Holocaust in a new way. Like Saul Bellow, whose works are all concerned, some more openly than others, with living as a Jew in America following the Holocaust, Roth’s works are suffused with this subtext. But in *The Plot against America*, he uses himself to tell a different story of the Holocaust, one where the instigating events may be different from those that actually occurred, but the tragic results are the same.

Foer, in *Everything Is Illuminated*, takes readers on a metafictional journey thorough the creation of the book *Everything Is Illuminated* by the author “Jonathan Safran Foer” which ends with an unexpected and searingly emotional testimonial from a

Nazi collaborator. *Everything is Illuminated* is a metafictional account of “Foer’s” journey to find the woman who hid his grandfather from the Nazis and, by saving his life, ensured that “Foer” would be born. As the novel ends with a tragic confession, it becomes clear that Foer is using “Foer” to make a larger statement about the unrepresentability of the Holocaust in fiction. Writers such as Hayden White have observed that fiction is an unacceptable form to reflect and represent the horrors of the Holocaust. According to Susan E. Nowak, personal experience is the only medium through which the scope and the depth of the atrocities can be apprehended. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, according to this line of thought, would be a more valuable and persuasive account than hundreds of films in the vein of *Life is Beautiful*. And *Everything is Illuminated* is a text that recognizes this fact, and then frames one fictionalized account of the lingering and devastating effects of these events alongside the very real inability of “Foer” to write about what he has witnessed on this emotional quest.

And very different still from Roth and Foer’s contribution to the genre of the Holocaust narrative is an episode of the television series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, produced and written by Larry David. In the episode entitled “The Survivor,” “Larry David” attempts to engineer a meeting between two “survivors,” believing them both to be survivors of the Holocaust. Complications ensue when only one of them is actually a Holocaust survivor and the other a contestant on the television show *Survivor*. After their introduction, an argument breaks out between these two over who suffered the most during their respective ordeals. Ridiculous, shocking, and intensely politically incorrect, this argument and “Larry’s” subsequent attempt to make peace, highlight the different

direction David is taking with this kind of trauma narrative. Appearing as himself within the show, “Larry David” habitually offends and articulates thoughts that are outrageous and insulting. “The Survivor” episode becomes another example of the freedom ceded to the fictionalized version of “Larry David,” who creates a joke about the American cult of suffering (represented by the game show contestant who thinks his ordeal can be compared to being condemned to a concentration camp). Obliterating the boundaries of propriety and good taste, David forces audiences to confront our cultural embrace of the simulation over the real.

My next chapter investigates the revolutionary means by which both Kathy Acker and Lee Siegel insert versions of themselves within their sprawling, multivocalic texts. Each of these author figures performs within a chorus of characters and voices, providing just one of many versions of authority. Strategies such as the ones employed by Acker and Siegel are designed to undermine the idea of authority, and to challenge conventional thinking about genre. In the three novels contained in *Portrait of an Eye* (a very revealing title), Acker’s narrator shifts identity from “Acker” to a series of other women, and other men, sometimes all in the same paragraph. Settings, along with narrative voice, are fluid in Acker’s work, but the one constant is the use of language to challenge conventional thinking about the inequitable power relationships between men and women. Siegel’s focus on identity politics and sexuality marks his work as similarly revolutionary. And, in his insistence on maintaining a difference between himself and “the author Lee Siegel,” who he claims to be frequently mistaken for, Siegel creates, as he phrases it, a “postmodern problem” for himself. This fragmentation of character then provides Acker

and Siegel with the ideal forum to explore issues of gender and sexuality. And as Acker's texts subvert reading strategies and traditional thinking about the author's point of view, and include elements of the visual arts and plagiarized texts, she too creates a world where "Kathy Acker's" voice is one of many, given no more importance than a scribbled note or a quotation from Dickens.

Included within this chapter are two other authors that I use as counterpoints to Acker and Siegel—Maxine Hong Kingston and J.G. Ballard. *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's memoir of growing up female in a Chinese-American family, employs a myriad of narrative strategies. Like Roth, Kingston combines fiction with family legends and Chinese folklore along with her own memories and reflections to produce a work that defies easy categorization. At the crux of every story in *The Woman Warrior* is a struggle for a woman to be either disenfranchised or empowered by language. The narrator, "Maxine," is instructed by her mother to never tell the story of her aunt "The No-Name Woman"; Maxine instead tells this story in the first chapter of her book. By giving voice to the heroines and victims of her family stories, "Maxine" enacts a linguistic strategy that is contrapuntal to Acker's, as the bodies of her heroines often become the site of simultaneous violence and resistance. The back of Fa Mu Lan, the heroine of "White Tigers," is violently scarred by her parents, who use a knife to carve their story onto their daughter, thinking that if she were to be killed, her body would serve as the testimony of her entire community. The body of Fa Mu Lan then becomes a hybrid of the body and text, much like Acker's heroines are constituted by a cacophony of voices.

J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, which features a writer named "Ballard" who becomes involved in a world where car crashes are erotic events is another work that challenges thinking about the body and not just the fictionalized figure of the author. *Crash*'s vivid depictions of the violent and sexualized collision of the body with technology mark it as a novel that forces readers to reconsider our views on violence and sexuality. Imprinting the main character with the name "Ballard" boldly challenges audiences to see *Crash* as not some distant, disturbing fiction, but instead a dangerous outgrowth of our cultural insensitivities to violence against the body.

All of these authors' experiments in fiction lead readers from questions of whether or not events actually happened (a friend of Philip Roth's was shocked after he read *The Plot against America* and told him, "I never heard about this!" [Tucker 45]) into examinations of the constructedness not just of experience and memory but also of language. The systems of language implemented by authors such as Siegel and Acker become "transformative systems," and in the Kristevan sense, the authors' lives become one more form of source material to be incorporated into the patchwork of linguistic systems already present in their texts. Siegel, along with Acker, Kingston, and Ballard have left questions of biographical veracity far behind in embracing a linguistic system that renders all previous strategies of interpretation incomplete, and these author doubles challenge readers to question their preconceived ideas of the split between author and character.

I will show in Chapter 5, "I crossed the proscenium and mounted the stage!": Postmodern and Posthuman Authors," how Mark Leyner's deification of the simulated

author “Mark Leyner” ironically comments on the cult of the author figure, while pointing beyond postmodernism to a new conception of authorship. This chapter demonstrates how Leyner’s use of himself as subject, while ironically dismantling all conventional thinking about authorship, allows for a vision of the future where there can be no objective idea of the author. Part of the avant-pop movement, Mark Leyner, in his works *My Cousin*, *My Gastroenterologist*, *Et Tu Babe*, and *Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog*, features a new kind of author figure in a new kind of text. According to Larry McCaffery, Leyner’s work always features an “unusual treatment of point of view that combines autobiography, metafiction and pure fiction” (“Maximum” 220). I examine how Leyner’s “I” becomes a means for Leyner to foreground his view of reality and reflect that unique point of view back to his audience. Leyner’s version of the autobiographical author figure illustrates a fundamentally different conception of the self, the author, and the genre of autobiography. The hyperreality that “Mark Leyner” exists in is a world devoted to perpetuating the myth of the cult author, one who has recycled and scavenged through literary tradition to create his own works of literary genius. In this examination of Leyner, I use Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” to determine exactly what kind of author figure Leyner is creating, and to illuminate the shift in reading strategies necessitated by this avant-pop conception of the author as the megalomaniacal center of all narrative.

I also establish Richard Powers as a counterpoint to Leyner, who constructs a fictional version of himself in *Galatea 2.2*—a “Richard Powers” who helps to build a computer capable of studying language and literature. Powers envisions the use of

himself as a character as a way of continuing a dialogue about the very conception of the self, a conversation that can only take place between his characters and a fictionalized version of himself. As “Powers” creates a machine that can understand language, the embodiment of one of Bakhtin’s system of languages, the author “Powers” wonders whether any communication can ever succeed or whether or not we are all trapped within our own systems of language. I conclude by considering the effects of this foregrounding of authorship on the reader as well, for when confronting a text which, according to Foucault, “unfolds like a game [jeu] that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits” (979), conventional reading strategies must be abandoned. The game, then, in Leyner’s work is pleasurable for both writer and reader, while in Powers’s novel, the playful façade masks a deep distrust of the degree to which science has threatened the sanctity of identity.

I conclude this study by looking closely at its communal implications. Compiling the list of primary texts to investigate was, in a way, a communal effort—I relied on suggestions from colleagues, members of the English department at UNCG, and those that I met and spoke to about this project. The postmodern play represented by these author figures compelled many of those readers with whom I shared my plans to want to join in the discussion about these types of autobiographical characters. In a very real way, this process mirrored what was happening in many of the texts I was examining. “Kaufman,” “Seinfeld,” “Baxter,” “Kingston,” “Foer,” and “Powers” all rely on a dialogic patchwork of voices and texts to construct their own work. I conclude by offering more evidence that proves the hypothesis that writing about your life, even in

such varied fragmentary postmodern forms as those represented in this study, ties all who attempt to recreate themselves through language to a rich and infinitely malleable literary tradition.

CHAPTER II

METAFICTIONAL MIRRORS: REFLECTIONS OF THE WRITING PROCESS

CHARLIE: "I've written myself into my screenplay."

DONALD: "That's kind of weird, huh?"

CHARLIE: "It's self indulgent. It's narcissistic, solipsistic. It's pathetic. I'm pathetic. I'm fat and pathetic."

DONALD: "I'm sure you had good reason, Charles. You're an artist."

--Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation*

Adaptation, the 2002 film directed by Spike Jonze and written by Charlie Kaufman, features "Charlie Kaufman" the screenwriter' struggles with writer's block as he attempts to adapt Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* into a movie. The film, a humorous parody of many things (Hollywood, the relationship between authors and their subjects, the romantic idea of the writer's work), uses a metafictional paradigm to analyze and expose the writer's consciousness. The film version of "Charlie Kaufman" is, like "Charlie Baxter" of Charles Baxter's *The Feast of Love*, "Paul Auster" of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (the first novel in *The New York Trilogy*), and "Jerry Seinfeld" of the television show *Seinfeld* (who fails in his attempt to create a sitcom based on his life), a postmodern construct that allows Kaufman to humorously deconstruct the romantic idea of "the author." But beyond an amusing inversion of traditional thinking about the author, each of these metafictional authorial doubles is envisioned as a shockingly empty

vessel, dependent upon their characters to fill them with ideas and inspiration, creating a violent disruption of romantic and modern associations between author and subject. These doubles then serve as a critique not only of society's fascination for simulations, but also of the responsibility of the writer to provide audiences with an understanding of an alienating postmodern existence. In their abnegation of authority, these characters reveal themselves as parts of a larger story—the absence of authority in contemporary society.

Metafiction is the perfect paradigm for these authors to confront their anxieties about creating fiction out of the raw material of real life, an endeavor that is marked by a palpable sense of futility and confusion. Constructing themselves as they construct their fictions, the lines between truth and fiction are hopelessly blurred for these authors. The struggle that unites all four of these author doubles, how to transform life stories into fictional stories, cannot be satisfactorily resolved, and all of these authors confront their own artistic failures. As they reconstruct themselves, they reconstruct the writing process and reveal it to be a precarious balance between the irreconcilable oppositions of art and commerce, truth and fiction, and life story and plot.

Victims and Villains in *City of Glass*

Paul Auster's *City of Glass* takes the narcissistic narrative to a new level by incorporating the writer "Paul Auster" as a minor yet crucial character who sets the detective story in motion. In this postmodern anti-detective novel, Daniel Quinn, a writer

of mystery novels, is drawn into a mystery himself as he is mistaken for the detective “Paul Auster.” After a series of mysterious late night phone calls where a breathless and desperate voice mistakenly calls Quinn’s number and pleads for help from “Paul Auster. Of the Auster detective agency” (8), Quinn (almost as mysteriously) decides to assume Auster’s identity. The confusion between Quinn and “Auster” becomes a way for Auster to pose serious questions about authority in the novel. Auster also emphasizes the degree to which the author of any work becomes a detective: constructing meaning, piecing together events and characters, and understanding the signs. The third night that Quinn’s phone rings, Quinn is ready to take on another identity (he already writes a series of detective novels featuring the private investigator Max Work under the pseudonym William Wilson⁴). Assuming Auster’s identity, he sets up a meeting with the caller who claims they are going to be murdered (Quinn can’t tell if the voice belongs to a man or a woman) and subsequently takes on the role of a detective: following his suspect, reading clues, and protecting his clients⁵.

Peter Stillman is the man who hires Quinn because he believes that his father, another Peter Stillman, intends to kill him. The elder Stillman, once a respected scholar, became an insane recluse who fell victim to some of the “far-fetched religious ideas” (31) he had studied during his years of research into early American religious doctrine. The elder Stillman locked his son in a room in their apartment for nine years, a bizarre experiment to see if, left completely alone, the boy would be able to speak God’s language. This isolation ended only when their apartment mysteriously caught fire and Peter was rescued. And after many years in an institution, the elder Stillman has now

been released, a fact that leads the younger Stillman and his wife to seek help from the detective “Paul Auster.” Having been referred to “Auster” by their nurse, Mrs. Saavedra, Quinn, under the guise of “Auster,” takes on the job of protecting Peter and his wife Virginia. In a novel about authorship, authority, and identity, this elision or blurring of the lines between authors and detectives and fiction and reality is amusing and essentially postmodern. “Nothing was real except chance” (4) Quinn concludes, and indeed beyond the coincidental lie only questions and no answers. But what distinguishes this novel from other metafictional or narcissistic narratives is the degree to which the character “Paul Auster” initially provides stability and centeredness for Quinn. In a narrative without any signposts to guide readers (the clients, suspect, and detective all disappear by the end of the book, leaving only a mysterious, unnamed narrator who steps in to attempt to complete the story of Quinn), “Auster’s” presence becomes a lifeline of human connection for Quinn. But despite the fact that “Paul Auster” may appear to be a vision of the author as a powerful, centering force, by the novel’s conclusion, “Paul Auster” will be unmasked as another powerless writer.

Unfortunately, once Quinn seeks out the real “Paul Auster” for help, “Auster” provides him with a vision of his alternate existence, a vision so powerful that after Quinn is confronted with it, he further removes himself from reality. Though William Little argues that “the refrain of nothing in Auster’s writing . . . is a response to a modern, secularized conception of experience as fractured, arbitrary, and incoherent” (135), by examining “Paul Auster’s” role in the narrative, a pattern of coherence does emerge that initially leads to the conclusion that the subject (Quinn) has been displaced by the author

(Auster). Quinn's response to the first phone call looking for "Auster" ("There's nothing I can do for you" [8]) signals what will occur to him by the end of the novel. As Quinn, he can do nothing; it is only as "Auster" that he can act at all. "Taking the call in the name of the (novel's) father, Quinn seeks to repress all traces of nothing" (Little 155), and this repression allows him "to re-present a transcendent, author-itative presence" (Little 155). The presence of "Paul Auster" as a character in the novel has been examined by critics who look to a linguistic paradigm to understand how Auster uses himself to deconstruct language and authority. Though there is abundant evidence to support such a reading, these examinations overlook the specific role played in the narrative by "Auster" who, though he himself acknowledges that authorship is just a game (in his examination of *Don Quixote*), still occupies a role that is more than just a piece of the polysemic puzzle of *City of Glass*.

Alison Russell's Derridean reading of *City of Glass* describes Quinn as a "paper-Auster, a mere linguistic construct of the author himself" (73). Quinn's insubstantiality as a character is revealed when, after encountering "Paul Auster," Quinn begins to recede, becoming a memory for "Auster" by the conclusion. The paper-Auster can only begin to disappear, however, once "Paul Auster" appears. Working as oppositions to one another, Quinn and "Auster" cannot exist simultaneously in the narrative. By subsuming his identity within these other identities (first Work and Wilson, then "Auster"), Quinn loses whatever power and authority he once had, along with his sense of self. Quinn becomes a victim of the violent hierarchy of *City of Glass*, where "Auster" must remain the

powerful author, able to give support and answers, before being exposed by an unnamed narrator at the end of the novel as a cad who has criminally mistreated Quinn.

According to William Lavender, “Paul Auster’s” appearance serves as an “anchor[s] in the concrete . . . [one of the] kernels of reality buried in a text that everywhere seeks an effect of unreality” (236). “Paul Auster” does not appear to create a sense of unreality as Lavender claims, but instead to illuminate the ease in substituting one author for another—the author “Auster” remains, while Quinn the author-turned-detective must fade away by the end of *City of Glass*. The reality of shifting identities is emphasized in *City of Glass*, most notably the very real contemporary concern that identity is not fixed. And this concern, that identity can be repeatedly traded in, reverberates throughout all the novels of *The New York Trilogy*. The postmodern idea of remaking oneself is simultaneously alluring and alienating, and Quinn (and “Auster’s”) various simulations can only end with the permanent abandoning of Quinn’s real identity.

Ironically, it is the transformative aspect of the detective work that he writes about that appeals to Quinn, as he has settled into a comfortable existence at the novel’s opening as Max Work, the detective in the crime novels he writes under the name William Wilson. According to Quinn,

his detective necessarily had to be real . . . If Quinn had allowed himself to vanish, to withdraw into the confines of a strange and hermetic life, Work continued to live in the world of others, and the more Quinn seemed to vanish, the more persistent Work’s presence in that world became. (10)

In this brief early passage, Auster outlines the fate of Quinn—he does withdraw into a strange and hermetic life by the end of the novel, but instead of being replaced by Max Work, “Paul Auster” steps into the place that Quinn once occupied. Peter Stillman’s misdialing begins the process of exchange as one author trades places with another.

The imperative that “his detective necessarily had to be real” then becomes the impetus for Auster to enter the narrative himself. After reaffirming this desire for reality, Quinn must begin the work of exchanging himself with the real “Paul Auster,” and the next time the phone rings, he has begun to disappear: “This time Quinn did not hesitate. He knew what he was going to do, and now that the time had come, he did it. ‘Speaking,’ he said. ‘This is Auster speaking’” (12). By violently disrupting his carefully calibrated system of identities, Quinn has begun to position “Paul Auster” as the center of the narrative, the anchor in his chain of identities.

Once Quinn goes to meet Peter Stillman and learn about the case, he assumes a Max Work-ian hard-boiled detective façade that will allow him to bring to life a persona that for so long has been simply an authorial construct, an intellectual exercise. By taking the name “Paul Auster,” he can enact his detective fantasy and live as Max Work. In this fantasy, he leaves the inert Quinn behind, becomes someone else, and begins to act rather than just write⁶. And like “Charlie Baxter” and “Richard Powers,” Quinn has constructed his authorial persona not as a part of society but as an outsider, consigned to observe and not act. These authors envision the writer as one who can only reflect contemporary ontological concerns by observing and responding rather than actually engaging in life.

This tri-part naming scheme of Quinn's (William Wilson--Max Work--Daniel Quinn) is a marker of the onomastic play evidenced throughout *City of Glass*. Names and the inherent instability of identity resonate throughout the novel, and names continually prove themselves unstable. After Quinn seeks out "Paul Auster" for help with the Stillman case, "Auster" describes the work he is currently engrossed in—an exegesis of *Don Quixote's* true author. As "Auster" contemplates who wrote the text, he also lectures Quinn on the apparent ghostliness of all the characters—none of their identities stand up to close examination and all are possible Quixotes, a description of the fractured authorial self that resonates with Quinn.

But before hearing this lecture on the unveiling of Cervantes's authorial persona, Quinn, in assuming the mask of "Paul Auster, Private Investigator" must also listen to a lengthy explanation of the strange case of the Stillman family. After being summoned to Peter and Virginia Stillman's Park Avenue apartment, Quinn must follow the conventions of the detective genre: while imitating the hardboiled detective, he must allow his client to become the author of the case, listening to the story of Peter Stillman (the father) narrated by the mysterious and bizarre Peter Stillman (the son). The detective genre dictates that the client must establish the facts of the case to the detective so that the audience and the detective can begin to solve the mystery.⁷ Peter Stillman's story, however, undermines this convention, and becomes a testament to narrative unreliability. Peter's first words inform Quinn that nothing that will follow can be trusted:

"No questions, please," the young man said at last. "Yes. No. Thank you." He paused for a moment. "I am Peter Stillman. I say this of my own free will. Yes.

That is not my real name. No. Of course, my mind is not all it should be. But nothing can be done about that.” (18)

The distinction between truth and fiction is rendered meaningless in this account of Stillman’s life, and Auster comments here on the larger problem of the inability to explain our own life stories to others using exclusively truth or fiction. Auster’s postmodern detective story features only doubt and confusion as neither the client nor the detective are sure of who they really are. Names and their inability to denote facts correctly is a theme revisited by Auster over and over again in *City of Glass* but more important than names themselves is the work that Quinn does as “Paul Auster” and the function that “Paul Auster” serves for Quinn. Only once “Paul Auster” enters Quinn’s life does Quinn begin to disintegrate.

After meeting with Stillman, Quinn returns to his apartment with a new red notebook, ready to begin work:

He picked up his pen and wrote his initials, D.Q. (for Daniel Quinn), on the first page. It was the first time in more than five years that he had put his own name in one of his own notebooks. He stopped to consider this fact for a moment but then dismissed it as irrelevant. (47)

The relevance of this fact will become clear for Quinn soon as he takes on another identity. “My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name” (49), Quinn writes in his red notebook. Quinn has now begun the work that he will complete by the end of the Stillman case: exchanging one life for another. According to Lavender, “we see in

metafiction a shape-shifting, a protean refusal to let itself be pinned down, classified, dissected” (238), and Quinn’s transformation into another persona (“Auster”) is a continuation of the work he has already done—constructing new identities for himself, accepting the construction as part truth, part invention. And, significantly, it is at this point where Quinn begins his downward spiral into even more names; in his conversations with Stillman he transforms himself from Quinn to Henry Dark before finally becoming (another) Peter Stillman. Dennis Barone has suggested that “Auster’s books are about the search for identity which sometimes results in the permanent loss of one’s own identity through a search for someone else’s . . . Quinn so obsessively searches for Stillman that he irrevocably misplaces himself” (16). Auster refers to the connection between identity and the act of looking in *The Art of Hunger* when he discusses Lacan’s theories of the “mirror stage” and how the effects of gazing upon another are necessary for the individual to fashion an identity: “But we can only see ourselves because someone else has seen us first” (315). Quinn has done all the looking, but no one has been looking for him. And at the end of *City of Glass*, Quinn cannot even recognize himself. He is no longer identifiable as Quinn, William Wilson, or Max Work and at the conclusion of the novel, he simply fades away, leaving only his red notebook behind.⁸

Identity has never mattered to Quinn; it apparently makes no difference to him whether he is William Wilson, Max Work, Paul Auster, Henry Dark, or Peter Stillman. Just as he triples his identity as a writer (Quinn becomes detective Max Work in the novels written by William Wilson), he multiplies again in the three personas he adopts in

his conversations with Peter Stillman: “This was the third time Quinn had presented himself, and each time it was as though Quinn had been someone else. He could not decide whether this was a good sign or bad” (100). Only appearing as himself to someone who knows his true existence, the character “Paul Auster,” can cause the final break in this pattern of constantly shifting personas. Confronted with “Auster’s” knowledge of Quinn’s identity (“Auster” recognizes his name from Quinn’s book of poetry, *Unfinished Business*), and realizing that Auster has in effect taken possession of the life that he once had (a promising literary career, a wife and son), Quinn realizes he “was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing” (124). Caught in the trap of duality, Quinn has entered, according to Baudrillard, the realm of the “inhuman” (*Paroxysm* 95). To further illustrate this point, Quinn becomes an indigent who leaves his own life to stake out the Stillman apartment. Obsessively monitoring the apartment for two months, Quinn chooses to live in an alley across from their front door rather than give up on the case. After he runs out of money, he leaves the alley, and is confronted by his reflection in a store window: “It had been no more than a matter of months, and in that time he had become someone else. He tried to remember himself as he had been before, but he found it difficult. He looked at this new Quinn and shrugged. It did not really matter” (143). Quinn’s attempt to simulate another identity (“Paul Auster,” the detective) has caused him to lose his own identity, and his blasé acceptance of the simulation allows Auster to critique the contemporary value placed on reinvention. By equating self-fashioning and reinvention with disappearance (Quinn vanishes at the end of *City of Glass*), Auster

expresses a fear of the danger of remaking the self, an American value that has been hopelessly corrupted, leading to the disappearance of individual identity⁹.

After realizing that he has failed to keep track of the elder Stillman (he seemingly vanishes after appearing, only to Quinn, to have spelled out “THETOWEROFBABEL” during his meandering walks around the city), Quinn decides to seek out the real “Paul Auster,” believing him to be an actual detective that can help him find Stillman. If, after losing Stillman, Quinn feels “that he has lost half of himself” (110), then after finding “Paul Auster” he will have lost all of himself. After looking up “Paul Auster’s” address in the phone book, he seeks out “Auster,” only to find not “Paul Auster” the detective, but “Paul Auster” the author who invites him in for literary talk and ham omelets after recognizing Quinn. Auster tells Quinn he is working on an essay about *Don Quixote*: “It mostly has to do with the authorship of the book. Who wrote it, and how it was written” (116), and in his reading of the novel, Steven Alford argues that Auster is creating a similar critique of authorship in *City of Glass*:

Continuing to follow the lines of the Quixote argument, we could argue as well that [Auster] has engineered the entire enterprise and chosen Quinn and the Stillman’s as his “saviors,” so that he could spew out lies and nonsense for people’s amusement. Hence, Paul Auster the writer in *City of Glass*, is a character invented by [Paul Auster], narrator, the same way that the character ‘Don Quixote’ was engineered by Don Quixote. (21)

Alford’s dissection of “Auster’s” ontological function, however, overlooks his narratological function. Not only does Auster introduce the act of writing into the novel but he also serves to assist and support Quinn. According to Brian McHale, “what is

strange and disorienting about the postmodernist author is that even when s/he appears to know that s/he is only a function, s/he chooses to behave, if only sporadically, like a subject, a presence” (201). Casting himself as the helpful author, Auster creates a beneficent function for himself in a narrative that mirrors the writing process—by helping Quinn, he explains motivations, nurtures his characters, and helps to pull the threads of the plot together—all functions of the author.

Speaking with Larry McCaffery in *The Art of Hunger*, Auster discusses the function “Paul Auster” serves in *City of Glass*. Auster asserts that his cameo appearance stems from a desire to illuminate his writing process: “What I was hoping to do, in effect, was to take my name off the cover and put it inside the story. I wanted to open up the process, to break down walls, to expose the plumbing” (308). And as “Auster” helps to reveal the mechanics of writing *City of Glass*, he also helps Quinn “break down” the Stillman case. After introducing himself and explaining how he became involved with the Stillmans, Quinn looks to “Auster” for answers to the questions he has about the case:

[Quinn] began at the beginning and went through the entire story, step by step . . . When he had come to the end, he said, “Do you think I’m crazy?” “No,” said Auster, who had listened attentively to Quinn’s monologue. “If I had been in your place, I probably would have done the same thing.” These words came as a great relief to Quinn, as if, at long last, the burden was no longer his alone. He felt like taking Auster in his arms and declaring his friendship for life. (113)

Quinn’s response to “Auster” complicates not only “Auster’s” appearance but also any facile explanation of “Auster’s” role in *City of Glass*. Working together to try and find answers, Quinn and “Auster” form an oasis of connection in the midst of this anti-

detective story, not only between people but also between pieces of the puzzling story of the Stillmans. These two writers discuss their common bond of literature over lunch and form a plan for how to cash the check Quinn has received from Virginia Stillman. In *Narcissistic Narrative*, Linda Hutcheon claims that metafictional texts involve a calling to action of the reader (30), and clearly “Auster's” role mirrors that imperative, for he is asked to read the clues that Quinn has presented and to help Quinn solve the case. But despite “Auster’s” support and aid (“If you need me for anything,’ said Auster, ‘just call. I’ll be happy to help” [123]), “Paul Auster” is revealed at the conclusion of *City of Glass* as someone incapable of helping Quinn. After Quinn has become an indigent, he calls “Auster” to ask for money. “Auster,” shocked to be hearing from Quinn after so long, informs him that Peter Stillman “committed suicide two and a half months ago” (146). “Auster” was unable to contact Quinn (after the Stillman’s check bounced) and subsequently ignored the matter until *City of Glass*’s true narrator speaks to “Auster” one night:

At his apartment, Auster explained to me what little he knew about Quinn, and then he went on to describe the strange case he had accidentally become involved in. He had become obsessed by it, he said, and he wanted my advice about what he should do. Having heard him out, I began to feel angry that he had treated Quinn with such indifference. I scolded him for not having taken a greater part in events, for not having done something to help a man who was so obviously in trouble. Auster seemed to take my words to heart. In fact, he said that was why he had asked me over. He had been feeling guilty and needed to unburden himself . . . he had spent the last several months trying to track down Quinn, but with no success . . . As for Auster, I am convinced that he behaved badly throughout. (157-8)

“Auster” at the end of the novel provides not security for Quinn, but the impetus for Quinn to remove himself from his own life. His helpfulness was merely another illusion in a work filled with them, and the guilt he confesses to the narrator at the end of the book provides another example of his powerlessness as a friend and as a character. Singled out as the villain within his own story, “Auster” fails, and in doing so, he reveals authorship as an inherently flawed construction. *City of Glass* is, on the surface, like most detective stories, about the search for answers, and Auster refuses to give any, constructing an open-ended postmodern world with no resolution. “Auster” has failed to read Quinn’s story correctly, and cannot shape this narrative into a lisible text with a satisfactory resolution. And *City of Glass* ends with the dissolution of one writer’s power and the removal of another from the narrative, rupturing for good the connection between authors and authority.

“It’s my story, not yours”: Baxter and the Problem of Authority

Another flawed author appears in Charles Baxter’s metafictional *The Feast of Love* as the author “Charlie Baxter” assumes a powerless role similar to “Paul Auster’s.” “Charlie” is a writer who, because of writer’s block, cannot produce any work and must look to random encounters with his neighbors to help him finish his book, *The Feast of Love*. And like Auster, Baxter creates a world where authors have no power or authority over their own characters. “Charlie” is repeatedly told by his characters that he has no right to their stories and they refuse to share these narratives with him. By virtue of their refusal, they place “Charlie” in the position of having to create fictions about them. *The*

Feast of Love then becomes a story about the author's inherent inability to reflect reality. "Charlie" will not be allowed to tell the truth and therefore must invent a counternarrative, one that will not invade the lives of his characters, but will instead reflect another, less threatening vision.

At the beginning of the novel, having awakened "in fright" (3) in the middle of the night, "Charlie" realizes his insomnia is being caused by panic over his inability to write. He gets out of bed and takes a walk around town,¹⁰ finally stopping in a local park where he encounters his friend and neighbor Bradley Smith. Baxter, thus, early in the novel, establishes "Charlie" and Bradley as doubles who both deal with their insomnia by taking long walks at night. But these two become more than doubles. "Charlie" and Bradley essentially exchange places, with Bradley becoming the de facto author of "Charlie's" latest book. Powerless to create because of his writer's block and insomnia, "Charlie" cedes control over his book to Bradley, who not only suggests the subject matter and title, but also proposes the idea that he will provide Charlie with the interviews that will constitute the plot of the book. *The Feast of Love* then becomes a prime example of a metafictional work that "explores a theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction" (Waugh 2). Baxter explores the idea of how language constitutes the self; "Charlie's" life as a writer is made up of not his own artistic creations but instead the voices of those around him. This narcissistic narrative becomes a way to veil the gaping hole at the center of *The Feast of Love*; "Charlie" is an empty space, one that can only become complete through ventriloquizing the language of others by transcribing their stories. This will lead him into a redefinition of fiction and the writer's

role in that fiction, as he must cajole his characters into letting him have access to their stories. “Charlie’s” dilemma leads to the question of who controls the life stories that inspire fiction—the author or the subject? Baxter will eventually learn that these stories that will form the material of his novel are more than just matter for him to cannibalize.

Baxter discusses the Samuel Beckett quotation he chose from *Molloy* as the epigraph to *The Feast of Love*, “Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be,” in an interview with Catherine McWeeney:

Beckett is describing, or the narrator Molloy, is describing the conditions under which not only do you forget who you are but, it’s more profound, you forget being itself. It’s as if you’re going through your life not fully conscious, almost in a dream condition. I thought that was ideal for my opening move because that’s what happens to Charlie. He wakes up not being sure of who he is and he’s conscious of his emptiness and gradually his emptiness is filled by these stories that are told to him. (McWeeney)

This sense of emptiness or “inadequacy of the author” (Hutcheon *Narcissistic* 29) marks metafictional works such as *The Feast of Love* as not simply self-reflexive mirrors of the artistic process but rather serious ruminations on the inadequacy of the novel, biography, or confession to fully reflect the writer or the writing process. “Charlie’s” life as an artist is marked by failure from the beginning, as his ontological questions spill out into his refusal to internalize the stories he is told by those he interviews for the book. The writing process is commandeered and simulated by his characters, who assert their control over the narrative. In this way, *The Feast of Love* reflects a crisis of authority as Baxter’s characters reveal the emptiness at the center of his being.

Baxter has suggested in interviews that *The Feast of Love* began as a reimagining of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

I thought: I'll write a novel with voices, a sort of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in which people are paired off with the right partners later, and everyone will tell their stories to Charlie, who will be this shadowy listener, like the reader. Like a friend, a therapist, or a detective. (Author Q & A).

This postmodern rewriting, which features an author collecting stories, also parodies another tradition: that of the *künstlerroman* or novel of artistic development. Instead of a novel about artistic creation or a romanticizing of the author's natural gifts and abilities, Baxter has instead fashioned a story of what happens once these natural gifts have eroded. "Charlie" is a victim, paralyzed by doubt, a casualty of his lack of creativity. At the opening of the book, when "Charlie" "wakes in fright" (3) (a line that he repeats to Bradley, which becomes the first line in their book), "Charlie" walks past a mirror in his house that is so old, it cannot reflect an image any more: "Like me, it's glimmerless. You can't see into it now, just past it. Depth has been replaced by texture. This mirror gives back nothing and makes no productive claim upon anyone" (4). The non-reflective mirror is an obvious but apt metaphor for Baxter's examination of the role of the author within this metafictional paradigm. Like the mirror that reflects Quinn's transformed self back to him in *City of Glass*, this mirror echoes a larger concern of Baxter—that the contemporary self, having been transformed (like Quinn) too many times, into too many simulations, has nothing left to reflect. The idea of a wholly integrated self in a world of

simulations is merely an illusion, just like the illusion that “Charlie” has authorial control over his narrative and his characters. If the characters in Auster’s work awaken to the “substancelessness of the self” (Alford 22), then “Charlie” finds that his inability to reflect an image of himself in a mirror is proof of his lack of substance. Instead of embodying the presence of a powerful author, he is merely an absence, another simulation. “Charlie Baxter” will make no productive claim, will give back nothing, and will be supplanted by the voices around him. In Paul John Eakin’s discussion of Paul de Man and autobiography, Eakin notes, “the writer is as it were written by the discourse he employs; the self is displaced by the text, with the result that the portrait of the self is eclipsed, supplanted instead by knowledge of the trope of self-reference and its structural function in a rhetorical system” (189). The empty vessel “Charlie” has been displaced within his own novel by the stories and voices supplied by Bradley and the people in his life that form the text, and like his non-reflective mirror, lives on functioning only as a reminder of his obsolescence.

Admitting that he cannot write, “Charlie” abandons control of his novel to others, allowing their imaginations to write his story for him. This loss of control is clearly seen when Bradley begins to make suggestions to “Charlie” about his latest work when they meet at the opening of the novel: “You should call it *The Feast of Love*. I’m the expert on that. I should write that book. Actually, I should be in that book. You should put me into your novel. I’m an expert on love” (12). Establishing Bradley as more of an expert in love and writing than “Charlie” illuminates Linda Hutcheon’s assertion that

narcissistic narratives allow for an “equation of reader and writer” (*Narcissistic* 27) as Bradley, the reader, positions himself as “Charlie’s” collaborator:

“Listen Charlie,” he says. “I’ve got an idea. It’ll solve all your problems and it’ll solve mine. Why don’t you let me talk? Let everybody talk. I’ll send you people, you know, actual *people*, for a change, like for instance human beings who genuinely exist, and you listen to them for a while. Everybody’s got a story, and we’ll just start telling you the stories we have.”

“What do you think I am, an anthropologist?” I mull it over. “No, sorry, Bradley, it won’t work. I’d have to fictionalize you. I’d have to fictionalize this dog here.” I pat Junior on the head. Junior smiles again: a very stupid and very friendly dog, but not a character in a novel.

“Well, change your habits. And believe me, it *will* work. Listen to this.” He clears his throat. “Okay. Chapter One. Every relationship has at least one really good day . . .” (16)

And as the reader turns the page to the next chapter which begins, “Every relationship has at least one really good day,” (17) it is clear that “Charlie” has capitulated to Bradley’s suggestions. For the remainder of the novel, Bradley supplies “Charlie” with the characters that populate the text, underscoring the powerlessness of “Charlie” to control his own work. Equating this writer and reader becomes a way for Baxter to emphasize the degree to which the text has been transformed from writerly to readerly. And by doing so, Baxter displaces himself from his own text, proving Eakin’s point about how writing about oneself effectively replaces the self with another in the text. Bradley then becomes Baxter’s double, haunting the text, becoming an active presence as “Charlie” is incrementally absented from his own life and work.

As he continues to follow Bradley’s plan for *The Feast of Love*, Baxter calls attention continually to “Charlie’s” impotence as an author. When “Charlie” phones

Kathryn, Bradley's first wife, to set up a meeting to discuss the dissolution of her marriage, their conversation allows Baxter to mock his own lowly status:

"Well, maybe you have a story of your own," I suggest. "About what happened to you."

"I have lots of stories," she says. "But they're not the sort of thing you give away, you know . . . and I don't tell them to just anybody. What did you say your name was again?"

I tell her.

"I honestly don't remember ever meeting you. I've never heard of you. Did we ever meet? And this is for a book you're writing, Charlie?"

"Sort of."

"You aren't going to post this whole deal on the Internet, are you?"

"No."

"Thank God. Who are you anyway? Could you please explain that again, that who-you-are thing?" (27-8)

Aside from an amusing commentary on the relative anonymity Baxter enjoys in his own hometown, this exchange reiterates the communal nature of this novel where each speaker's voice takes some power from the author. If, as Bakhtin states, "the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its 'languages'" (262), then Baxter's style in *The Feast of Love* is to subsume his voice to all these other voices, emphasizing a cacophony of voices each more powerful than the writer who gives over control of his own writing process. Kathryn takes possession of her own stories, denying "Charlie" access to them.

"Charlie's" characters are not passive subjects, but active participants in the fiction making process, none more so than Diana, Bradley's second wife, who also questions "Charlie's" writing process when he attempts to interview her: "Listen,

Charlie. I mean, I suppose this is all very interesting and everything, but it gives me the willies. First of all my story is *not* a story. Second of all, it's not yours. It's mine, isn't it? I thought my life was mine and not yours" (127). By calling into question the ownership of the raw material of this novel, Diana deconstructs the idea of an objective narrator and underscores the constructedness of all fiction. But more than just a metafictional joke, this exchange challenges essential ideas about fiction. The debate over the classification of *A Million Little Pieces* as memoir or fiction emphasizes the impossibility of removing all fictional traces from life writing as well as simultaneously affirming society's need to affix these types of reductive labels. Larger, philosophical questions are raised by this exchange as well namely, who owns the stories we tell about ourselves. If, as Diana claims, our life stories are not just stories, then how are we to make sense of our own narratives? The answer is found in understanding the narrative principles that govern our lives, and accepting that we construct ourselves in an ongoing "performance of self-narrative" (Gergen 208), and these narratives always have a communal component. In other words, sharing stories helps us maintain a sense of self, and to discover who we are and who we have become. Using these stories, relating himself to these individuals helps "Charlie" realize who he is, and in this way fiction becomes connected to life writing, not only through the actions of the author Charles Baxter, but also through those of the character "Charlie Baxter."

Seinfeld and the Presence of Absence

The writing process itself was memorably satirized by producer Jerry Seinfeld and producer/writer Larry David in the sitcom *Seinfeld*'s fourth season. The show, famous for its insistence on being a show about nothing, took a metafictional turn during the 1992-1993 season as "Jerry" and his friend George Costanza write a pilot for a sitcom based on "Jerry's" life. In the double episode "The Pitch/The Ticket" (the two episodes aired back-to-back in 1992), "Jerry Seinfeld," the stand-up comedian is asked by NBC executives to come up with an idea for a television show for himself, showcasing his stand-up comedy routines. Together "Jerry" and George come up with a radical idea—the show will be about "Jerry" and the mundane events of his life (their exchange is reminiscent of the conversation between Baxter and Bradley in *The Feast of Love*):

George: "This should be the show."

Jerry: "Just talking? What's the show about?"

George: "It's about nothing."

Jerry: "No story?"

George: "Nah, forget the story."

Jerry: "You gotta have a story."

George: "Who says you gotta have a story? Remember when we were waiting for a table in that Chinese restaurant? That could be a TV show."

Jerry: "And who's on the show? Who are the characters?"

George: "I could be a character."

Jerry: "You?"

George: "Yeah, your basic character."

Jerry: "So, on the show, there's a character named George Costanza?"

George: "Yeah, what, there's something wrong with that? I'm a character. You know, people are always saying to me, 'You're quite a character.'"

Jerry: "And who else is on the show?"

George: "Elaine could be a character. Kramer."

Jerry: "Now he's a character. So, everybody I know is a character on the show. And it's about nothing."

George: “Absolutely nothing.”

As George and “Jerry” reiterate this description in their initial pitch meeting to the NBC executives, they echo the very description that the show’s producers David and Seinfeld had initially used to pitch the idea of *Seinfeld* to NBC executives. *Seinfeld* was conceived by David and Seinfeld as a show about “the excruciating minutia” of Jerry Seinfeld’s everyday life, an idea that David would recycle in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a show about the “real” life of “Larry David.” The main character, “Jerry” is a standup comedian modeled after Seinfeld, surrounded by fictional characters based on people from his life. “Jerry” then becomes like “Auster” and “Baxter”—a “real” person surrounded by a fictional community. This metafictional storyline, which stretched out over most of Season four, was an insider’s parody of not only how the show began, but also its reception by studio executives and audiences. The simulation of the creation of “Jerry” articulates the thinking behind the show we are watching—a daring metafictional experiment for a situation comedy. This story arc raised serious questions about identity, and the impossibility of maintaining a conception of a real self within a world of simulations.

As “Jerry” and George sit down to write the pilot for the show *Jerry* in the episode “The Cheever Letters,” they experience a dilemma familiar to “Charlie Baxter”: writer’s block. Unable to sit down together and actually collaborate, they use any excuse to delay the actual production of work and instead spend large amounts of time ordering lunch, talking to neighbors, and debating extremely minor pieces of dialogue (“I walk in and say ‘Hi,’ then you say ‘Hello.’”). In this way, they resemble the metafictional

characters “Charlie Baxter” and “Charlie Kaufman,” both victims of debilitating anxiety about their writing. In *The Metafictional Muse*, Larry McCaffery states that “the metafictionist implies that within the act of creation, of fiction making, we can find the key to unlocking the complexities of self-definition and the manner in which we project this definition through language” (6). And in their process of fiction making, “Jerry” and George reveal themselves to themselves; they are both forced to confront their lives as they are reflected back to them through the script they produce. “TV George” embodies George’s flaws (he is neurotic, aggressive, and bald) while “Jerry” creates a simulation of “Jerry,” a character who is already a simulation of the real Jerry. This confusion raises the discourse of the television sitcom far above the concerns of entertainment. By playing with these layers of simulation, *Seinfeld* enters the realm of the hyperreal, a construction that, according to Baudrillard, crosses over into another realm:

The era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials . . . It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deferring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. (*Simulacra 2*)

The machine of *Jerry* then takes on a life of its own, as each cast member, except Jerry, is reduplicated for the fictionalized show; every double offers merely the signs of the real. Elaine, George, and Kramer are all characters in the show, and as we are shown the casting sessions, much humor is found in the producers’ attempts to reduplicate the physical and personal characteristics of each character. The actress playing

“Elaine” tells “Jerry,” “I want to experience everything [Elaine’s] experienced,” including dating “Jerry.” “TV George” is told by “Jerry” after an outburst that George would behave in the exact same way. And an NBC executive remarks, after watching a rehearsal, “Seinfeld can’t act . . . These stand-ups can’t act” (a nod to an often-heard criticism of Jerry Seinfeld). But the metafiction reaches its apotheosis when Kramer (who wanted desperately to play himself on the show) confronts “TV Kramer.” “I’m Kramer,” he claims, only to be answered by “TV Kramer,” “I’m Kramer.” And this exchange articulates one of the more postmodern and revolutionary aspects of *Seinfeld*. Which version, if any, is real? Can “the real” ever be isolated and identified? The show leads its audience to laugh at these serious questions, destabilizing the categories of truth and fiction, giving weight to the habitually shallow situation comedy. Mainstream television comedies with a vast following rarely venture into such serious examinations of identity and the self—*Seinfeld* succeeded in spite of this subject matter.

The fact that the show *Jerry* ultimately fails (NBC cancels the show immediately after the pilot airs) sheds light on Baudrillard’s thoughts on the pervasive power of the television medium to create another mode of reality. This version of Jerry is rejected, returning him to the semi-autobiographic world of *Seinfeld*, one that is only one realm removed from reality. The clever metafictional experiment by David and Seinfeld must fail as American television audiences would undoubtedly be alienated from this triplication of identity. The show was conceived as a reflection of the real life of one man, and the early episodes included scenarios familiar to many: waiting in restaurants for your table to be ready, leaving an angry phone message, losing your car in a parking

garage, etc. The “nothingness” of the show then becomes a marker of the emptiness of contemporary life. Like Baxter’s mirror that gives no reflection, this nothingness is another symbol for the illusory nature of the self, a condition which *Seinfeld* both mocks and mourns. “No hugging, no learning” was the unofficial motto of the show, and in this abnegation of sitcom clichés, the producers also refuse to give a representation of anything but the misanthropic side of life (a quality which endeared it to millions of fans). Nothingness then becomes indexical for an absence of many things—hugging, learning, and the ethos of bonhomie that marks most beloved characters in popular culture.

The embrace of absence that pervades the idea of nothingness can only succeed outside of this plot line, because audiences find a vicarious release in the show. Living through the actions of the characters is only possible if they mirror what we would like to do, but never would (such as George racing out the door ahead of women and children when someone yelled “Fire!”). Mirroring themselves and not this side of the audience is not what viewers want to see. This plot line, about the characters’ duplication in a hyperreal television construction, violates the pact *Seinfeld* makes with its audience; to reflect all aspects of Jerry’s life except its own fictional construction. The process of how “Jerry Seinfeld” remakes himself, once witnessed, cannot be replayed on a continuing basis; it must recede back behind the curtain.

Multivocality in *Adaptation*

According to Linda Hutcheon, “narcissistic narrative, then, is process made visible” (6). And, the writing process itself is made memorably visible in the 2002 film *Adaptation*, directed by Spike Jonze and written by Charlie Kaufman. The basic plot line, “Charlie Kaufman’s” attempts to adapt a novel into a screenplay, barely suggests the labyrinth that Kaufman has fashioned as he examines, parodies, and ultimately celebrates the life of the author and equates becoming a writer with becoming a successful human being. But before the life-affirming ending (the last shot of the film is of flowers blossoming against the cityscape of Los Angeles), Kaufman takes a hellish journey through his own tortured psyche, ending in a harrowing trip through the Florida Everglades straight out of a conventional Hollywood thriller, as *Adaptation* becomes “some strange hybrid of truth, fiction, the avant-garde, and Hollywood” (Edelstein). Among the many questions posed by the film, the most important concerns its own status as a simulation and the attempt to discern whether or not a simulation can ever reflect the complexities of life. And ultimately, the film is about finding an answer to that question.

“Charlie,” though he shares some things in common with the successful screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (the name and the résumé), is, as he tells us repeatedly, a fat, bald, sweaty mass of insecurities. Charlie, who lives with Donald, his twin brother, an aspiring screenwriter, is a tortured artist, an outsider in Hollywood unable to enjoy the success he already has achieved as the writer of the film *Being John Malkovich* (we see him on the set being ignored by cast and crew alike). Tortured by self doubt and disgusted by his physical appearance and emotional cowardice, “Kaufman” has nevertheless been given a prestigious writing assignment: adapting Susan Orlean’s non-

fiction book *The Orchid Thief* into a film. Terrified of the responsibility he has incurred by taking this job, “Charlie” begins to disintegrate, losing faith in his ability to write anything, let alone finding a way to take a book about a flower and turn it into an interesting and compelling screenplay. Charlie is not the only writer whose artistic process is exposed in *Adaptation*; we also see the effect writing *The Orchid Thief* has had on Susan Orlean’s life. This writer for *The New Yorker* becomes enthralled with the life of her subject, John Laroche, whose adventurous pursuit of the rare ghost orchid flower in the Everglades is the complete opposite of the sophisticated literary world that Orlean inhabits. The lives of these writers collide when Charlie and Donald, in an effort to understand Orlean and her work, follow her from New York to Florida (where she and Laroche have become lovers) and somehow end up running through the swamp at night, trying to escape from the now murderous Orlean and Laroche. After this harrowing trip, Charlie finally understands how to tell the story of *The Orchid Thief*—by turning it into a story about himself and his writing.

An unwieldy, brutal look at the inner life of “Charlie Kaufman,” *Adaptation* removes any sense of romanticism from the writer’s life and process. Emphasizing frustration and failure, Kaufman critiques the view that artists create societal values, as “Charlie” is incapable of doing anything but using his art to reflect his own neuroses. Until he writes about his failure, “Kaufman” will be a failure. This mobius strip of creativity and failure then becomes the symbol for “Kaufman’s” art as well as a statement of how he sees the role of the artist in contemporary society. Kaufman must construct himself as he constructs his writing—there can be no separation. And in doing this,

Kaufman takes the real details from his life and fictionalizes them, molding himself into the film script he is writing. According to Patricia Waugh, in metafiction, “the traditional fictional quest has thus been transformed into a quest for fictionality” (46). Kaufman has taken himself and transformed his own life into a liminal space somewhere between truth and fiction. “Charlie” also exposes an essential truth of the writing/artistic process—that the process of making movies is more akin to a horror film than a typical glamorous Hollywood depiction of the life of the artist.

Larry McCaffery, in his discussion of the metafiction of William Gass, observes that “our attention has been focused on the act of reading words in a way we have not experienced before” (*Muse* 192), and Kaufman and Jonze allow us to see the act of watching a film in a new way by exposing the germination point of all films: the screenwriting process. *Adaptation*’s production was most likely a (less dramatic) mirror of the nightmarish scenario we see depicted onscreen; not an inspired vision brought to life by a community of artists but instead, a commercial product desperately conceived by panicked writers and craven film executives. We see “Charlie” at work, alone in a dark room, his keyboard propped up on an ugly dining room chair, surrounded by clothes, books, notes, food wrappers, and other detritus, and usually accompanied by the reclining figure of Donald, who offers him clichéd advice about how to adapt *The Orchid Thief* to the screen. “Charlie” tells Donald (whose basis in reality has been kept a knowing secret by Kaufman and Jonze: “It’s fairly well accepted that there is no Donald Kaufman, although both Charlie Kaufman and director Spike Jonze are disarmingly coy on this issue” [Prendergast]) that “writing is a journey to the unknown.” But, as we see in the

film, “Kaufman” is not telling the truth, for the journey that the film takes us through, that of his own writing process, is a journey of self-knowledge and understanding through his own troubled psyche. Like “Charlie Baxter,” he comes to understand his purpose as an artist—to create his own version/vision of the truth of his life as an artist.

Despite his previous success as the writer of *Being John Malkovich*, after accepting this new assignment, “Kaufman” experiences a complete meltdown as his deadline for completing the project quickly approaches. Frustrated by his inability to translate Orlean’s words into a coherent screenplay, he begins to mentally disintegrate, and becomes convinced that he cannot write. If the classic characteristic of metafiction is the writer’s “call[ing] attention to the activity of writing as an event within the novel, as an event of equally great significance to that of the events of the story which he is supposed to be telling” (*Narcissistic* 12), then Kaufman takes this conceit even further—there is no story except his own writing. It is not the reader who is called to action to participate in this text; rather “Kaufman” must call other writers to action to help him rewrite Orlean’s writing: Donald, who slavishly follows the advice of screenwriting guru Robert McKee, and Orlean herself.

According to Waugh, metafiction “offers both innovation and familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions” (48) and the genre Kaufman simultaneously reconfigures and explodes in *Adaptation* is the *künstlerroman*, as the film resists any attempts to find beauty in the journey “Kaufman” takes in producing his art. “Metafictional novels . . . thus reject the traditional figure of the author as a transcendental imagination fabricating, through an ultimately monologic discourse,

structures of order which will replace the forgotten material text of the world” (Waugh 51), and clearly “Charlie” is not a powerful, centering voice, but rather an unfocused, panicky, weak man. Faced with a debilitating case of writer’s block, “Charlie” admits, “The only thing I am qualified to write about is myself.” Acknowledging this, “Charlie” realizes that rather than being an impediment to creativity, self-absorption is the key to his success. Writing about his own writing is the only way for “Charlie” to reflect and “to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Scholes 40). In an inversion of “Charlie Baxter’s” empty mirror, Kaufman can only reflect himself in the artistic vision he has created, as he rejects the binary of truth/fiction and instead creates a persona that is a hybrid of these categories.

Despite a conspicuous lack of creativity, Donald writes a screenplay entitled *The Three*, an overwrought, cliché ridden thriller whose dénouement comes when the killer, his victim, and the policeman on his trail are all revealed to be the same person, “The Deconstructionist,” who is suffering from multiple personality disorder. Though we, like “Charlie,” are supposed to find Donald’s efforts derivative and indicative of the kind of poorly made product coming out of Hollywood (“Charlie’s” agent helps Donald sell the script for untold millions), *The Three* is another mirror of the fractured contemporary self in a film loaded with them. There are three writers at work in *Adaptation*: “Charlie,” who is riddled with anxiety and self-doubt; the accomplished yet passion-free Orlean; and Donald, the talentless hack who succeeds in the creatively bankrupt system of Hollywood.

Adaptation then becomes a competition between the voices of all three writers. In Bakhtin's discussion of individual languages, he asserts that "the unity of a style thus presupposes on the one hand a unity of language (in the sense of a system of general normative forms) and on the other hand the unity of an individual person realizing himself in this language" (264). Such unity, however, is impossible in Kaufman's metafictional world. Reflecting a postmodern view of self as fragmented and isolated, Kaufman's script rejects an illusion of unity. The shattered glass that Donald includes as a (not so subtle) visual motif in his screenplay reflects the disintegration of the artistic self in *Adaptation*. According to Bakhtin, "the internal bifurcation (double-voicing) of discourse, sufficient to a single and unitary language and to a consistently monologic style, can never be a fundamental form of discourse: it is merely a game, a tempest in a teapot" (325). Indeed, the story of the Kaufman twins (the real Charlie and the fictional Donald) amounts to little more than a collection of facile observations of duality and camera tricks (Nicolas Cage appearing in the same shot as both brothers, looking identical while Charlie is a mess and Donald a success). And as the film's plot unravels at the conclusion (Donald is killed in a car accident in the Everglades after he and Charlie run into the swamp to avoid being shot by the author [Orlean] and her subject [LaRoche]), it is clear that Kaufman has viewed his entire screenplay as a game, an elaborate charade to prove that the author can never be in control of his subject, even if that subject is the author himself. Though Charlie and Donald would seem to constitute a dyad of binary oppositions that give the text meaning (artistic vs. commercial, self-loathing vs. confidence, misery vs. contentment), only once "Charlie" is free of Donald,

his ghostly double, can he create and be released from his self-absorption. As Baudrillard described this condition, “We’re haunted by the phantom twinness, by this identical reduplication, and we’re always under threat of merging into it” (*Paroxysm* 94). Ridding himself of Donald allows “Charlie” to escape this reduplication and finally to create his own vision.

Patricia Waugh, in referring to Bakhtin’s definition of the submission of competing voices to the one godlike voice of the author’s asserts that “metafiction *displays* and *rejoices* in the impossibility of such a resolution” (43). Auster (in his introduction of an outside narrator at the end of *City of Glass*), Baxter (whose alter ego within his novel is incapable of even thinking of a title for the novel), Seinfeld (whose television version of his television show fails), and Kaufman (who is trapped in the hell of his own creative process) all rejoice in the inability of their versions of themselves to resolve their narratives alone. If, as Linda Hutcheon claims, “narrative is a shared construction” (29), then each of these authors deconstructs his status as author, emphasizing their own inadequacies, only to reconstruct their texts with the help of a multitude of writers and readers.

CHAPTER III
REMEMBERING AND REINVENTING: POSTMODERN VIEWS OF THE
HOLOCAUST

“As safe Americans we were not there. Since then, in imagination, we are seldom anywhere else.”

--Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil* (Preface, 3)

As many contemporary authors have discovered, writing about the Holocaust is not a simple exercise in historical fiction. Representing this unrepresentable event does not simply pose a stylistic or structural problem but instead, a moral dilemma as philosophers and historians have questioned whether or not there can ever be a responsible fictional representation of the Holocaust. Such concerns, however, have not prevented fiction writers from turning to the Holocaust as the subject matter in their own attempts to make sense of their personal and family histories following this event. Three 21st-century attempts to represent the Holocaust challenge previous thinking on responsible emplotment of this event by incorporating author doubles as characters confronting the historical implications of the Holocaust. Within these texts, truth and fiction are enmeshed, not only in the figure of the author but also in the narrative, creating a new way of looking at this event that reveals something important about how artists have represented trauma in narrative. Philip Roth, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Larry David do something new to shock the reader out of the complacency that results from

encountering another trauma narrative in an age rife with them. They create new ways of looking at truth, fiction, historical events, and simulations of experience. And by doing this, they allow readers to defamiliarize their encounter with narratives about the Holocaust, ultimately representing one personal view of the space between truth and fiction that reveals a new way of constructing our thinking about this devastating event.

In *The Plot Against America* (2004)¹¹, Philip Roth continues to examine his particular concerns (anti-Semitism, American history, the construction of “the truth”) through a metahistorical fictional paradigm; real characters become involved in fictional events set against the backdrop of the Holocaust. According to Roth himself, “it’s a false memoir that takes the form of a real memoir” (Tucker 45). Roth’s efforts to explore his personal history alongside the history of twentieth-century Jewish Americans while using himself as a character in a fictional novel are complemented by other Jewish authors who use this metafictional paradigm to explore the space between reality and fiction (including the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer and the writer/actor Larry David). Though there is a range from the darkly comic efforts of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to the genuinely chilling events of *Plot* and *Everything Is Illuminated*, all of these Jewish American writers use metafiction to look closely at the experience of living as a Jew in America fifty years after the Holocaust. The frustration experienced by fiction writers at their inability to represent historical events whose horrors render them unrepresentable can be mitigated through metafiction and its self-conscious mirroring of that same complex writing process. These three author figures find a way to reconstruct a narrative of this event (which none of them experienced personally) that will reflect their lives and

concerns while challenging conventional modes of story-telling, much like Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a comic book about the Holocaust does, using a new mode of narration to tell their stories.

Roth's Interpretive Puzzles

The Plot Against America is another example of Roth's compulsion to analyze the fictive self and to create works that cannot be easily categorized as fiction or nonfiction, efforts that have come to define his writing. Roth has continually destabilized the categories of fiction and fact, toying with his readers' expectations and with critic's attempts to define and limit his work. Using the fictional character "Philip Roth" becomes a way for Roth to extend his look at the oppositions of truth and fiction, memoir and autobiography, fiction and metahistorical non-fiction while also addressing the larger cultural concerns that have always dominated Roth's writing: the inescapability of family history, the suffocating yet accurate stereotypes of the Jewish family, and the problem of self-definition (are the Roths in *Plot* Jews or Americans first?). Underlying these concerns, however, is a rumination on how contemporary Jewish Americans struggle to maintain their individual identities and integrity against the forces of assimilation. In this way, the Jewish American writers Roth, Foer, and David have much in common with African American writers such as Charles Johnson (in *Middle Passage*) and Alice Walker (in *The Temple of My Familiar*) who use historiographic metafiction to examine their cultural heritage, as discussed by Madelyn Jablon: "[African-American writers] also draw attention to the fascination among writers with the craft of writing and with their lives

and work, for artist-characters reveal their autobiographical underpinnings undisguised” (79). Using this postmodern approach of self-incorporation into a fictional narrative makes sense; to write about experiences that are incomprehensible, a postmodern view of the self as fragmented and unstable allows everything to become illuminated.

When current world events remind us of the persistence of anti-Semitism—Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed in December 2005 that the Holocaust was a “myth” (Friedman) and Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson asserted on his television show *The 700 Club* that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s 2005 stroke “was divine retribution for the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza which Robertson opposed” (CNN.com)—Roth’s insistence on keeping his focus on this problem seems sadly relevant. And interlocking his own examinations of the self and the Jewish experience into *The Plot Against America*, with its fictionalization of events leading up to the Holocaust, allows us to see Roth’s work in a meta-historiographical paradigm, much like Walker’s *The Temple of my Familiar* “envisions artistic creation as participation in an intergenerational conversation that demands an acknowledgement of the importance of the historical collective past on the personal present” (Jablon 44). Both slavery and the holocaust consist of such psychologically disastrous raw material that historians and sociologists have debated the relative merits of even attempting to create fictions out of these events. Writing a fictional account of the Holocaust that is both stylistically innovative as well as historically accurate is a challenge that has frustrated most who have attempted it because, as Hayden White states, these events must be “responsibly emplotted” (28). Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, a comic book about the Holocaust, succeeds

because, in White's estimation, it "assimilates the event of the Holocaust to the conventions of comic book representation, and, in this absurd mixture of a 'low' genre with events of the most momentous significance, *Maus* manages to raise all of the crucial issues regarding the limits of representation in general" (32). In *The Plot Against America*, itself a mixture of high and low, fiction and fact, memoir and fantasy, Roth uses experimental metafiction to attempt his own creative representation of the culture that allowed the Nazi genocide to occur.

While discussing Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, Alan Berger asked, "Is Roth not utilizing the Holocaust to give himself legitimacy in the Jewish community?" (Furman 38), in a apparent need to atone for his portrayal of that community in *Portnoy's Complaint*, and in *Plot*, Roth is returning to this attempt to use history to make a statement about his own identity politics and the legacy of his own work. Roth insists that he used fiction in *Plot* to make sure readers "might forget that this hasn't happened" (Tucker 45). Remaining unstated, however, is Roth's desire to ensure this entire period of history is not forgotten and by using the rhetoric of testimony (the invocation to never forget), he incorporates his unique blend of falsehoods and historical truth to give his own accounts legitimacy in the Jewish community. Alongside the verifiable biographical details in *Plot* (family names, addresses) is a large index of factual information, research that Roth gathered in order to better simulate this alternate history.

Creating a false memoir of the holocaust in *Plot* then becomes then the perfect paradigm to examine this inability to divide our lives into the easy categories of "truth" and "fiction," primarily because the Holocaust is an event that must be known through

representations of it rather than by itself. And in his novel *The Ghost Writer*, Roth attempts to rewrite one of the most important non-fiction texts of the Holocaust, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. In *The Ghost Writer*, the first in Roth's Zuckerman series, Nathan Zuckerman, while spending the night at his idol E.I. Lonoff's house, becomes infatuated with a young woman named Amy Bellette that he meets there. Having already been upset by his father's charges that a story he wrote showcased the most dangerous clichés of the Jewish experience (Nathan's story contains an account of a nasty family feud involving money), Nathan creates a fictional biography of this woman, imagining that she is Anne Frank, who did not die in Auschwitz but survived and came to America. And as Nathan rewrites Amy's history, Roth rewrites perhaps the most widely read personal account of the holocaust.

By crafting this revisionist history, Nathan undermines one of the most important texts for post-Holocaust American Jews. If Anne Frank had survived, her account of hiding during the war would be denuded of its power, and all Jews would fall victim to the same anti-Semitic ideas that Nathan's father feels his story perpetuates. According to Judge Wapter and his wife (the influential family friends Nathan's father asks to help convince his son of the danger represented by his story), Anne Frank's death, and the subsequent dramatic reenactment of her diary on Broadway, allowed Gentiles to see the suffering of the Jews and connect to their plight on a human, emotional level. If her suffering is experienced as the suffering of another human being, then audiences could be moved enough by this drama to no longer view Jews as alien others. Taking the pathos of the diary away would eliminate this step towards understanding and acceptance.

Instead of listening to his father about the dangers of reinforcing anti-Semitic stereotypes and removing this hope for connection, Nathan transgresses and creates another dangerous story. Nathan has, in the language of Harold Bloom, misread his own father: “To live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father” (*Map* 19).

In rewriting and fictionalizing this best known account of the Holocaust, Roth sets a pattern that leads to *The Plot Against America*. The danger of taking this event and fictionalizing, personalizing or adding aspects to it in order to reflect an individual’s own concerns is explained by Berel Lang: “the effect of the additions is then to misrepresent the subject and thus – where the aspects misrepresented are essential – to diminish it” (145). Entwining his personal history with Anne Frank’s therefore takes away from the power of her voice, a critique of Nathan included within *The Ghost Writer*. If Anne Frank had lived, one of the most powerful primary texts of the Holocaust would no longer be viewed as a tragedy. And Roth’s dilemma, as he continues to turn to the Holocaust as a backdrop for his writing is clear: how does a fiction writer represent the connection between the Holocaust and his own personal history without diminishing either one? Roth’s solution to this problem is to continue inventing his own truth, constructing a “Philip Roth” that is an amalgam of fact and fiction experiencing a simulation of historical events.

Though *The Ghost Writer*’s Amy is not Anne, Nathan’s “biography” of her is logically grounded in enough truthful details to lead readers to believe that she could be, just as Lindbergh’s victory in *Plot* is based in enough historic detail that it has the feel of

truth. The copious amounts of research involved in writing *Plot* (“I was surrounded by history books about the 40’s and the Nazi movement in America” [Tucker 45], along with the large index of historical information found at the back of the novel, allows Roth to create a startlingly realistic simulacrum of this period in American history. In *The Ghost Writer*, rewriting an account of the Holocaust leads Nathan to an understanding of his own life: “The loving father who must be relinquished for the sake of his child’s art was not her’s; he was mine” (207). The rewriting of the same time period in *Plot* serves another, larger purpose for Roth—using fiction to understand not only personal history but how a nation could attempt to exterminate an entire group of its citizens that define themselves as Americans first and Jews second.

Operation Shylock addresses many of the concerns that will resurface in *The Plot against America*, namely those of identity and its fluidity, especially as a vehicle for exploring the very real concerns facing Jews around the world. In the novel, which is classified as a memoir and a work of fiction (its status as either of these is consistently undermined by Roth), “Philip Roth” suffers a nervous breakdown after battling an addiction to painkillers. During his recovery, “Roth” becomes aware that someone has been impersonating him; a man calling himself “Philip Roth” has been speaking publicly in Israel about Zionism, the Diaspora, and the trial of John Demjanjuk, the alleged butcher of Treblinka. In this weak and vulnerable state, “Roth” flies to Israel to confront this poseur and to disassociate his name from the bold and inflammatory statements “Philip Roth” has been making. As he finally confronts the imposter, “Roth” is shocked when the other “Philip Roth” appears genuinely glad to meet him. Expecting to reenact

the violent confrontation scene from Poe's story "William Wilson,"¹² this other Roth is honored to finally meet his double:

"Philip Roth! The real Phillip Roth—after all these years!" His body trembled with emotion, tremendous emotion even in the two hands that tightly grasped my back.

It required a series of violent thrusts with my elbows to unlock his hold on me. "And you," I said, shoving him a little as I stepped away, "you must be the fake Philip Roth."

He laughed. But still cried! Not even in my mental simulation had I loathed him quite as I did seeing those stupid unaccountable tears.

"Fake, oh compared to you, *absolutely* fake—compared to you, nothing, no one, a cipher." (71)

And in this exchange between the "real" and the "fake," Roth inverts expectations—not only does the fake Roth not fear this confrontation, he relishes this meeting, acknowledging his status as other. According to Debra Shostak, "while the postmodern epistemologies of identity Roth has explored are far from new, his particular narrative approach, through the exploitation of his own persona, provides fresh angles on the issue of how subjectivity is represented and poses fascinating interpretive puzzles" (183). The puzzles here are endless in their postmodern circularity and beget a stream of questions. Primary among these are questions of identity (or, as Andrew Furman terms it, "the slipperiness of Jewish American identity"[30]), which is complicated in typical Roth fashion in *Operation Shylock* by being set against such a highly charged and problematic event for Jewish Americans as the Demjanjuk trial and the debate about diasporism. Shostak claims that

when Roth experiments with the form of his narrative, drawing on genres as diverse as autobiography, biography, memoir, confession, dialogue, psychoanalytic monologue, and metafiction, he draws upon readers' expectations about the 'truth' value of each genre in such a way that he can simultaneously offer and refuse self-exposure. (183)

What Shostak does not mention, however, is the context in which each of these experiments is set. "Philip Roth" does not meet his double in a neutral setting; they meet in Israel during the Demjanjuk trial, a specific historical moment of paramount importance to American Jews. *The Plot against America* reveals another double—Roth's younger self—in another specific moment in the lives of all Jewish Americans. And just as Roth reimagines himself, so he refigures America, which becomes not a place of refuge for Jews, but instead a prison.

This rewriting of American history forms the basis of *Plot*, but the new version of historical events is framed by Roth's continuing experimenting with his own authorial persona. By creating false memoirs, misleading "I"s, and look-alike doubles, Roth has embraced every opportunity to blur the lines between himself and his protagonists. Going back to the first Zuckerman trilogy (*The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, and *The Anatomy Lesson*), Roth fashioned a narrator so like himself that it was taken for granted among readers and critics that Zuckerman was Roth or at least as close to him as anyone ever needed (or wanted to get). And in *The Facts*, *The Counterlife*, *Operation Shylock*, and *My Life as A Man*, Roth zealously embraces the confusion of literary self-exposure, going so far as to purposely manipulate his readers into (mis)reading between the lines; as Zuckerman says in *The Facts* of autobiography, "it's probably the most manipulative

of all literary forms” (20). Manipulation has always been a part of autobiography, from Booker T. Washington’s desire to raise funds for his Tuskegee Institute by using the content of *Up from Slavery* to pander to whites to Gertrude Stein’s manipulation of the form of life writing to write *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, a narrative of Stein’s life, not Toklas’s. But manipulation of the reader by the subject in Roth’s work is fundamentally different from these (or any) earlier examples. Roth actively rejects all easy categorizations of his work, and not only blurs the line between generic distinctions, but renders such arbitrary distinctions ridiculous when applied to his writing. Mark Shechner has observed,

You don’t have to read much of *Portnoy’s Complaint* or *My Life as A Man* or *Zuckerman Unbound* or the *Counterlife* or the latest novel as of this writing, *The Dying Animal*, to find, peeping out from behind those Portnoys, Tarnapols, Zuckermans, and Kapeshes, the real Philip Roth, fiendishly dicing up his own experiences—and tarting them up as well—for all he is worth, because, well, it works for him, and what works is what works. (22)

Moving past facile questions of autobiographical categorization, Roth’s career has moved from troping on the use of his real life, to serious meditation, and back again to play. Debra Shostak’s excellent recent book, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives* explores much of this territory, but was published in 2004 before Roth released *The Plot Against America* later that same year.

For *Plot*, Roth takes the facts (only the ones that cannot be disputed—names of his family members and logistical information about his childhood home in Newark) and places them within a wholly fictional context, thereby changing his formula and creating

a new way for his audience to misread his biography. The fictional conceit here, that Charles Lindbergh was elected president in 1940 instead of Franklin Roosevelt, is the instigating action in this false memoir. In an earlier interview, when speaking of his propensity to combine elements of fiction and biography, Roth explains his technical approach to this type of life writing:

You don't necessarily, as a writer, have to abandon your biography completely to engage in an act of impersonation. It may be more intriguing when you don't. You distort it, caricature it, parody it, you torture and subvert it, you exploit it—all to give the biography that dimension that will excite your verbal life. (Searles 105).

And in *Plot*, Roth exploits the facts, using biographical details to create an imaginary world where the horrors of the holocaust are made all too real. Much as Spiegelman's *Maus* used the non-traditional structure of a comic book and mice as characters in creating a very different Holocaust narrative to defamiliarize the reality of that experience in order to make its horrors fresh and immediate, so Roth's work foregrounds the experience of Jewish Americans in World War II, rendering their fears of persecution terrifyingly real.

Andrew Furman asserts that "to be a Jewish American in the twentieth century is to ask a series of 'what if?' questions. What if I had been born in 1933 in Germany or Czechoslovakia or Poland? What if my grandparents fled to Israel rather than to the United States?" (30), and in *Plot*, Roth poses and answers his own "what if?" question. *The Plot Against America* is predicated on an alternative history of twentieth-century

America: what if Charles Lindbergh had been elected President of the United States in 1940? The Roth family (brothers Philip and Sandy, mother Rose, and father Herman) of Newark, New Jersey find themselves living a nightmarish inversion of their formerly idyllic suburban existence as Lindbergh supporters begin to deprive Jews of their civil rights while President Lindbergh refuses to involve America in World War II. Herman loses his job with the insurance company, teenage Sandy is sent to a work camp and recruited by a youth organization to proselytize for Lindbergh's youth corps, and the family is recommended for relocation with other Jewish families from their neighborhood to rural Kentucky. As Lindbergh continues his non-interventionist policies in the war and anti-Semitic violence begins to threaten Jewish Americans, the Roth family, like many of those around them, find themselves asking if they still live in the America which had given so much to them before the Lindbergh presidency began to slowly take everything away.

The first line of the novel establishes the emotional context of *Plot*: "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear" (1). And the fear that has excited this part of Roth's verbal life forces him to confront the paradox that has haunted Jewish American fiction writers: how can one be both Jewish and American? Does one have to choose between these two self-definitions? The key to resolving this paradox for Roth is to understand how his fears are tied to a larger communal fear. Aiming at the larger truth of how genocides occur around the world, Roth addresses the fear that we all understand, a fear borne out of the question, "What if it happened here?" As Roth omits the logical end of his story (the novel ends with plans for relocating the Jews and the mere suggestion of

concentration camps), he allows this uncertainty to become synecdochal, to stand in for all of our fears about our own vulnerability.

As the Roth family listens to Roosevelt accepting his party's nomination for president in 1940, they find themselves being altered: "There was something about the inherent decorum of the delivery that, alien though it was, not only calmed our anxiety, but bestowed on our family a historical significance" (28). And it is this significance as a part of Roth's own history that becomes the reason for including himself as the narrator of the book. As Herman Roth observes later, "'History is everything that happens everywhere. Even here in Newark. Even here on Summit Avenue. Even what happens in his house to an ordinary man—that'll be history too someday'" (180). History in Roth's conception is being made by us at every moment, and he chooses here to record his own personal history, rewriting world events to give clarity to his unique project. Roth creates a vision of a plot against not only America, but American history. Critical of invocations to write about certain events a certain way, but seemingly wary of going too far, Roth refuses to represent any actual atrocities against American Jews. The absence of these details then becomes a visceral presence that haunts *The Plot Against America*. Roth doesn't write about what happens after his family is nearly relocated to Kentucky, and refuses to give resolution, leaving his readers with a feeling of anxiety and dread that recapitulates the "perpetual fear" that he invokes on the first page of the novel.

In addition to fear and dread, Roth establishes another recurring theme in *Plot*, that of the binary oppositions, or the dyad. Each character is a dual character composed of two things: American/Jew, brother/betrayer, heroic father/loudmouthed Jew, America

as land of opportunity/America as hell. Even the form of the novel acquires this binary structure, as it is both false and true, a memoir and a work of fiction, fact and fantasy. Roth, as in *Operation Shylock*, presents himself here as another “Philip Roth,” the same little boy who is shaped by his experiences growing up in New Jersey, but this “Philip Roth’s” experiences are far more harrowing and dangerous. Reflecting back on his experiences, “Philip” remembers that everything is composed of two sides and this knowledge is almost as frightening as the historical events he must live through. Even President Lindbergh is seen by “Roth” as “at once youthful and gravely mature” (30), capable of inspiring blind devotion and abject terror in his constituents. But more importantly to young “Philip,” Herman Roth tells his nephew Alvin that “a family is both peace and war” (52) Roth’s false memoir emphasizes the dual nature of every person and everyone institution, from the White House to the families on Summit Avenue.

The Roth family then becomes a symbol for the bifurcated nature of characters and all narratives. A family must be both peace and war while a memoir can be both true and fictional. This idea becomes more problematic, though, in relation to Roth’s subject. The Holocaust is the background of Roth’s story, and the fear of American Jews is the fear that rules the story from page one to the rather abrupt end, where Roth refuses to give narrative closure and ends his story on October 15, 1942. *Plot* offers only the beginnings of the story of World War II, without a clear indication of how President Lindbergh will address the Nazi atrocities. Creating this gap in his memoir then allows Roth to opt out of completing this personal history. According to James Goodwin, “as a form of life history, autobiography is always incomplete” (3), and in the true spirit of a

holocaust memoir, “Roth” lets his survival be the only evidence of closure. Berel Lang claims of these holocaust remembrances that “the author of a memoir need not claim to make those events themselves intelligible, but the intention in recounting them is at least to make intelligible his present view of them, to show how the self which speaks or now writes was constituted in the past” (130). And it is Roth’s insistence on explaining himself, using both truth and fiction, that ultimately imbues his memoir with historical significance.

Creating and Collaborating in *Everything is Illuminated*

Susan E Nowak claims in her examination of Norma Rosen and Rebecca Goldstein that life writing takes on a special function for not only these two writers but for all Jewish American authors living in a post-Holocaust world:

The classical sources [of fiction] no longer provided a coherent worldview within which to construct and maintain a viable sense of Jewish identity. In response, many Jews began to deal with questions of identity, meaning, and purpose through personal experience rather than archetypal norms. Personal experience provided the *context* and *content* through which Jews living in the aftermath of the Shoah could address, in a meaningful and credible manner, issues such as survivor trauma, intergenerational communication, and the development of a post-Holocaust consciousness. (117)

Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2002 novel *Everything is Illuminated* uses postmodern life writing, including himself as a character in a quasi-fictional novel, to put his life as a third generation Holocaust survivor into perspective and to attempt to construct a coherent sense of identity. The novel, which features a young writer named “Jonathan

Safran Foer,” is simultaneously the story of “Foer’s” journey back to his grandfather’s village in the Ukraine to find Augustine, the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis, as well as “Foer’s” fictional narrative of life in that village from the eighteenth century through WWII. “Foer” is guided in the present by Alex, a Ukrainian translator and transmuter of the English language, and Alex’s grandfather, who eventually reveals his own connections with the Nazi destruction of the all-but forgotten village of Trachimbrod. Alongside this present day voyage to find this village is the correspondence between “Foer” and Alex, which began after “Foer” returned to the States to write his story of Trachimbrod. Animating all these stories is a desire to capture the essence of an experience that cannot be documented or represented adequately; “Foer” has no luck tracking down the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis and therefore has to embroider a story of shtetl life. In an interview, Foer acknowledged the dilemma of the contemporary Jewish writer attempting to fictionalize the Holocaust: “Is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one’s responsibilities to the truth of a story, and what is ‘the truth?’ Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy?” (Author Interview). These questions and the answer found in *Everything* represent a similar conception of the self to Roth’s in relation to this defining event. Foer admits that his book “represents the possibility of a responsible duality, of ‘did and didn’t,’ of things being one way and also the opposite way” (Author Interview) in the same way that Roth’s idea of the self includes fiction and non-fiction, truth and falsehood. This use of Foer himself, along with the shifting form of the book (letters between “Foer” and Alex, the story of Trachimbrod, the Ukrainian journey of “Foer”)

then perfectly reflects the reality of the impossibility of representing the Holocaust in one unified fashion.

Everything is Illuminated then becomes a vehicle for Foer to explore what it means to fictionalize this event and himself simultaneously. “Foer” is represented in comical fashion to readers by Alex, whose grasp of English idioms is less than masterful. Alex’s malapropisms (“all of my many friends dub me Alex, because that is a more flaccid-to-utter version of my legal name. Mother dubs me Alexi-stop-spleening-me!, because I am always spleening her” [1]) mark him as one of the targets of Foer’s satire, along with Foer himself. As Alex stumbles to make himself understood, so “Foer” attempts to salvage some dignity for himself, despite the fact that he is mocked by his characters at every turn. When “Foer” is greeted at the Lvov airport by Alex, the guide he has hired, Alex is shocked by this American author:

When we found each other, I was very flabbergasted by his appearance. This is an American? I thought. And also, This is a Jew? He was severely short. He wore spectacles and had diminutive hairs which were not split anywhere . . . In truth, he did not look like anything special at all. I was underwhelmed to the maximum. (31-2).

Foer moves on from gently mocking his own appearance to using this narcissistic narrative to deconstruct more serious ideas of Jewish identity. In one of Alex’s letter’s to “Foer” after “Foer” returns to America, Alex comments on “Foer’s” lack of ethnic identity: “Mother asked about you yesterday. She said, ‘And what about the troublemaking Jew?’ I informed her that you are not troublemaking, but a good person, and that you are not a

Jew with a large-size letter J, but a jew, like Albert Einstein or Jerry Seinfeld” (104). Though Alex’s observations on “Foer’s” Jewish identity are meant to be amusing, they touch on larger conflicts about that identity. Assimilation often entails a denuding of the very same ethnic identity that gives Americans a connection to their own pasts. Becoming a Jew with a small-size letter J comes to symbolize both acceptance by the world community and a loss of a more defined ethnic identity. Foer’s trip to Europe revealed the lack of connection to his past, and *Everything Is Illuminated* then becomes his opportunity to construct a fictional connection to a shared past with his ancestors and with the Ukrainians who also suffered during the war. With no way of writing non-fiction about his trip (he never found what he was searching for), he must construct an alternate experience for himself, one that allows him to address his quandary: he is a writer whose attempt to research his connection to a survivor fails, forcing him into the dangerous position of needing to create a fiction about the Holocaust.

The postmodern, metafictional text of *Everything is Illuminated* also showcases “Foer” preparing to write the novel we are reading, but just as Foer satirizes his own appearance and ethnic identity, so he parodies the writing of his own book. As Alex, Grandfather Perchov, “Foer,” and the dog Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior set out on the quest for Augustine and Trachimbrod, the group experiences the ultimate difficulty in attempting to find the village of Trachimbrod—no trace of it exists. As Alex observes, “It was seeming as if we were in the wrong country, or the wrong century, or as if Trachimbrod had disappeared, and so had the memory of it” (115). But as the group’s futile search continues, Alex observes of “Foer,” “I saw that he kept filling his diary. The

less we saw, the more he wrote” (115). As the historical record of this town and the events of the Holocaust fade from the memories of the aging generation that lived through it, the need for narrative accounts about the Shoah grow. According to Gerhard Bach, “the second- or third-generation writer touches the sphere of the historical Holocaust but rarely tends to invade it” (89). “Foer,” knowing that he will not have access to the historical sphere (how can he write a history of a woman he cannot find or a town he cannot see?), turns to metafiction as a means of invading some space around this event.

After finding a woman who could be Augustine, but who claims instead to be another survivor of the massacre that obliterated Trachimbrod, “Foer” is shown pictures of the villagers, including his grandfather:

I gave the hero¹³ each picture as she gave it to me, and he could only with difficulty hold it in his hands that were doing so much shaking. It appeared that a part of him wanted to write everything, every word of what occurred, into his diary. And a part of him refused to write even one word. (154)

“Foer’s” response, of being unable to create then mirrors what actually occurred when he traveled to the Ukraine and could find nothing to write about. As he states in an interview, “the complete absence I found in Ukraine gave my imagination total freedom” (Author Interview). Only when he carves out a metafictional space surrounding this absence can Foer connect to the Holocaust and begin to confront this devastating history. Without any evidence (no Augustine and no Trachimbrod), Foer must create a villain, just as he has created “Foer”; Grandfather Perchov then becomes a fictional construction

that serves a formal and thematic purpose. Foer, too far removed from events to create his own trauma narrative, must turn to another victim of the Nazi invasion of Trachimbrod, but not the one that “Foer” expects to offer testimony. And as Grandfather Perchov tells his story, Foer, like Roth, sheds light on the degree to which suffering reaches beyond those who died in the Holocaust.

Gerhard Bach, in his work on texts written by second generation Holocaust writers, has claimed that these authors

have expanded this notion in a twofold way, in connecting the moral issue of Holocaust remembrance (and its artistic modes of expression) with a postmodern discourse that now includes, besides the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, its perpetrators and collaborators as well. (78)

Foer’s novel, though technically a third-generation narrative, continues this work as Alex’s proudly Gentile grandfather becomes implicated in the story “Foer” attempts to tell of the history of Trachimbrod. Foer’s postmodern rendering of his family’s wartime story now becomes the story of another kind of survivor, one who has suffered in spite of his survival. Alex’s grandfather, who informed on his best friend Herschel in the Nazi invasion of Trachimbrod, acted to spare his own life, and has been tormented by his actions ever since. His crimes might have remained hidden if not for “Foer’s” journey. But “Foer’s” story becomes a chance for him to unburden himself of this traumatic memory he has carried for so long. He breaks down and tells his survivor story, connecting his narrative of suffering to that of Foer’s grandfather, and all other victims of the Holocaust.

Bach's discussion of contemporary Jewish American fiction contains the question, "where can we identify 'boundaries' between specific groups or generations of Holocaust writers and how do we deal with these boundaries—as markers of separation or of connection?" (78). Foer provides an answer of sorts by combining two different perspectives on the Holocaust in *Everything*—"Foer's" imagined story of his grandfather's village before it was destroyed by the Nazis and Grandfather Perchov's story of how he condemned his Jewish friend to death—that feature two different generational perspectives on the Holocaust. By combining these two generations in one narrative, Foer creates a new type of Holocaust literature, one that provides a model for the post-Holocaust third generation. Foer's story must end with Grandfather Perchov's suicide, and his invocation to his grandson, "Try to live so that you can always tell the truth" (275). This final bit of advice, a reminder to testify, to tell the truth of their family and their sins, is the responsibility of all of those, both victims and perpetrators, who were destroyed by the events of history. And this truth transcends any boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, history and memoir, and authors and characters.

"I'm a survivor": Larry David and the Cult of Suffering

The comic elements of Foer's work serve to link him to another writer who uses a metafictional paradigm to examine identity politics, namely the Jewish American experience: the comic writer/actor Larry David. As the creator of *Seinfeld*, David encouraged Jerry Seinfeld to play himself surrounded by fictional characters, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* shares this same elaborate construction as David stars as "Larry David,"

the creator of *Seinfeld*. In a departure from *Seinfeld*, “Larry” is instead surrounded by a blend of real people playing themselves and actors portraying the people in “Larry’s” world. *Curb* then becomes another example of a postmodern work where identity is never stable and every character’s basis in reality is always a guessing game for viewers. Mining much the same territory that he covered in *Seinfeld*, *Curb* is an improvised comedy about the life of “Larry David,” the comedy writer who created *Seinfeld*. Just as *Seinfeld* was famously described as a show about nothing, *Curb* is essentially a show about the “excruciating minutiae” of “Larry’s” life. The events of “Larry’s” daily life become just an excuse for him to offend everyone around him, and each week affords him a new opportunity to embarrass himself and his wife Cheryl (played by the actress Cheryl Hines).

The mix of reality and fiction continues among the rest of the recurring cast and guest stars: “Larry” counts among his celebrity friends Jeff Greene, played by Jeff Garlin, “Richard Lewis,” “Julia Louis-Dreyfus,” and “Jason Alexander” among many others who play themselves. Freed from the routine of working on a network show and wealthy because of its success, “Larry” is able to have lunch, play golf, and visit leisurely with his friends. The show then becomes a study in the ways that “Larry” becomes the schlemiel, bungling encounter after encounter with both real and fictional people. Not only does the show embrace this convention of Jewish humor, but *Curb* also becomes a response to the questions of assimilation and resistance. Donald Weber identifies the struggle between these two ideas as a phenomenon that specifically belongs to Jewish American popular culture:

If (that is) popular culture both enables the psychosocial ordeal of 'Americanization' and provides opportunities for cultural dissonance, then Jewish American popular culture offers a rich testament to *how* that complex dialectic of acculturation and resistance works. (130)

And each episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* offers an opportunity to witness "Larry" and his attempts to traverse that same line between assimilation and ethnic identification ("Larry" has a non-Jewish wife and worries about being discriminated against at the country club he wants to join).

Over the show's five year run, *Curb* has included a large number of actors who have played themselves, marking *Curb* as an intertextual, postmodern text: "intertextual references are emblematic of the *hyperconsciousness* of postmodern popular culture: a hyperawareness on the part of the text itself of its cultural status" (Collins 196). And in the world of *Curb*, the cameo appearance is a status symbol; the list of actors who have appeared in order to mock themselves is long, speaking to the popularity of appearing as yourself on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. This mix of reality and fiction makes for an amusing opportunity for actors to make fun of their personas (Mel Brooks bemoans his continued success with *The Producers* and Jason Alexander is frustrated by his failed attempts to escape the "George Constanza" role he played on *Seinfeld*). All of these roles are secondary, however, to the role played by David: "Larry David, professional schlemiel," the Yiddish term for a perpetual bungler. "Larry" week after week missteps, misspeaks, or is somehow misunderstood by everyone around him, often producing cringe-worthy results for the audience. The schlemiel, defined by Hirschel Revel, "handles a situation in

the worst possible manner or is dogged by an ill-luck that is more or less due to his own ineptness” (115). And “Larry” continually handles every situation in the worst possible way. No matter his intent, “Larry’s” offensive behavior places him in the long tradition of schlemiels in Jewish culture and literature (Woody Allen’s characters are archetypal schlemiels). According to Andrew Furman, the schlemiel has transcended its status as a merely comic archetype and instead embodies a very important aspect of Jewish self-identity: “laughter inspired by the foibles of the schlemiel allowed Jews some relief (if not transcendence) from their own hapless predicaments as unwelcome inhabitants . . . the ancient pedigree of the schlemiel reflects, among other things, the long legacy of Jewish persecution that culminated in the Holocaust” (160). Though Furman argues that the schlemiel’s moment in Jewish American Literature has passed (belonging to the 1950’s and 60’s with the works of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth), he claims that this figure lives on in American popular culture in “Woody Allen movies, television shows such as *Seinfeld*” (161), and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which continues this rich tradition.

As the schlemiel, “Larry” insults, offends, and misspeaks, but using a fictional version of “Larry David” allows the show get away with such outrageousness. The audience knows it isn’t the real Larry David trying to take a golf club out of a coffin during a dead golfer’s funeral or berating a wheelchair bound man for rolling out in front of his car; the gap between this “Larry David” and reality is just small enough to allow the audience to laugh at his outrageousness while shuddering at the political incorrectness of someone who would actually do such awful things. The television show imitating life is one step away from reality, which allows viewers to cringe and identify at the same

time. HBO promoted the fifth season of the show with the line, “Deep inside, you know you’re him.” By highlighting this identification, HBO wants its viewers to live vicariously through this simulacrum of reality.

“Larry” is an insider who speaks as an outsider, yet is never truly alienated from his community (he is wealthy, famous, and always surrounded by his Hollywood friends). Of course, the schlemiel persona is a well-established negative Jewish stereotype, and “Larry’s” Jewishness as a marker of otherness has been a pivotal part of the show. But “Larry’s” outsider status is more complex, like many others of his generation:

[For post WWII American Jews] assimilation had been not only outward, with many Jews abandoning their Jewishness as a result of secularism, materialism, religious indifference, and anti-intellectualism, but it was also vectored inward, bringing Christian values and customs into Judaism. (Heschel 40)

“Larry’s” complicated relationship to his own ethnic identity forms the plot of many episodes of *Curb* (Larry won’t fire a chef from his restaurant because he believes him to be a Holocaust survivor; Larry must make amends to his Christian wife and her family after eating the cookies they have made for their nativity scene; Larry is questioned by the police after buying tickets from a scalper for the high holidays). These scenes depicting Larry’s faith continue to do the work that *Seinfeld* began (it is widely seen as the show that brought Jewish people into America’s living room every week). The pathos of “Larry’s” difficult life as a Jew transcends comedy, however, with the season four

episode, “The Survivor.” This episode allows David to parody many serious topics facing Jews of his generation, including interfaith marriages and latent anti-Semitism; “Larry’s” Gentile father-in-law asks to substitute “Yippee” for “Mazel tov” (or as he says, “a matzoh toff”) in Cheryl and “Larry’s” wedding vows, and Larry begs forgiveness from his mother-in-law after yelling at her by saying he was “flummoxed” after an argument about the Holocaust. But the main target of David’s satire in “The Survivor” is the American culture of victimhood which diminishes the true victims of the Nazi genocide.

“The Survivor” episode begins as “Larry” and Cheryl have decided to renew their wedding vows and “Larry” must meet with his rabbi to discuss the ceremony. “Larry” invites the rabbi to a celebratory dinner the evening before the ceremony, and the rabbi asks if he can bring another guest to the party, a friend who is a huge fan of *Seinfeld* and would love to meet “Larry.” Plus, adds the rabbi, “he’s a survivor.” Believing this friend to be a Holocaust survivor, “Larry” agrees, and later asks Cheryl if they should invite his father’s friend Solly to the dinner, who is also a survivor. “Do Holocaust survivors like to talk to one another, you know trade stories?” Larry asks Cheryl and in this exchange, he joins in the tradition of Jewish comedians finding humor in this most unlikely of subjects. Woody Allen and Mel Brooks have been mining this dangerous territory for humor for decades, and David’s own work on *Seinfeld* places him in their company (Jerry’s parents are horrified to learn that he kissed his girlfriend as they watched *Schindler’s List*). Just as Roth wants readers to experience history through his prism of negotiated identities and realities, so David uses the fabricated reality of his own comic experiences to make a most serious point about how the distance even among Americans Jews from the

Holocaust creates a peculiar mixture of reverence and discomfort which accompanies any discussion about this event.

The night of the party, as the rabbi arrives at the David's house, he introduces his guest. Larry is shocked to find that this survivor is none other than Colby Donaldson, a contestant on the television show *Survivor* during its second season. Embarrassed by this confusion, "Larry" is forced to listen to Colby tell the other dinner guests how difficult life was for him during the taping of the show. Solly then challenges Colby, telling him that he knows nothing of true suffering:

Solly: "I was in a concentration camp. You never even suffered one minute in your life compared to what I went through."

Colby: "Look, I'm saying, I'm saying, we spent 42 days trying to survive. We had very little rations, no snacks . . ."

Solly: "Snacks, what are you talking snacks? We didn't eat, sometimes for a week, for a month. We ate nothing!"

Colby: "I couldn't work out when I was over there. They certainly didn't have a gym. I mean, I wore my sneakers out and then the next thing I've got a pair of flip-flops."

Solly: "Flip-flops?!"

Colby: "We slept on the ground, on the dirt, OK. 118 degrees during the day, 98 degrees at night with 98 percent humidity."

Solly: "45 degrees below zero!"

. . .

Colby: "Have you ever even seen the show?"

Solly: "Did you ever see our show? It was called the Holocaust!"

. . .

Solly: "You don't know nothing about survival. I'm a survivor!"

Colby: "I'm a survivor!"

Solly: "No, I'm a survivor!"

Terrifying and hilarious at the same time, their entire argument transcends television comedy to become a bitter statement about the Jewish experience in the 21st century.

According to Emily Miller Budick,

One response to the impossibility of language to represent the unrepresentable event of the Holocaust has been just such a privileging of ‘silence’ as the only decorous way of responding to what cannot be said, indeed as the only way of capturing the deep muteness that defines traumatic experience. (221-2)¹⁴

This argument then disrupts our entire way of thinking about how to speak of the Holocaust. Colby’s outspoken challenge to Solly represents a startlingly incorrect mode of representing this experience. Solly’s identity as a survivor is challenged by a star of a reality television show who believes that going without snacks is a form of suffering. While they both can call themselves survivors, one has experienced a simulation and the other history. Baudrillard’s definition of the term “hyperreal” illuminates this situation: “A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary; and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences” (*Simulacra 3*) *Survivor* becomes a hyperreal double of the horrors Solly lived through, and his embrace (as well as the rabbi’s) of this simulation further destabilizes concepts of trauma and suffering.

This argument between Colby and Solly is doubly shocking because of the political incorrectness of the horrors of the Holocaust being challenged, especially by a non-Jew. As Budick claims, “Americans, including American Jews, occupy an oblique

and distant relation to the events of the catastrophe” (217). This oblique relation allows for language associated with the Holocaust to be manipulated, even by the rabbi, who initiates the confusion by labeling Colby “a survivor,” despite knowing how the term would be interpreted. This same rabbi tells “Larry” that his brother in-law died on September 11th, but rather than being a victim of the terrorist attacks, he was hit by a bike messenger uptown; when Larry challenges the rabbi’s claim of victimhood as he tells people that his relative “died on September 11th,” which automatically makes “Larry” think he was a victim of the terror attacks of that day, the rabbi is offended. He sees nothing wrong with attaching his own grief to a larger tragedy, another perpetrator of, as Paul Berman put it in his review of *The Plot Against America*, “phony victimhood.” And like Rabbi Bengelsdorf in *Plot*, who becomes a powerful advocate for President Lindbergh and endangers all American Jews, this rabbi’s blindness to anything but his own rhetoric undermines his authority within the Jewish community. According to Susanna Heschel, “late twentieth-century Jews were nagged by their awareness that America was a compelling enticement to abandon their religion and identity. Judaism, many feared, was no match for the American adventure” (33). David is producing a parody of this desire to shed ethnic identity for a more Americanized view of suffering and the self. By producing this exchange, David fashions a critique of an American society that subsumes lived experience and ethnicity to a simulation, where everyone has an equal claim to victimhood.

Just as their exchange in “The Survivor” deconstructs the language we use to talk about the Jewish experience, “Larry,” throughout the run of the series has deconstructed

the idea of his own identity. Who is the real survivor becomes a question alongside the confusion over who the real Larry David is. Using “Larry David” as the focus of the show means that this question can never be satisfactorily answered. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and “The Survivor” episode in particular, is about pushing the limits of language and of challenging accepted ideas about identity. In his discussion of second and third generation Holocaust narratives, Gerhard Bach asserts that “contemporary narrative strategies against forgetting are thus stringently forceful antidotes to an otherwise rampant culture of obliviousness” (89). “The Survivor” episode, though a comic treatment of this subject, becomes another surprising Holocaust story that provides a striking challenge to the contemporary lack of understanding of this cataclysmic event and its victims. Using the space between the “real” Larry David and the TV “Larry David” forces viewers to look at all the simulations that surround them while challenging the rhetoric that facilitates the acceptance of the reflections of the real.

Elaine Kauvar uses a reference to Kierkegaard in her essay on Philip Roth’s “autobiographies” to illuminate the duality habitually present in Roth’s fiction: “[The] individual has a variety of shadows, all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being himself” (437). Roth, Foer, and David have all included these shadowy doubles as a means of investigating the highly charged events of their shared histories as Jewish American authors. Writing about this one event that eclipses all representation has led each of these authors to re-consider how to represent the self, a task made even more difficult in the face of their tragic subject.

CHAPTER IV

BODIES IN MOTION: SHAPE SHIFTERS IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE WRITING

“Reality and the self are in fact *discontinuous* entities.”

--Larry McCaffery, “Postmodern Realism(s),” *Some Other Frequency* (9)

Zoltán Abádi-Nagy: “Why do you call attention to the text in your fiction?”

Ronald Sukenick: “I will put it this way. What I am trying to do is call attention to the text itself so that it becomes not a window which seems to look out onto the world but a kind of object that returns the reader to his own imagination . . . [I am] trying to activate his imagination so that he himself can look at the world, not necessarily in my version of it—in his own version of it.”

--Ronald Sukenick, *In Form, Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (146)

Raymond Federman claims that “the New Fiction writers confront their own writing, insert themselves into their own texts in order to question the very act of using language to write fiction, even at the risk of alienating the reader,” (32) and this description fits the experimental work of Kathy Acker. What distinguishes her use of this idea of writing about “Kathy Acker” is her insistence on deconstructing the traditional form of the memoir, primarily through her attack on ideas of propriety and sexuality. Acker shocks her readers through her refutation of formal conventions and her bold use of sexuality. Acker’s brutally frank work includes herself as a character, inscribing “Kathy Acker” as a marker of a desire to deconstruct the form of the novelistic memoir. Along with Acker, Maxine Hong Kingston, J.G. Ballard, and Lee Siegel all include themselves as characters within fictions that challenge conventional thinking about gender and sexuality. Kingston’s character “Maxine” finds her own voice after competing

dialogically with female voices from her family stories and her past, and from the history of all Chinese women. Ballard's *Crash* includes the character "Ballard," an author who is one of several victims of twisted metal and twisted desire. Lee Siegel too uses himself within his explicit memoirs as a means of deconstructing conventional thinking about the forms of academic mores and writing. *Love in a Dead Language* and *Who Wrote the Book of Love?* are both fictional works yet both feature "Lee Siegel." Just as Acker uses herself to cast doubt on formalism, Siegel too attempts to read his life by focusing on, especially in *Who Wrote the Book of Love?*, his understanding of romantic love. All of these artists have found a politically charged mode of using their own appearance in their works about the body, and in this way, they create a formal and textual challenge to conventional ways of thinking about gender relations, and post-feminist ideas about both male and female sexuality. These authors use their own bodies within their texts to confront and critique the boundaries of thinking about the body and to force readers to look closely at the construction of the self both in fiction and in life.

Body Language

Kathy Acker's work cannot be contained or compartmentalized. Audacious in its form and content, Acker's writing defies description. Shocking in its frank depictions of sexuality yet incorporating familiar material, such as the reworking or rewriting of other texts (from Dickens, Cervantes de Sade, among others), Acker's work is endlessly surprising in its form, and the content of her writing forces readers to reconsider all of their previously held ideas about literature. Indeed, the very label of literature cannot be

easily applied to Acker's work, as it incorporates memoir, other plagiarized texts, drawings, and the visual arts into a unique mixture. Acker's books range from fictional diaries and comic books to theoretical essays on literature. What unites all elements of her work, however, is the insistence on challenging accepted thinking, whether about sexuality, feminism, pornography, or traditional ideas about fiction writing. In this way, she is like the other authors in this study who use metafictional techniques to challenge ideas about the self and its representations in contemporary fiction. Acker uses herself as a means of further deconstructing the "I" of her memoirs and our comfort with identifying the "I" in the texts we read. Nothing about reading Acker's work is designed to comfort; rather, every element takes readers into an unfamiliar and stylistically innovative world.

As Raymond Federman says of contemporary fiction,

As soon as a work of fiction refuses deliberately TO REPRESENT the world (*to mirror reality*), or refuses TO EXPRESS the innerself of man (*to mirror the souls*), it is immediately considered a failure, quickly labeled experimental, and therefore deemed irrelevant, useless, boring, unreadable, and of course unmarketable. (2)

Acker has experimented throughout her career and has been seen as marginal or unreadable. But for readers who are willing to venture past the elements of her work that are so experimental (the graphic sexuality and representation of the body, the shocking subject matter and the formal deviations from conventional narrative), her work provides an endless field of freeplay to examine. Much attention has been paid to the form of

Acker's writing, primarily because it is such a fascinating mix of disparate elements. Collages of texts, her works then become a perfect representation of the postmodern collision of high and low elements. In *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations*, she recycles large elements of the classic texts, but instead of creating an homage to either Cervantes or Dickens, this postmodern rewriting instead permanently alters the meaning of their works by transforming that material into a combination of narrative, diary, and porn that blends these elements into an entirely new genre. Reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's famous work, "Erased de Kooning Drawing" (1953), in which he removed de Kooning's pencil drawing and then put his name on the remaining shadowy markings, Acker admits that in these works of rewriting she "was attacking the traditional notion of originality" (McCaffery "Path" 24), and the abnegation of conventional means of representing identity is one of the hallmarks of her writing.

The self in Acker's writing is not an entity that can be isolated from categories of truth, fiction, non-fiction, memoir, or autobiography. Unlike Philip Roth, who uses his fragmented representations of self (is he ever his characters, even when they are called "Philip Roth" as in *Operation Shylock* or *The Plot Against America?*), Acker's fictional personas signal her affirmation of a more radical philosophy than Roth's alter egos. Acker's tendency to "blur the distinctions between author and character—a device that emphasizes the individual's imaginative role in constructing any version of 'reality' and the interaction of 'fiction' and 'fact'" (McCaffery "Postmodern" 15) links her to the other authors in this study. But even more than questioning reality, Acker's refusal to distinguish between fictional characters and "Kathy Acker" is a strategy to defamiliarize

the entire form of fiction writing. Indeed, all of her fiction is a formal experiment designed to have readers question everything from the identities of her characters (are they female or male?) to the power relations between men and women.

Larry McCaffery's comments on the connections between the self and the world illuminate Acker's unique approach to writing about herself:

There is a growing awareness on the part of our best writers that the 'real'—of the self and of the world we live in—is not some discrete, isolable entity that can be represented objectively but is in actuality a network of relationships that can be rendered 'realistically' only via formal methods that emphasize rather than deny the fundamentally fluid, interactive nature of this network. ("Postmodern" 10)

Acker's work questions these networks of relationships through experimental means both of content and of form. And fluidity becomes a perfect description of Acker's work. Characters are fluid—in *Black Tarantula* the main character becomes a new person again and again. In this same novel, the setting shifts from year to year and place to place. *I Dreamt I was a Nymphomaniac* contains a sprawling, non-fixed, non-punctuated sea of words that flows uninterrupted. Like Ronald Sukenick's *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*, Acker's narrative comes out like a stream, challenging readers to shape the narrative themselves. As part of the Fiction collective, Sukenick desired to challenge traditional ideas of narrative. Audiences who depend on markers of punctuation and pagination (paragraphs, tabs, etc.) are frustrated by their absences, rendering the work a textual block with no apparent way of allowing a reader inside. "Make it new" may have been the cry of high modernism, but Sukenick and Acker want to make it different, and

subsequently include these textual challenges to readability and conventional narrative. Joseph Natoli places Acker in the company of Don DeLillo, William Burroughs, and Ishmael Reed, labeling them “dissident writers,” whose work “embodies that enlarged notion of the political within the sphere of language” (529). Acker’s work can never be separated from its political content; that is, her words become an invocation to her reader to question and reexamine reality. According to Acker, “reality is up for grabs . . . the body itself becomes the only thing you can return to” (McCaffery “Path” 21), and clearly the body as reality becomes the focus of her work.

Another author that, like Acker, uses a permeable and experimental depiction of the “I” in her work in order to reveal truths about the power of the female body is Maxine Hong Kingston. In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine (the narrator) uses the lessons she learned from her experiences growing up as a first generation Chinese-American to guide her choices in adulthood. The novel, though classified as an autobiography, clearly contains fictional elements; the book is divided into five stories that all contain a mixture of memoir, Chinese legends, and fictional stories of Maxine and her family. Labeling this work as fiction, memoir, or non-fiction would be to take away from Kingston’s accomplishments, for it is the blend of all these things that give *The Woman Warrior* its unique qualities. “No-Name Woman,” the first story in the book, opens with the invocation “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (3). Maxine’s mother goes on to relate a story about Maxine’s aunt, a woman who was forced to kill herself and her baby (the child was conceived while her husband was away at war—no one knew who the father was) after being violently cast out by her

community and her family. This story, passed on to the author as a cautionary tale to be kept to herself, instead serves as an instigating narrative. Maxine is inspired to control her own body and her own life, to take control of these stories and tell them in her own writing. Silence about her aunt's story and about women's bodies, according to Kingston, is an act of oppression, and by speaking out, she will refuse to submit to this ancestral control. She will become a writer, challenging the versions of reality passed down through her family's stories and create a story about herself. The novel ends with a collaboration between that Maxine and her mother, "the beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (206).

Of all the stories in *The Woman Warrior* that encapsulate Kingston's concerns about the body and narrative voice, the one with the most startling imagery is "White Tigers," where Kingston imagines her life as a sad contemporary counterpoint to the legendary Chinese woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan. As Fa Mu Lan prepares to go into battle, her parents perpetrate a barbaric act against her body for the good of their entire community. They carve a history of their village on Fa Mu Lan's back, inscribing her body with their words; if she is killed in battle, her body can inform her enemies about her mission. She then becomes a living document, ready to go into battle with her body bearing testimony to the struggles of her family: "I saw my back covered entirely with words in red and black files, like my army" (35). After telling this story, Maxine admits about her present day existence, "My American life has been such a disappointment" (45). Only in comparison to the exploits of Fa Mu Lan is her life disappointing, for she has taken the knowledge of this legend and other stories and transformed the image of a

woman embodying words into a desire to write, and to create a counternarrative against the subjugation of Asian American women. She will fight like this other woman warrior from the past, using words to call attention to this disparity of power. And she will do through the body of this narrator named Maxine who is written on as well, by her past, the family stories passed down from generation to generation, and the legends of her Chinese ancestors.

Kingston's feminist concerns about how women's bodies have been controlled by men link her explicitly to Acker's depictions of female sexuality. But Acker leaves Kingston's concerns of the limitation of the body far behind. Acker's admittedly "deeply sexual perspective" (McCaffery "Postmodern" 20) is the hallmark of her writing. *Blood and Guts in High School* is filled with drawings so explicit that readers may feel as if their copy should be wrapped in a brown wrapper. The text of Acker's writing is filled with graphic talk and description and a forthright view of sexuality that is brazen and shocking. As Jeannette Winterson asserts of Acker's work, all parts of the body

are intimately described, and not in the language of cloudy romance. Yet there is no disgust . . . Acker took the garbage, the waste, the revolt, the sickness and made it into a knightly tool—that is, something shining and bright, piercing and free, to cut life loose from its manacles. (ix-x)

Indeed, there is no judgment of her character's desires or bodies—all is laid bare for the reader in Acker's books. And as Winterson observes, in characterizing the body in this way, Acker transcends boundaries in her subject matter and the language she uses to depict the body.

The language that Acker does employ is reminiscent of Federman's description of contemporary writing:

The impossible becomes possible in the New Fiction because language escapes analytical logic. It is a language which accepts and even indulges in contradictions; a language that plays with repetitions, permutations, neologisms, puns; a language that dislocates conventional syntax while designing a new typography, and in so doing renders the world even more unintelligible. (14)

Illustrations, handwritten notes, and even comic book drawings all make appearances in Acker's works, rendering her work typographically as well as linguistic innovative and definitely, at times, unintelligible. Rather than being a negative quality, unintelligibility is embraced in Acker. Her writing is intensely personal, and therefore cannot be apprehended by anyone else. In this way, she embodies the ideas of Hélène Cixous and her exhortation to "write your self. Your body must be heard" (1093) from "The Laugh of the Medusa." And one of Acker's strategies in making sure her body is heard is to literally write herself, as "Kathy Acker" emerges in the language she uses to write about her self.

The formal container for Acker's language is a constantly shifting textual space where nothing, not characters, settings, or even typeface is fixed. Though the narrator of *Great Expectations* may claim, "The author of the work you are now reading is a scared little shit" (70), audacity rather than fear marks all of Acker's formal innovations. These maneuvers highlight the fluidity of identity and gender; in a passage from *My Mother: Demonology*, the nameless female narrator announces, "I decided that I had to destroy

my obsession. Obsession. The only way to do this, destroy my deepest being, it seemed, would be to become a man. The name of that man is Heathcliff” (116). In this passage, Acker addresses many of her concerns in her fiction: to use literary tradition (in a manner reminiscent of Mark Leyner’s) as a backdrop against which she can explore her ideas on how power, language, and the body can all be used as weapons. And in *Black Tarantula*, within the first chapter, the identity of the main character transmogrifies again and again as the protagonist shifts between names, times, and places. As she becomes different women (who are themselves constituted out of other texts that Acker has plagiarized), ending with Acker herself, the author boldly refuses endings, and emphasizes narrative uncertainty.

If the look of Acker’s work marks her fiction as experimental, then the content of her new brand of fiction unmoors just as many boundaries. “[Acker] discovered a political use for pornography, a way of disrupting polite society” (Scholder xiii), and this characterization aptly describes Acker’s project. This disruption becomes a way for Acker to offer her work as a political challenge to modes of thinking that deny the power of the spoken word and its ability to subjugate women. Sexuality in her work is brutal and relentless. The lives of these women and men are ruled by the power of sexuality which has a profound effect on the self. Acker then uses this power to define her character, leading into an investigation of who these characters really are—male/female, fictional/real, “Kathy Acker”/invented persona.

Acker’s fiction has always included a metafictional component, manifesting itself in a preoccupation with writers and writing in almost all of her works. The writers change

from Janey's diaries in *Blood and Guts in High School* (her diary includes handwritten notes, poems, translations, illustrations, etc. and maps) to the experimental creations of *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac* and *Toulouse Lautrec*, and Acker intrudes on her own writing of *My Mother: Demonology* to comment, "(I have suddenly realized the meaning of *My Mother: Demonology*)" (141). Acker notes in *Blood and Guts* that

writers create what they do out of their own frightful agony and blood and mushed-up guts and horrible mixed-up insides. The more they are in touch with their insides the better they create. . . . A writer's personal life is horrible and lonely. Writers are queer so keep away from them. (100)

Reminiscent of Charlie Kaufman's writer figure in *Adaptation*, a man tortured by his own flaws, who can only create out of abject misery, this view of the writer's process gives insight into Acker's project. Art is not created out of serenity in a romantic Wordsworthian contemplation of beauty according to Acker. Rather, writing is a product of blood and guts, a messy and emotional process of self-immolation. Her author figures are tortured souls who are exploited and exploit others to achieve insight.

Discussing the degree to which Acker's fiction plays with conventional ideas about the space time continuum (characters are transformed into new ones, time is disrupted, several long passages are repeated verbatim multiple times), Marjorie Worthington notes that "by moving with facility across the seemingly intractable borders between male-female and space-time, her fiction highlights the constructed and artificial nature of the very binaries by which we make sense of the world" (391-2). Making sense to others is besides Acker's point. Worthington goes on to observe that,

in the novella *Black Tarantula* contained in the collection *Portrait of an Eye*, the biographies of different figures from disparate time periods, such as murderess Charlotte Wood, the Marquis de Sade, and William Butler Yeats, are interspersed with apparent autobiographical information about Acker herself. Not only does this juxtaposition strategy blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, but it eradicates the temporal distinction that traditional fiction maintains between events. (394)

Eradicating distinctions between gender, space and time then becomes the defining characteristic of Acker's fiction.

Acker's innovative use of shifting time, place, and gender is explicated by her in several interviews as well as the essays in her book *Bodies of Work*. By experimenting in this way she attempts to challenge traditional power structure and traditional binary constructs that exploit women and place them on the powerless bottom. Acker also challenges ideas about strategies of narration by experimenting with a fragmented narrator, one who combines multiple identities simultaneously. Worthington claims that anecdotes about "literary and historical figures are interspersed with snippets of Acker's autobiography in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* which encourages the reader to see events from different centuries as simultaneous, even equivalent" (401), and this encapsulates another innovation. The idea that identity is a fixed concept allows power to be easily grasped and allows those that are marginalized by the binaries of control to be manipulated. By creating identities in her fiction that are fluid, none of these characters can fall victim to those who would try to disenfranchise them. Identity that shifts is safe from exploitation.

As Acker's protagonists shift, become different people and refuse all labels, they also at times mysteriously become the author. The three novels collected in *Portrait of an Eye* all play with identity, implicating Acker in acts of deliberate confusion between character, narrator, and author. In the first novel, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, the main character is referred to as Kathy in passing transcriptions of conversations ("I call Friday call Saturday Sunday This is Kathy O uh do you want to spend the night with me" [*Portrait* 4]). The heroine of *I dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac* says states bluntly, "My name is Kathy Acker. The story begins by me being totally bored" (*Portrait* 96). And *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* begins with a telling epigram: "'Make sense,' Fielding said. 'Tell the real story of your life. You alone can tell the truth.' 'I don't want to make any sense,' I replied" (*Portrait* 188). This revealing statement implicates Acker in this act of misreading autobiography, rejecting truth telling, replacing it with the reification of the power of the author to render identity as she wants. Recapitulating the language of Cixous—"Woman must pour herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (1090)—Acker finds her own way of putting herself into the text, making sense of the real story of her life in an intensely personal fashion.

In an interview with Larry McCaffery, as they discuss the concept of an "I" in her work, addresses the unique qualities of the "I" in her writing: "It was the 'I' in the text, not 'I' of me. I wasn't interested in autobiography or in diary writing, but in what that textual 'I' looked like. So I set real autobiography next to fake autobiography—that is, I took some biography and made it into an autobiography" ("Path" 23). Acker elaborates

more fully on this idea in *Bodies of Work* when she claims of her effort to conjoin false and true autobiography,

I learned two things. First, in fiction, there is no “true” or “false” in social-realist terms. Fiction is “true” or real when it makes. Second, if there is a self, it isn’t Hegel’s subject or the centralized phallic I/eye. If there is a self, it’s probably the world. All is real. When I placed “true” autobiography next to “false” autobiography, everything was real. (10)

Categories that separate truth and falsity, then, are not germane to Acker’s work; reducing truth and fiction to their most simplistic definitions cannot explain Acker’s purpose in combing “real” and “false” autobiography. Meaning, Acker acknowledges in *Bodies of Work*, is found in the mixture:

Political, economic and moral forces are major determiners of meanings and values in a society. Thus, when I use words, any words, I am always taking part in the constructing of the political, economic, and moral community in which my discourse is taking place. . . . Whenever I engage in discourse, I am using given meanings and values, changing them and giving them back. (4)

And this change comes out of desire to understand how language and discourse shapes our existence and ideas of our “true” selves.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asks the following question:

If the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for

understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its “interior” signification on its surface? (177)

The answer to Butler’s question can be found in Acker’s “Kathy Acker.” Constructing “Kathy Acker” is the only option left for a writer who would agree with Butler’s assertion that “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33). Acker’s vision of the self as a fluid entity that is constantly under construction is illuminated by Butler’s thoughts on performance. Characters that are constantly shifting between Acker, literary characters, and fictional constructs then cannot be isolated as one fixed concept. Acker’s insistence on performing works of identity deconstruction results in texts which make readers question how we all perform the act of constructing identity. In her discussion of drag and transgender performances, Butler claims “this perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization” (176). All of Acker’s writing takes on this quality of fluidity; the text on the page flows into words, images, and notes that demand the reader signify this raw material in her own way, and this postmodern collage becomes a challenge to patriarchal systems of meaning. Writing in *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore states that “Foucault’s dictum ‘One writes in order to become other than what one is,’ suggests that autobiography offers an opportunity for self-transformation . . . Autobiography becomes a speculative project in how ‘to become other’” (11). And in all of Kathy Acker’s works of fiction and non-fiction, she insists on writing about her self in order to transform herself and her world. Acker’s fiction, which

features a play with gender roles and identities, suggests an open field of signification which allows readers to reconsider the imaginative reconstruction of their own “I”s.

The sexual basis for Acker’s work links her to another author who includes himself in his sexually charged work—J.G. Ballard’s *Crash*, which features the character “Ballard” as one of a group of characters who are compelled to try and crash automobiles to feel any sense of connection, and resort to increasingly reckless and death-defying behavior. In his essay on the novel, Baudrillard called *Crash* “the first great novel of the universe of simulation” (“Crash” 119), responding to Ballard’s ability to combine technology with sexuality. As the characters in Ballard’s work rely on the violent intersections of their own bodies with the technology of the automobile to achieve sexual satisfaction, so he creates a landscape where “traffic and accident, technology and death, sex and simulation are like a single, large synchronous machine” (Baudrillard “Crash” 118). Baudrillard claims that in *Crash*, sex is divorced from its natural function to the level of a simulation as a result of melding with the technology represented by the car crash. In this way, Ballard reduces the human to the inhuman. And significantly, Ballard is a character in this novel, another victim of this separation of the body from its natural function, and also separating the self from its natural state. Identity becomes separated from its natural function, as fiction and non-fiction collide, just as the bodies in the novel cannot escape from colliding. The body’s transformation into another realm then mirrors Ballard’s identity transformation from author to character to instigator of the action within the novel.

Siegel's Postmodern Problem

While discussing Ronald Sukenick's work, Raymond Federman observes that Sukenick "constructs his fiction on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, he creates a fiction and simultaneously makes a statement about the creation of that fiction" (31). Lee Siegel's metafictional approach echoes what Sukenick has done in his works of fiction. Siegel's novels *Love in a Dead Language* and *Who Wrote the Book of Love?* feature the character of "Lee Siegel" who, the narrator takes pains to remind us, is not the same person as the author. And in these experimental false autobiographies, Siegel joins Acker, Kingston, and Ballard as another author who uses the body to explore ideas about identity and sexuality. He differentiates his work from these authors in the surprising capability for evil found in this character. The simulation of "Siegel" takes the idea of the death of the author to heart as he murders Leopold Roth, the main author of the text *Love in a Dead Language*. And in perpetrating this act, "Siegel" proves that every piece of writing is life writing, that every construction recapitulates autobiography.

Siegel's novel *Who Wrote the Book of Love?* is an attempt to mirror what Philip Roth has done in *The Plot Against America* by creating a false memoir that sounds like a real memoir. Siegel echoes Roth's efforts to play with the categories of fiction and autobiography and to cast doubt on the veracity of any memoir and begins the play in his author's note:

Despite the fact that so many of our experiences are, coincidentally, identical, Lee Siegel, the boy portrayed in this chronicle, should not be confused with Lee Siegel, the adult author of this book. This character, who has shown up in my other books, including *Love in a Dead Language* and *Love and Other Games of Chance*, has consistently tried to pass himself off as me. The similarities between us are, however, less relevant than the differences, and, of these differences, the most pertinent one is that while his obsession is with love, mine is merely with trying to write about it. (Author's note)

By beginning his memoir in this way, playing with the roles of author and subject, Siegel splits himself into two people--the real and the fictional, leaving his readers to try and reconcile this contradiction. Siegel recalls Philip LeJeune's work on autobiography, specifically his thoughts on "the problem of the anonymous *author*" (his emphasis):

Can the hero of a novel declared as such have the same name as the author? Nothing would prevent such a thing from existing, and it is perhaps an internal contradiction from which some interesting effects could be drawn . . . and if the case does present itself, the reader is under the impression that a mistake has been made. (18)

The mistake that Siegel wants to prevent his readers from making is to confuse author and character. Siegel has articulated a theory of autobiography in his author's note that encodes the author and character as distinct yet linked entities, each with their own concerns. Siegel reminds readers that the author is always present, and in this cautionary note, attempts to differentiate life from life writing. Of course, this is an impossibility, especially given the fact that *Who Wrote the Book of Love?* is the story of how "Lee Siegel" became a writer. *Who Wrote* is in every respect a *künstlerroman* except instead of a traditional story of the artist's development, we have an artist who does not take credit

for being a writer. (Posing the question in the title marks this text as a challenge to the reader to try and decide who actually wrote this book.) Much of the memoir is concerned with how “Siegel” discovers the power of words; after falling in love with a girl named Clover Wiener (who also makes an appearance in *Love in a Dead Language* as an old girlfriend of Leopold Roth's) in elementary school, he undertakes a grade school level study of Nabokov-ian “word golf”: “While learning how to write that year, I discovered that the word ‘love’ was embedded in Clover’s name. For the first time I sensed the magic power of written words” (38). As he becomes aware of the power of language at such a young age, “Siegel” creates a postmodern response of sorts to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with a humorous look at “Siegel’s” youthful misadventures with romantic love and also the love of writing.

But before the writing of this novel, Siegel summed up many of his authorial concerns with identity in a brief article he wrote for *The New Republic*. This one page essay, “The I’s Have It,” published in 2000, tries to explain to readers the “postmodern problem” Siegel finds himself experiencing:

There is a writer named Lee Siegel, and he is not me. I have been aware of him for a while, but it’s only recently that his presence has started to plague me. He is a university professor who up until a few months ago wrote and published books on India . . . the situation has now taken a bedeviling turn. Professor Lee Siegel has published a work of fiction, a novel that received rave reviews in *The New York Times Book Review* and from one of the *Times’* daily book critics. What’s more, Professor Siegel has begun to review fiction in the *Book Review*, which means that his literary activities are running parallel to mine. (46)

This “postmodern problem” then combines elements of Dostoevsky, Poe, and Borges, as Siegel creates a menacing and mysterious double of/for himself. In this way, Siegel creates a link with Charlie Kaufman, who very coyly refused to either confirm or deny the existence of the twin brother he writes about in *Adaptation*. Playing this game of identities with himself and his readers places Siegel in the postmodern tradition of Nabokov, whose *Pale Fire* challenged readers to decide who the real author of the poem within the book: is it Shade, Kinbote, a combination of the two, or someone else entirely? *Pale Fire* contains no definitive answers, and Siegel plays with readers in a similar fashion, assuring us that this unlikely situation (multiple writers named Lee Siegel who are constantly mistaken for each other) which appears completely unbelievable is indeed true. Harré and Gillett discuss a theory of identity formation which states that we each structure our perceptions around “a kind of center . . . the ‘I’ pole” (108), and Siegel’s “I” pole is a center that will not hold. Creating this double is a schizophrenic manifestation that Siegel insists on clinging to in his works of fiction from *Love in a Dead Language* to *Who Wrote the Book of Love?* This recurring motif in Siegel’s fiction then becomes his response to the contemporary condition of schizophrenia. Jameson’s description of this condition could be applied to the structure of *Love*: “schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up in a coherent sequence” (119). What rescues Siegel from falling into the trap described by Jameson is the reader’s important role in his fiction. Invoking the reader into making sense of this raw material is Siegel’s attempt to rescue his narrative from becoming a maddening exercise in word play and instead to create a form of interactive

hypertext that Leopold Roth in *Love in a Dead Language* wants to create for his own text.

As Siegel admits in “The I’s Have it,” he has accepted his double as both a simulation of and a substitute for himself, and also resigned himself to the knowledge that this condition of duplication will cause him to lose his grip on reality (“Whom the gods wish to destroy they first drive insane. I think I will go mad”). More than an operational double in *Love in a Dead Language*, “Siegel” is revealed on the last page of the novel to be a murderer, and the subsequent author of the text we are reading (if Roth had lived to complete his translation, Anang (Roth’s graduate student) would not have had to finish the text by patching it together). In this dense, sprawling, and intricate text, Leopold Roth, a professor of Indian religions, produces his translation of the *Kama Sutra*, a project that has consumed him professionally and personally. Accompanying his translation is a commentary by Roth, which follows his obsession with one of his students, and a commentary on Roth’s commentary by Anang. This last commentary is both an attempt to finish Roth’s book (after his death) and to explain his life. Accompanying all of these narrative threads is a myriad of other documents (letters, term papers, photographs, illustrations, etc.) that creates, as in Acker’s work, a collage of materials that becomes the backdrop to Roth’s fragmented existence.

A satire of academia and of academic writing, as well as an experiment in publishing (the existence of primary documents, backwards writing, pages printed upside down in different colors of ink, etc.), *Love in a Dead Language* is also an homage to the content and structure of Vladimir Nabokov’s novels *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Of course,

Lalita's name is a very deliberate echo of Lolita, and, in a rewriting of Lolita's seduction by Humbert Humbert, Roth schemes to isolate Lalita in India, contriving a plan for them to travel together, just as Lolita and Humbert did (even sharing a room). Structurally, *Love in a Dead Language* recalls *Pale Fire* because of the complexity of the text itself. In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote, the failed scholar, creates a commentary on the famous author John Shade's poem that has little to do with the poem, as Kinbote uses this excuse to write about his own life and conspiracy theories. Like Kinbote, Roth departs from the text of the *Kama Sutra* once he puts his plan to seduce Lalita into action. More important than these superficial resemblances, however, is the fact that readers of both *Pale Fire* and *Love in a Dead Language* are given the freedom to manipulate the form of the book in order to create meaning for themselves.

As John Haegert observes, "the art of reading (or better, misreading) which is the principal focus of *Pale Fire*. The interpretive process whereby as readers we attempt to organize literature's irreducible anomalies into recognizable wholes—this is what Nabokov's work is most fundamentally about" (422). And *Pale Fire* creates an endlessly circular game for readers who try to unite the threads of the novel into a whole that makes sense. The reader of the bricolage of *Love in a Dead Language* is given a similar challenge, for all the disparate elements of the text need to be organized and joined into a whole by the reader. This game of reading is complicated by Siegel who has placed obstacles to understanding throughout his text. All the narrators are unreliable, primary materials are torn to pieces and reassembled, rendering them unreadable, and certain pieces of the text have even been rescued from the garbage by a helpful hotel employee.

All of these obstacles make the construction of meaning difficult, but surpassing these formal, textual challenges is an ontological one—the appearance of “Lee Siegel” in the narrative.

The textual complexity of *Love in a Dead Language* is evident on every page, but its use of the author within the text is a complicating game, intended to shed light on the construction of identity and the idea that every kind of writing, even academic work, becomes a form of life writing. “Siegel’s” shadowy figure emerges in the background of the novel (his name is found on the address label of the picture of Roth’s brochure for his invented summer program in India, he is referenced in a letter to Roth by the designer of a CD-ROM of the *Kama Sutra*, and his book *Laughing Matters* is mentioned in one of Roth’s many footnotes). Though these textual appearances might appear to be merely games, akin to the playful appearances Nabokov makes in *Pale Fire* (there are references within the text to Hurricane Lolita and Professor Pnin), a much more serious element to “Siegel’s” appearance exists in the text. While Roth and his son’s girlfriend (whose name shifts with every book she writes) agree to perpetrate a literary hoax—“I don’t really mean ‘deception,’ not in the sense of fraud, or even hoax—it’s really more of a game. Do you like games? Do you want to play?” (108)—games of interpretation are left behind with the introduction of “Lee Siegel” into the novel. “Siegel’s” voice is the first of many to appear in the novel; the foreword begins with a portion of a letter from “Siegel” to Anang, Roth’s graduate student, telling us in essence that the book we are about to read, Roth’s commentary, is worthless. “Siegel” ends his letter to Anang by saying, “I would never permit my name to be associated with a book such as this” (x). Beginning his

novel with this statement, though an amusing inversion of the author's note usually found in the Prologue, signals a dark conception of the role played by this author double, an abnegation of responsibility for the text we believe we are reading by Lee Siegel. "A book such as this," beginning with a rejection by the author itself is thereby opened up for the reader; the death of the author—we learn on the last page of the novel that "Siegel" has killed Roth—will create of the birth of the reader of *Love in a Dead Language*, taking responsibility for creating meaning from "a book such as this."

The text actually created by Siegel contains its own critique of master narratives, a postmodern assault on the idea of a fixed, singular meaning. In the language of Roland Barthes, *Love in a Dead Language* "accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural" (1007). The plurality of voices in the text (along with "Siegel" and Roth both translating the Kama Sutra) leads "Siegel" to observe that the multiple options for readers will produce an empowering of the reader: "They can choose some of this one, some of that one, or each can decide which one they like best . . . like when there's a McDonald's, a burger king, and a Jack in the Box all right together on the same block" (236). Equating reader-response criticism with fast food elucidates Siegel's critique of totemic approaches to translation and interpretation. "Siegel" appears as an agent of interpretation within the text, foregrounding the approach readers need to apply to *Love in a Dead Language*. Becoming a tool for Siegel to instruct readers, "Siegel" also becomes an instrument for Siegel to literally act out within his novel the death of the author—Leopold Roth.

Once “Siegel” actually appears as a character within both Roth’s and Siegel’s commentaries, he serves as a threatening presence, leading to his murderous confession on the final page. “Siegel” and Roth embody a dyad similar to that of “Auster” and Quinn in *City of Glass*. Quinn realizes that “Auster” is another writer, leading the exact life he once had (successful balance of career and family), just as Roth and “Siegel” are mirror images (teaching, researching, and writing on the same subjects). And just as Quinn disappears from the book, leaving an unnamed narrator and Auster to complete the novel, so Roth is eliminated from the book (once his commentary ends), which is finished by Anang and “Siegel,” whose letter to Anang is the last page in the book¹⁵. While “Auster” appears to embody, in Craig Owens’ terms, “a crisis in cultural authority”(57)—he fails Quinn, is held responsible for his disappearance by the narrator, and ultimately revealed as negligent and ignorant—“Siegel” creates a crisis of authority by killing the “author” of the book.

After Roth is suspended over his relationship with his student, “Siegel” is asked to take over his duties at the university. “Siegel” shadows Roth’s academic efforts, always turning up in the middle of Roth’s work, to haunt him (just as the shadowy Zemblans intrude upon Kinbote in *Pale Fire*). “Siegel” earlier appeared in India to intrude upon Roth and Lalita, just as he happened to be in England when Roth first met Sophia (Roth’s future wife). And after Roth’s dismissal from the university, “Siegel” takes over his student’s dissertation advising, begins teaches Roth’s classes at the university, and following Roth’s death, is asked to finish his translation of the Kama Sutra. Everything that Roth undertakes professionally is finished by “Siegel.” If Auster

views the self as substanceless, then Siegel only understands the self as inescapable. In this way, Siegel concludes that life writing is the end result of any kind of writing. Continuing this line of thought, Roth's writing becomes the writing of Lee Siegel who is writing the book that we are reading, supposedly written by Roth. This endless circularity, a postmodern image, becomes a metaphor for any kind of writing as it naturally must transform itself into writing about the self.

"Siegel's" appearance becomes more than a metafictional game once it becomes clear that his function in the novel is to undermine meaning, and the pursuit of it, in *Love in a Dead Language*. Siegel includes a criticism of interpretation within *Love*—"Meaning is demeaning" (63), and the academic satire of Roth's failed commentary (a flawed reading of a text, unfairly influenced by the personal biases and delusions of the writer) becomes a trenchant parody of literary criticism. Just as Acker's appearance within her texts calls attention to the inability to construct stable categories, either about the self or narrative itself, so "Siegel's" intrusion into *Love* illuminates Siegel's project of exposing the simulations, condemning those who can not read clearly enough to distinguish reality from the unreal. And clearly Roth's embrace of the simulation, his inability to see that his pursuit of Lalita will lead him away from the real, brings about his disgrace and eventually ends his life. Thinking that he had found the essential nature of India in Lalita, his attempts to possess her are shown to be post-colonial illusions. Lalita reveals herself to be the agent of Roth's destruction by alerting the college about what he has done, ending their relationship, his marriage, and his academic career. The text of her accusations even becomes public, as it is published in the university's newspaper. Sophia

Roth claims, after her husband's death, that the real tragedy of his life was that "he allowed his life to become a story," (358), and as the subject of all these stories (the primary sources that make up the novel), Roth's subjectivity within his own story, his presence within the book, leads to his death. And it is another presence that takes this metaphysical idea and makes it concrete by actually hitting the author over the head (another metaphoric joke about interpretation) with his own book—"Lee Siegel."

"Siegel" enacts a strategy of "interference," articulated by Edward Said, "a crossing of boundaries and obstacles" (157), by revealing on the final page of the book that he killed Roth:

He was taking up all of my time with his problems and obsessions. Even my friends and family were being bothered by him. He was, furthermore, stealing all of my ideas and trying to commandeer my life. He was driving me crazy. I did not want to have anything more to do with him. I'm sure you'll understand, therefore, when I tell you that it was inevitable and obvious. At some point I had to do it. Yes, of course, I did it: I killed Leopold Roth. (366)

The boundaries here between reader and writer, character and author are transgressed by "Siegel" and Siegel, and by interfering with these categories, Siegel problematizes and de-naturalizes them, rupturing the connections that give a text its meaning. Meaning here comes from subtext, from having been instructed by the author in how to read his book correctly. A correct reading means to regard the simulated "Siegel" as an illusion and to seek meaning by understanding that Siegel must kill Roth for "Siegel" to live on (and he does, appearing in Siegel's latest work of fiction). Roth cannot live on as the author of the text we are reading; according to Foucault, "the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing

more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing” (979). In this game of writing, Roth is the dead man, whose status as “real” must be eliminated by the simulated reality of “Siegel.”

In this way, Roth and “Siegel” enact an intertextual reference to another story (which has also been consciously incorporated into *City of Glass* by Auster)—Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson.” As Roth is constantly made aware of the presence of “Siegel,” so William Wilson is always aware of his “twin’s” existence. Wilson and his double share the same birth date and the same name, bear a striking resemblance to each other, and even attend the same school. Wilson goes to great lengths to extricate himself from this shadow, only to be constantly intruded upon by his double. Roth is similarly tortured by “Siegel’s” doubling of him; “‘Sometimes I feel I could kill him,’ Roth said of Siegel” (315), echoing Wilson’s rage at the other, usurping Wilson. And at the end of the story, after years of trying to avoid the other Wilson, the first Wilson is compelled to murderous rage when his shadow appears, and following their confrontation, his double’s dying words inform him of his fatal error: “‘*In me thou didst exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thy own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself*’” (201). This prediction ominously applies to “Siegel” after his admission that he has killed Roth; he may have broken the connection between them, but in a sense he has ended his own life as well. Just as “William Wilson” ends with this violent attack on his shadow-self, so *Love in a Dead Language* must end with violence against the body of one author and one half of a dyad left with no matching half to complete the whole. The simulation of “Siegel” asserts his presence by reducing the body of Roth to an absence, but as the book

concludes and he refuses to continue the text within a text, "Siegel" is effectively entombed within the narrative, unable to live in a world beyond his double's book.

A text about other texts, their authors, and the connections between textual narrative and the body of the author, featuring an appearance by the author himself within the book, *Love in a Dead Language* encapsulates many of the concerns of Acker, Kingston, and Ballard. Leopold Roth is a victim of his desperate attempt to model his life after a book. His life, devoted to translations of one text and the connections between it and his own life, can only end as an unfinished work; his physical life comes to a close before his book can be completed, leaving other voices to finish his translation. In a text that constantly undermines its own meaning (by including materials revealed to be forgeries, fakes, or other dissemblances), "Lee Siegel," Roth's shadowy double, becomes a reminder of the split between reader and writer, truth and fiction, author and character, and text and life. *Love in a Dead Language* becomes a means of critiquing a view of simulation as natural and instead reveals it as a powerful and very real threat to our ability to understand what is real, about literature and about ourselves.

CHAPTER V

“I CROSSED THE PROSCENIUM AND MOUNTED THE STAGE!”:

POSTMODERN AND POSTHUMAN AUTHORS

“The author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction.”

--Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”

“After the Q and A, I’ll pose a question to the workshop participants: Do any of you think you could ever be as good a writer as I am—or perhaps even a better writer—and would you explain why you feel the way you do?”

--*Et Tu, Babe*

In *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist, Et, Tu Babe*, and *Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog*, Mark Leyner, along with creating a new style of fiction, also fashions a new type of author, one who is at the center of his own narrative but is simultaneously a target of that narrative’s parody. The self-conscious author “Mark Leyner,” therefore, becomes a kind of “trickster” figure, who ironically plays with, and questions, the limits of authorship and language. Moving himself to the center of his work, Leyner gleefully mocks literary structure and history, eliminating the need for structure, character development, and plot along with all conventions of fiction writing. Given to measuring his own accomplishments against authors throughout history (“Imagine Nathaniel Hawthorne’s utopian, socialistic community in his novel *The Blithedale Romance*—but now imagine it

inhabited by Ed Gein, Richard Speck, Charles Manson,” [*Et Tu* 108]), “Mark Leyner” inverts the traditional binaries associated with the classical authorial figure. Leyner substitutes the committee thinking of “Team Leyner” for individual accomplishment and acts of genius, self-promotion for artistic integrity, and most strikingly, does not situate the author as an outside observer of society, but rather, conceives of him as a powerful centering force. In these avant-pop works, Leyner is able to deconstruct authorship itself, to dismantle the distinction between high-brow and low-brow, to scribble in the margins of literary tradition, and create something entirely new. Creating a system of language, Leyner’s work offers a sharp contrast to another author who addresses issues of how identity is structured by language and technology—Richard Powers creates a character, “Richard Powers,” in *Galatea 2.2* who, like Leyner, attempts to understand the writer’s place in the meeting of humanity and technology. But, unlike Leyner, Powers ends his novel with the sincere reification of self-knowledge and understanding. In Leyner’s ironic and constantly evolving view of authorship and authority, nothing is safe from deconstruction and reconstruction, not even the author himself.

Ego Formation: Avant-Pop Life Writing

In his 1969 essay, “What Is an Author?,” Michel Foucault claims that writing “unfolds like a game [jeu] that invariably goes beyond its own rules” (979) and is primarily concerned with “creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (979). Foucault’s characterization of writing as a game is evident throughout all of Leyner’s work. His games provide an opening not for “Mark Leyner” to disappear

into, but rather to emerge from, in order to become the focal point of the narrative. If, according to Foucault, “the author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society,” (982), then the only discourse which concerns Leyner is the discursive community of “Team Leyner,” the rabidly loyal followers of “Mark Leyner.” Leyner’s avant-pop sensibility renders Foucaultian conceptions of the author quaint and conventional, for the avant-pop answer to the question, “what is an author?,” is fundamentally different from any poststructuralist answer.

Taking their cue from Pop Artists, Leyner and other avant-pop writers (Kathy Acker, Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, etc.) infuse their work with the “ideology of hyper consumption” (McCaffery *After* xviii) and use “radical aesthetic methods to confuse, confound, bewilder, piss off and generally blow the fuses of ordinary citizens exposed to it” (McCaffery *After* xix). One of the avant-garde strategies employed by Leyner is to deconstruct the idea of authorship, and he does this by using himself as the focus of his narrative, creating a completely fictional autobiography. Though other postmodern writers may incorporate elements of autobiography into their works by including themselves as a character (as Paul Auster does in *City of Glass*, along with Charles Baxter in *The Feast of Love*), Leyner’s use of himself as the subject at the center of *Et Tu, Babe* is something fundamentally different. Despite Auster’s claim that he places himself within the book to deconstruct the writing process, to “expose the plumbing” (308), Leyner’s avant-pop sensibilities take him beyond merely defamiliarizing the writing process. Appearing as a character in his book becomes a

means for Leyner to foreground his view of reality and to reflect that vision back to his audience. Leyner's ironic vision of himself as "the finest, most audacious, most illuminating, most influential and imitated writer of his time" (*Et Tu* 146) points to his method of using language to confirm that objectivity no longer exists, in language or in reality.

As Peter Schneck has noted, avant-pop's "unlikely combination of the popular and the avant-garde becomes possible only through an implicit revision of both the traditional strategies of pop art and those of modern and postmodern avant-gardes" (67). In this post-postmodern aesthetic, Leyner's work becomes something new built upon the foundation of postmodernism. According to Mark Amerika,

Leyner employs many of the devices we used, not too long ago, to think of as being in the domain of the avant-garde. His sound-bite imagery and speed-metal rhythms, emblematic of much avant-pop writing, are constantly sampling the fictioneers, artists, and performers of the avant-garde, not to mention the rest of Western culture's dreck-machine. ("Virtual Ghetto")

In one of his early works, *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, Leyner's avant-pop orientation is made overt as he mixes classic poetry and literary criticism with Lucille Ball and Ricky Ricardo in the final canto of the liturgical piece "Gone with the Mind":

sic transit gloria mundi / foucault died of aids before he could finish the fourth volume of his history of sexuality / after he divorced lucy, he sold her his interest in their production company and with the exception of cameo appearances he retired from the history of broadcasting / pindar wrote: ". . . to all comes / the wave of death and falls unforeseen / even on him who foresees it / but honor grows for the dead / whose tender repute a god fosters." (116)

The disjunctive collection of references and self-conscious style of this passage, along with the emphasis on writing about other writers (this is poetry about poetry, which quotes other poems), marks Leyner's work as quintessentially avant-pop. This piece in particular forms a template for much of Leyner's work to follow, for here he highlights the writing process and reworks canonized literature, retrofitting these works in order to subsume them into his own narrative. All of Leyner's writing is characterized not only by this unique style of "collage and juxtaposition" (McCaffery "Maximum" 220), but also by inversions of narrative convention and the creation of a world that can only be described as "hyperreal."

All of the traditional narrative signposts in Leyner's avant-pop world—chapters, plots, characters, even notes about the author—have become obsolete, leaving room for new definitions of these conventions to emerge. In *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, the obligatory "About the Author" section found at the end of novels is included here, but with Leyner, it takes on the form of something different, a portrait not of the author with the inflated ego and body from *Et Tu, Babe*, but still another Mark Leyner. This author's note begins, "I was born on January 4, 1956, at Margaret Hague Hospital in Jersey City, New Jersey. Little is known about my early life" (152). Revealing that little is known about himself by himself is only one of the untenable and outsider positions taken by this "Mark Leyner." The author of this autobiography separates author, character, and biographer, playing with these roles, creating a new form of self-knowledge and myth-making. This author's notes, and all of Leyner's writings, serve to echo Jean

Baudrillard's thoughts on "High Definition," which "marks the transition – beyond any natural determination – to an operational formula – and, precisely, a 'definitive' one, the transition to a world where referential substance is becoming increasingly rare" (*Crime* 29-30). "Mark Leyner" therefore becomes a hyperreal construction, one whose artificiality is constantly foregrounded, whose existence as a formalistic construction is constantly being undermined by the reader's insistence on reality and referentiality. To accept this version of "Mark Leyner" we must not insist on natural relations between sign and referent. Readers must surrender to a world where, as Baudrillard states, they accept what is high definition, or that which "removes a dimension from the real world" (*Crime* 30). The "Mark Leyner" of *My Cousin* is a dimension removed from the real world, his high definition body constituting irrefutable evidence of his hyperreality.

In all of Leyner's fiction, or non-fiction, since, as he claims of *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, "there is nothing in *My Cousin* that hasn't happened, in one way or another" (McCaffery "Maximum" 233), the production of the written word is foregrounded. In *Et Tu, Babe*, a narrative of the creation of the cult author "Mark Leyner," we experience the apparatus of the writing and publishing process before we see any plot (such as it is in Leyner's work) develop in the novel. The book opens with a letter from "Mark Leyner" to his editor followed by excerpts from his upcoming book *Et Tu, Babe*, which serves to defamiliarize the marketing and production of the book, a task not usually tackled by the author. Leyner states on his opening page that "as you know I am not your average author" (3), and indeed the average author would not, however much he might enjoy it, write his own press releases and select excerpts from his own

book for promotional purposes. Though Foucault may assert that “the text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author” (984), the same cannot be said of the machinery of promoting the text, which usually consists of someone else’s writing. According to Leyner in his preface, “*Et Tu, Babe*—a master jam of relentless humor and indeterminate trajectories—teeming with creatures and the burlesque of their virulent lives—will undoubtedly be, page by page and line by line, the most entertaining book that Vintage has ever published” (4). Such confidence in not only the writing but also in the marketing and consequent reception of *Et Tu, Babe* signals a shift in the power relations of the author and the publishing apparatus. As an author, Leyner is moving himself from the margin, a powerless position where he is at the mercy of the publishing industry and the vagaries of the reading public, to the center.

And at the center of all of Leyner’s work is “Mark Leyner,” a narrator as well as the focus of the narrative. In his discussion of narrative and discourse, Gérard Genette states that “the objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of any reference to the narrator” (896) a theoretical position diametrically opposed to Leyner’s work. Genette goes on to explain that “the diction proper to the narrative is in some sense the absolute transitivity of the text, the complete absence . . . not only of the narrator, but also of the narration itself, by the rigorous expunging of any reference to the instance of discourse that constitutes it” (897). Genette’s thoughts on the complexity of the categories of subjective and objective, and of narrative and discourse further illuminate Leyner’s work, where objectivity is an impossibility. No facts are given by Leyner which are not centered on the conception of himself as a “cult author,” or filtered through the subjective

“I” of his narrative. If, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, “language is a system of constitutive rules,” (848), then Leyner is making up the rules as he goes along, particularly in the creation of a new kind of “I.” As Larry McCaffery observes, Leyner’s work always features an “unusual treatment of point of view that combined elements of autobiography, metafiction, and pure invention—an ‘I’ that was a permeable membrane between the self and the outer, public personas of media figures” (“Maximum” 220). Leyner has crafted a new vision of narrative where the “I” supersedes everything, becoming not a conduit for the reader into the story, but the story itself.

“Mark Leyner” the character as author provides a striking contrast to another postmodern author figure, Bill Gray in Don DeLillo’s *Mao II*, pointing to a significant shift in the movement from postmodernism to avant-pop. Gray, a solitary figure isolated from society, finds himself a marginalized character, who exists only to endlessly revise his work. This shadowy cult figure finds himself being co-opted by the publishing world which only wants to exploit his celebrity. He is coerced into helping negotiate a hostage exchange, only to realize that the publishing industry is solely concerned with the media spectacle of the event and not with his artistic integrity. Bill subsequently dies alone and anonymous, and DeLillo offers no hope for anyone to even take notice of his death; his identification papers are stolen from his dead body, obliterating any possibility of the acknowledgement of his death. Leyner’s avant-pop version of the author figure, however, illustrates a fundamentally different conception of authorship than DeLillo. “Mark Leyner” is a mega-celebrity, adored by readers all over the world, regarded as a superstar of monstrous proportions. He may be considered a “cult author,” but the cult in this case

is the one he fashions for himself, the Team Leyner acolytes who surround their idol as bodyguards and members of the production team. While Bill Gray revises and takes notes, never producing any new work, “Mark Leyner” is in a constant state of production: books, liner notes, and “impressionistic reportage” (*Et Tu* 108) are all accomplished with ease by “the most intense, and in a certain sense, the most significant young prose writer in America” (*Et Tu* 16). Such statements by Leyner are audacious in their confidence and striking in their foregrounding of the self-promotion of the author and the product. In *Mao II*, Bill found himself at the mercy of the publishing industry, represented by his friend Charlie who brokers the deal to exchange Bill for the kidnapped Swiss poet: “There’s an excitement that attaches to your name and it will help us put a mark on this event, force people to talk about it and think about it long after the speeches fade” (99). But, in Leyner’s work, most notably in his preface, he has assumed power over the industry, not allowing the machinery of production to exploit or ignore him.

Through the language of self-promotion and self-creation, Leyner attaches excitement to his own name and forces people to talk about him and his work. Leyner includes his own fan letters, memorials of his life (by celebrities ranging from Carl Sagan to Connie Chung), and commercials encouraging the public to purchase his work:

Seed the minds of the world with Team Leyner thought! Help disseminate the incendiary words of this visionary warrior by ordering additional copies of Mark Leyner’s majestic master works for your family, friends and co-workers. Available at your local bookstore. (*Et Tu* 169)

Though he may claim that the novel he proposes is indeed “the kind of book that Vintage wants from a Mark Leyner” (*Et Tu* 4), he alone creates the kind of publisher that he wants for Mark Leyner. He asserts his own power over this machinery of the publishing industry while emphasizing his own production, establishing himself as the author of not only the words on the page, but also of their presentation to the world, controlling his work by making it public, a startling contrast to Bill Gray, who could only control his work by refusing to ever let anyone read it.

Via this assertion of power, Leyner moves to the center from the margin, assuming the power over the production and dissemination of his own work. If, as Brian McHale has asserted, “postmodernism foregrounds and lays bare the process of world-making (and unmaking) and the ontological structure of the fictional world” (36), then in Leyner’s world, the author figure has not just moved to the center of one narrative, he has transformed himself into the center of his own fictional world. While *Et Tu, Babe* may appear to be a parody of literary production, Leyner has carved out a place within the continuum of literary history for “Mark Leyner” (the author figure of his book). *Et Tu, Babe* becomes then a meditation on not only the publishing industry, but on authorship, as well as literary tradition. As Leyner arrives at the Hyatt Self-Surgery Clinic, he recalls that he has “left my copy of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* in the Mercury XR2 that I’d test-driven for *Gentlemen’s Quarterly*. All my notes on the 132-hp turbocharged roadster were scrawled in the margins of the Elizabethan poet’s magnum opus” (25). This conflation of high and low culture, which turns Spenser’s work into note paper for an article in *GQ*, foregrounds Leyner’s intentions—to scribble in the margins of literary

history, creating an entirely new form of literature. Leyner's language, so audacious in his dismissal of Spencer's legacy and bold in the insistence on usurping literary tradition, illuminates the shift in Leyner's conception of literary tradition as something for him to work with, write on, recreate, and recycle for his own use.

Writing in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon, while discussing the ideological dimensions of postmodern satire, asserts that

intertextual parody of canonical American and European classics is one mode of appropriating and reformulating – with significant change – the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Eurocentric culture. It does not reject it, for it cannot. Postmodernism signals its dependence by its use of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic abuse of it. (130)

Though Leyner may be a white, middle-class male, he does parody the literary classics, abusing the conventions of the bildungsroman and the künstlerroman just as he does Spencer's *Faerie Queene*. Though *Et Tu, Babe* does not include any reworking as sustained as the "Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown" dramatization included in *Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog*, Leyner continually references other authors and literary genres within his narrative. As "Mark Leyner" is being interviewed by a reporter from *Allure* magazine, in response to her query about how he got started writing liner notes for record albums, he weaves a fantastic story involving neurofibromatosis, ballet, and Bruce Springsteen's first wife, and admits (if only to the reader), "I'm frequently asked that question about how I got started writing liner notes and I have to admit that it's become somewhat tedious explaining it over and over again" (31). This ennui with discussing his

artistic beginnings and the story behind his own authorship reveals the distance between Leyner's portrait of the artist as a young man and the conventions of the *künstlerroman*. The play with language and autobiography parodies the entire history of this type of story, along with simultaneously inflating and deflating the idea of artistic genius.

"Leyner" further undermines the figure of the author and the entire community of writers, a community which he disavows, by referring to an article he has written outlining the shortcomings of his literary peers:

Published on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*, the article exhorted artists to stop their incessant whining; to stop crawling on their knees with their hands out, begging for grant money and fellowships; to stop exalting self-marginalization; to emerge from their academic sanctuaries where they huddle like shivering, squinting, runty, sexless, nihilistic mice—to emerge into the intoxicating, palpating, nutrient-rich sunlight of the marketplace, to intermix with the great people of a great nation, and to be emboldened by the truculent spirit of the populace. (60)

Leyner's ironic diatribe here takes as its myriad targets the academy, artists who pander, artists who find it beneath them to pander, writers who abjure the commercial arena, and the commercial arena itself. Leyner's irony is resistant to facile attempts at interpretation, but clearly no one is safe from his vitriol, not even "Mark Leyner" himself, who owes his success to the marketplace and the truculent spirit of his audience. "Mark Leyner" has taken this advice, investing himself (particularly his own body-builder's physique) with power taken from the publishing industry, the literary community and the public, creating a new kind of writer, who is confident, wealthy, and elevated to god-like stature by the public. The idea of self-marginalization is anathema to this artist who promotes himself,

his work, and the benefits of the Team Leyner lifestyle, subsuming artistic integrity to the successful positioning of the product. The Team Leyner collective is responsible for proofreading Leyner's work, researching "a comprehensive demographic analysis" (79) of his audience, and of brokering deals with companies like PepsiCo. that will pay for product placement within his work. Leyner has inverted the binary oppositions of marketplace and artist, and has created not only a new kind of product but a new kind of producer: an artist who is consumed not by ideas but by empowerment.

If, within the paradigm that Leyner is crafting, the "I" of the author/artist has transmogrified into something new and powerful, then the role of the reader has been fundamentally changed as well. This change in how the reader must react to Leyner's language has been occasioned by Leyner's own "freeplay" of language. According to Jacques Derrida, the field which permits freeplay can only occur when "there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and founds the freeplay of substitutions" (967). In Leyner's work there is a distinct center, the megalomaniacal author figure who rules his world (and the reader's) with his talent and outrageous persona. Leyner's presence, this all-encompassing center, then determines the freeplay of his language. The boundaries created by this center manifest themselves in the limitations placed on the reader. There is only one way to read Leyner, the way that he has designed. Leyner himself acknowledges these limitations, specifically the inability for the reader to determine meaning because of the overdetermination of the text. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Leyner discusses his writing strategies and their desired effect:

It simply never occurred to me to write traditional, mimetic, plotted narratives. That never interested me at all. What I was interested in was finding a way to make every line be the center of the whole piece, or where every line is as important as every other line so that readers could read anything and still find this acute audacity. And if you're trying to do that, you can't create characters and plotted narratives and that other stuff. If you have to supply backgrounds, and then have characters walking into rooms and then sitting down and then starting to talk, there's going to be lulls while you're getting the reader from one place to the next. Well, I don't want those lulls—or any lulls, for that matter. (“Maximum” 227)

This insistence on ensuring that there be “a maximum energy level in every single line” (McCaffery “Maximum” 226) ultimately takes the power of determinacy away from the reader. Every effect is predetermined for the reader's benefit; every line is orchestrated to produce a certain effect, that of “maximum, flat-out drug overkill, the misuse of power” (McCaffery “Maximum” 226). Leyner orchestrates an unending series of climaxes within his book, denying the reader any hope of assembling the book according to their own interpretation of high and low moments. And if everything within the text is important, then there is no need for the reader to work to create a hierarchy of meaning out of the text. Mark Amerika claims that “one of the main tenets of avant-pop writing is: I, whoever that is, am always interacting with data created by the Collective You, whoever that is, and by interacting with and supplementing the Collective You, will find meaning” (“The A&P Manifesto”). If “Leyner” wants to assert control over the production of his book and the machinery of that production, then he also wants to control how much his audience is able to supplement his writing.

Foucault valorizes the reading process through which readers assist in the construction of the mysterious “author,” and asserts that the reader's duty is to recognize

“the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice” (983). Because of Leyner’s unique command over his narrative, his abnegation of mimetic narrative, and elimination of any “lulls” in his language, his texts resist this kind of literary criticism. Pattern and connections emerge, but the deliberate depthlessness of Leyner’s postmodern style and his “overkill” approach to narrative complicate the task of the literary critic. Where literary tradition teaches readers to become aware of literature as a product of the imagination, Leyner wants his readers to experience his work merely as a product. The language of *Et Tu, Babe* constantly foregrounds the work as a product to be consumed.

Leyner also anticipates every aspect of the writing process in *Et Tu, Babe*, producing not only the text itself, but also the machinery that goes into promoting it and the ultimate reception of it by his readers. Leyner also participates in the critical reception of his work, appropriating the reaction of critics and theorists, disallowing them the opportunity to come to conclusions about his text, and boldly usurping them by canonizing himself. Leyner’s strategy to let only himself (or Martha Stewart, who in a memorable profile in *Condé Nast’s Traveler*, quoted in *Et Tu, Babe*, refers to Leyner as “not just an acclaimed writer, but perhaps the most influential writer at work today, certainly the writer who single-handedly brought a generation of young people flocking back to the bookstores after they had purportedly abandoned literature for good” [103]) decide whether or not he is worthy of canonization. Leyner proclaims his work to be a “classic,” obviating the need for critics or an audience. Is this rhetorical move an ironic

statement on the hyperbolic nature of press releases, a parody of the machinery behind the promotion of artists, or perhaps just a humorous comment on the self-centeredness of most authors? According to Harold Bloom, “when you declare a contemporary work a permanent, classic achievement, you make it suffer an astonishing, apparent, immediate loss in meaning” (*Kabbalah* 100). Bloom’s thoughts on canonization are made even more complicated in lieu of “Leyner’s” acts of self-canonization. The necessary loss of meaning that Bloom mentions may indeed be Leyner’s point. The ironic portrayal of “Mark Leyner” and his work, the fatuous praise it receives and laudatory comments created by Mark Leyner about “Mark Leyner” obviously cannot be taken at face value. In Leyner’s conception of the author, everything is ironic. If, as Bloom states, “all canonization of literary texts is a self-contradictory process, for by canonizing a text you are troping upon it, which means that you are misreading it” (*Kabbalah* 100), then how could Leyner be misreading “Leyner?” In his interviews with Larry McCaffery, Leyner has characterized his own writing as an attempt “to fashion something ludicrously mythic out of my banal life” (“Maximum” 234). Leyner, therefore intentionally misreads his own autobiography, deconstructing his own history and then reconstructing it, changing his banal life into “the fast burst that never stops” (McCaffery “Maximum” 227), culminating in an autobiography that takes on mythic dimensions. And if irony can only “complexify” (Hutcheon *Irony’s Edge* 13), then it is the ideal mode for Leyner’s overt acts of autobiographical contempt.

Linda Hutcheon claims, in her work on the categorization and functions of irony, that “irony always has a ‘target’; it sometimes also has what some want to call a ‘victim’”

(*Irony's* 15). In *Et Tu, Babe* the various victims of Leyner's ironies are the publishing industry, his fellow writers, and the reading public. But in *Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog*, the victim of Leyner's irony is clearly himself. Within the narrative of *Tooth Imprints*, Leyner inverts images from *Et Tu, Babe*, and transforms "Mark Leyner" from an omnipotent cult leader to a less solipsistic, more familiar author figure. We learn in *Et Tu, Babe* that "Leyner" is featured in a book of photographs by Annie Leibowitz who, "upon learning that the satellite was capable of providing high-resolution images down to the name on a golf ball, contacted the Department of Defense and suggested that they collaborate with her on a book of photographs of me lolling about the headquarter's rooftop patio, au natural, basted with oil, and flexing" (47). While these satellite photos capture images of "Leyner's" body¹⁶, in *Tooth Imprints*, satellite photos present images of "Leyner" writing, and not just writing, but composing the book we are reading: "That's me at the Chateau Marmont in Hollywood, writing "Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog'" (91). (Leyner includes a detailed exegesis of this same writing of *Tooth Imprints* later in *Tooth Imprints*.) These two images of the body of the author being photographed and reduplicated are ironic statements concerning the role of the author, the inflation of their significance in Leyner's world (writers are important enough to be photographed by government surveillance cameras), but also signal a significant shift in Leyner's use of irony.

The book of photos in *Et Tu, Babe* indicts the media and the consumer culture for fetishizing authors who produce nothing but their own bodies—rather than their words, photographs of authors now constitute a book worth \$75. While consumers and popular

culture are still included in the ironic indictments of *Tooth Imprints*, Leyner has shifted his target, and now focuses his irony on himself. Alan Wilde, while discussing irony in Donald Barthelme's work, claims that Barthelme is "concerned with the connection between the ordinary and the extraordinary" (149), a statement that helps to elucidate Leyner's own project in *Tooth Imprints*. This connection between the ordinary and the extraordinary is a concern in all of Leyner's work, for he constantly plays with these categories and exuberantly transgresses the boundaries between them. When Annie Leibowitz takes photographs from space with a Department of Defense camera of "Mark Leyner" posing nude on a rooftop, for which the average reader will pay \$75, Leyner has left the realm of the ordinary far behind.

In "Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown" (the play included in *Tooth Imprints*), Leyner offers a fundamentally different (yet still fundamentally ironic) view of the author "Mark Leyner" from *Et Tu, Babe*. Where the earlier "Mark Leyner" grew weary of explaining how he got started writing liner notes, "Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown" offers an intimate view of the artistic process at work, a theme that pervades *Tooth Imprints*. Leyner shares the story behind his creation of the play, and reveals that his inspiration was not produced endogenously as a result of his genius, but rather from merely observing a woman in a beauty salon reading *The Portable Hawthorne*: "And there I stood, the 14-point type clearly legible through the salon's tinted glass plate, reading Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" over the shoulder of, and in prurient tandem with, this recumbent woman who was as oblivious to the peeping Tom with whom she shared the pleasures of her text as she was insensible to the traumas of her

Grand Guignol pedicure” (16). As in *Et Tu, Babe*, “Leyner” finds himself in contemporaneous and “prurient” tandem with texts which will invite him to recycle them into something new, rewriting upon them, leaving few traces of their previous existence. He will treat “Young Goodman Brown” as a palimpsest, for “Leyner” is inspired to “remake Hawthorne’s great parable of evil. But my protagonist would descend not down the footpaths of an encroaching forest, but through the revolving doors of a posh department store. And I would be that bedeviled pilgrim. I would become Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown” (17). Just as he wrote in the margins of *The Faerie Queene*, “Leyner” proposes to reformulate Hawthorne’s work, embedding himself with this new meta-narrative, leaving only a trace of the original work behind.

But Leyner’s actual conception of “Mark Leyner as Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown” becomes a different kind of rewritten text than his earlier brash desecration of Spencer. “Mark Leyner’s Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown” becomes a dystopian story of a man literally held hostage by consumer culture, framed within a narrative of this same man bedeviled by the creative process. Where in *Et Tu, Babe* Leyner was a mentor to agoraphobic housewife-poets, here Leyner is so fraught with difficulties composing his play (“after several months of false starts, dead-ends, and agonizingly fruitless labor, I aborted the project, which ended up costing me my marriage and two and a half feet of my large intestine” [19]), that he must “pay a visit to my mentor, my former English professor from Brandeis University, Dr. Philip Edelstein” (20). Authors, such as DeLillo’s Bill Gray, are supposed to suffer for their art, perhaps, though, not quite like this. What is surprising about this view of “Mark Leyner” is that it is so far removed from

Et Tu, Babe's portrait of the artist as a primal force of nature, whose powers must be limited by the government, and whose name becomes indexical for power and transcendence over problems that plague "Charlie Kaufman" and "Charlie Baxter" such as lack of inspiration and writer's block. That "Mark Leyner" when asked by adoring fans, "How do I know if I'm great or I'm the victim of megalomaniacal delusions?" answered, "Since I was a small child, I've had the feeling that simply by clenching my jaw and visualizing an explosion, I could blow up planets or stars in galaxies thousands of light-years from earth" (77). Leyner presents us with two opposing views of his own artistic powers, both ironic, both revealing.

Authors and Automatons in *Galatea 2.2*

Like Leyner, Richard Powers in *Galatea 2.2* composes a fiction about "Richard Powers," a double of the author, who becomes involved in a scientific experiment—creating artificial intelligence in a machine by reading it the great works of Western Civilization. Autobiographical in many ways ("Powers" is the authors of four novels with the same titles as those of Powers), *Galatea 2.2* becomes a vehicle for Powers to reflect on many binary oppositions: art/technology, the literary canon/emerging national literatures, the body/machine, and most importantly writer/text. And like Leyner' attempt to humanize technology by having his inner organs "viscerally tattooed," "Powers" names his computer Helen and begins a oddly intimate relationship with this machine. But the crucial difference between these two writers comes in their view of the world beyond these attempts to conjoin the human and technology. Leyner's conception of the

connection between himself and technology is playful and ironic, mocking the earnest attempts of those like “Powers” who attempt to humanize a machine by reading it poetry. Placing himself at the center of this attempt helps Powers prove his ultimate point: that experience is the animating force of life and that our unique lived experience unites the fragments of our lives into one integrated system. In essence, “Powers” is a vehicle for Powers to assert his belief in the power of the system of language—engaging with this machine and teaching it language reminds “Powers” of his life as a narrator of events, rather than a reader of other texts. This machine (not so imaginatively) teaches “Powers” about life and the inescapability of the writer’s calling. And at the end of *Galatea 2.2*, “Powers” learns that the experiment has been an elaborate ruse; his body has been the subject of the experiment all along, not the machine, and he is the one who must return to himself, valuing his identity as a writer, finally learning how to read the text of his own life correctly.

In addition to both featuring characters with the same names as the authors of these works, both Leyner and Powers add to the cyberpunk tradition. Leyner’s book feature the author as machine, body-building, transforming his body into that of a cyborg with bionic parts, dependent on technology to create his works of fiction. Powers takes this meeting of man and technology even further in the plot of *Galatea 2.2*. If cyberpunk can be defined as the meeting of humanity and technology, then “Powers’s” tutorial with his machine and his decision to humanize this machine would render this novel a kind of science fiction. He begins to spend all his time reading to Helen, downloading texts into her, essentially teaching this machine how to read and think. “Powers” relishes this

opportunity to create a cyborg, at the expense of his own writing. Fully investing in this idea of “Helen,” he never realizes, until the end of the experiment, that his scientific colleagues have been experimenting on him to see if he would fall for this scheme. Knowing that a machine could never become a sentient being, even they are surprised at “Powers’s” faith and determination to turn Helen into a cyborg.

This machine, a version of Gibson and Sterling’s *The Difference Engine*, becomes a hybrid of human and computer as “Powers” eventually does give her the capability of thought and comprehension. “Powers” attempts to create a true Saussurean system—he wants be able to teach Helen what literature means, by reading the signs of each work and understanding what they signify. And when they are done, she will be able to read the signs correctly and give him back the meaning. But, this system is inherently flawed. “Powers” finds he cannot teach Helen a complete system for her connections will always short-circuit (literally) meaning. At the novel’s conclusion, Helen quits. She refuses to take a test that will prove she has read and understood the works that make up the canon. Helen finally does learn that her system of reading is inherently flawed; since she has not lived, she cannot understand the animating emotions behind any piece of prose or poetry. Telling Powers “Take care, Richard. See everything for me,” (326) Helen deconstructs, forcing “Powers” to realize that her comprehension was merely an illusion, that a machine cannot see, think, or understand.

The poignancy of Helen’s realization that machinery can never replicate the human component of literature then becomes one of the defining differences between “Leyner” and “Powers.” Irony suffuses Leyner’s work; Powers is sincere in his belief in

the fear of technology and the sanctity of the writer's gift.¹⁷ Where "Leyner" revels in his powers as a writer and the outrageous benefits this vocation has brought him, "Powers" has lost everything. At the outset of the novel, despite his success as the author of four well-received novels, he finds himself alone, returning to an ambiguous role as "Writer-in-residence" at his former university, having lost interest in his writing. With no desire for human contact, "Powers" isolates himself in a building dedicated to scientific research, connecting to people only through the internet. Leyner, like Kathy Acker, is obsessed with body-building, and both of these writers incorporate this fascination with the body's capabilities and the beauty to be found in its transformations into their work.¹⁸ And in *Galatea 2.2*, "Powers" also becomes enthralled with the mechanization of his body, substituting this electronic interaction of his computer's mechanical system for human contact; he is obsessed by the World Wide Web, feeling, "I could not log off. My network sessions, all that fall, grew longer and more frequent. I began to think of myself in the virtual third person, as that disembodied world-web address: rsp@center.visitor.edu" (9). Unable to remove himself from this series of connections, he is lured into communing with other technologized bodies, not out of an appreciation for the infinite capabilities of technology but instead for a much more humane reason: to recover from a bad breakup. His willingness to become a part of this scientific experiment is manifested by his rejection of interpersonal relationships after having his heart broken.

Of course, the experiment must fail; Helen, the machine he is trying to teach language and literacy, learns something but not what "Powers" wanted to teach it. The

machine quits the experiment, having been taught by all the texts it has “read” the cliché that life is for the living; according to “Powers,” Helen has learned that “life meant convincing another that you knew what it meant to be alive” (327). Later, after “Powers’s” experiment with Helen is over, instead of being drawn into the realm of the inhuman like Auster’s Quinn, Powers will return to his world of writing, inspired by this quest for artificial intelligence to continue writing and abjure technology.

During an interview with Jim Neilsen, Powers discusses the autobiographical components of *Galatea 2.2* and the function this type of life writing served for him:

the autobiographical fiction in [*Galatea*] gave me a chance to do a personal look back over the shape of [my first five books]. It allowed me one last intimate occasion to address the issue that ties all of these books together: the apology for fiction in a postfictional age . . . I built Helen by reading to her. And the only story that I know well enough to orient her with is my own. (22)

This postfictional age that Powers refers to is an apt description for his own work, a hybrid of autobiography, fiction, and scientific treatise. And the hallmark or unifying characteristic of this age is the degree to which the acquisition of language is the means for connection, with neurons of the brain becoming like machine circuitry. Just as Helen acquires language through the introduction of a variety of texts that are downloaded into her mainframe (including fiction, poetry, and music), “Powers” too has had to relearn language once he relocates to a small and remote village in the unnamed foreign country of E. to join his repatriated girlfriend C. (For an autobiographical work, Powers is very reluctant to name names of people or places.) “Powers” proves himself no better linguist

than Helen as he repeatedly mangles the native tongue of E.: “I became our very own outsider” (188). And this outsider stance, so often associated with the romantic idea of “the author,” is what leads “Powers” back to the States, back to science, and back to the experiment that will ultimately lead him back to the understanding of the power of language to construct identity, situating him in a post-post-fictional world as he rededicates himself to his writing.

Like “Kaufman,” “Baxter,” and even *Seinfeld*’s George and “Jerry,” “Powers” initially finds himself unable to write. Unlike the writer’s block suffered by these other authors, “Powers” finds himself drawn so far into his scientific experiments with Helen that he abandons his literary career; writing itself only exists for him as a set of already existing texts to be fed to Helen. “Powers” creates his own post-fictional age by refusing to write; he will only read to his machine. Reminiscent of John Barth’s literature of exhaustion, “Powers” sees that there is nothing left to create. He will only recycle, and not write. The texts that he gives to Helen are mirrors of the texts that he read aloud to C. in the early and romantic years of their relationship, and as he reflects on this literary education, “Powers” reveals his view of identity in this post-fictional age:

Each book became a knot. Yes, the strings of that knot were theme and place and character. Dr. Charles, with his gangrene machine. Stephen, gazing at the girl in the water. But, into that tangle, just as crucial, went the smell of the cover, the color and cream resistance of the pages, the week in which I read any given epic, the friends for whom I synopsisized, the bed, the lamp, the room where I read. Books made known to me my days’ own confusion. They meant no more nor less than the extensive, dense turnpike of the not-I. (229)

More than a framework for intertextual references, Powers here confirms the power of the written work to animate readers, to reveal a world both outside and within them that can be accessed only through interacting with the text on every level of experience. And it is this belief in the power of language that can be communicated only through fiction that rescues *Galatea 2.2* from postmodern irony and instead gives power to the subjective reading experience as the most profound means of understanding the “I” as well as the “not-I.” Ultimately, *Galatea 2.2* is a rejection of the simulation. “Powers” wants to create a simulation through Helen, a machine that can read and write like a human, but his attempt must fail, and that is why he must use himself, to prove a point about rejecting the simulation. As the simulation Helen grows more and more lifelike, “Powers” does not realize the control he has ceded to this machine; he begins to explain the choices he has made in his personal life to Helen, and when he “gives” her his book to read, he is anxious for her approval: “I could not remember being that nervous, even when reading the longhand draft to C. I came in the morning after, wired over whether this machine thought my book was any good” (294). Having given himself over so fully to nurturing this emerging cyborg, “Powers” finally realizes he must reject this simulation, and this dilemma is given weight by virtue of the fact that Powers has used his own name. A machine cannot create, nor can a simulation of a writer. He, along with Helen, has learned to accept that he as the author is the creator of fiction, and that these mirrors of reality must be abandoned. At the end of *Galatea 2.2*, “Powers” and Powers merge, the fiction writer folding back into his own autobiography, ready to begin writing again:

I'd come into any number of public inventions. That we could fit time into a continuous story. That we could teach a machine to speak. That we might care what it would say. That the world's endless thingness had a name. That someone else's prison-bar picture might spring you. That we could love more than once. That we could know what once means. Each metaphor already modeled the modeler that pasted it together. It seemed I might have another fiction in me after all. (328)

Significantly, "Powers" now understands that his creations are not separate from him, but as they are a product of his imagination, they become not a simulation of him, but instead a part of his identity. He is a writer and must not abandon writing to teach a machine to become a writer. Discovering his desire to compose again eliminates his need for the simulation of Helen, and in this vision of reanimating the creative drive, and in an utter rejection of postmodern irony, Powers asserts his sincere belief in the inescapability of the self.

Baudrillard, in his discussion of irony in *The Perfect Crime*, states that irony "is no longer a function of the subject; it is an objective function, that of the artificial, object world which surrounds us, in which the absence and transparency of the subject is revealed" (73). What Leyner is revealing in the portrait of the artist in *Et Tu, Babe* is the transparency, or the absence of the author's power. Leyner realizes that language is always subsumed to imagery—people spend more to look at photographs of Leyner than they do to read his books. But, even this view is reductive of the multilayered ironies of Leyner. If, as Baudrillard implies, irony reveals the absence of the subject, then the illusion of power is being implicated by Leyner in *Et Tu, Babe*, a position that his ironic stance in *Tooth Imprints* has seemingly abandoned. What is absent in the ironic

conception of “Mark Leyner” in “Young Bergdorf” is this satire on the power of the author—the parody here is limited to the already familiar portrait of the artist: frustrated, seeking inspiration, suffering for his art.

Throughout *Tooth Imprints*, Leyner presents a sustained and more realistic (though it is perhaps fruitless to speak of realism in Leyner’s work) view of authority and authorship. The author is not absent in this world, as he is proven to be in *Et Tu, Babe*, if we accept Baudrillard’s reading of irony which exposes the transparency and ultimate absence of any kind of authority. Here the author is present, struggling with self-doubt, and fully invested in the process of writing. In the almost Borgesian structure of “Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown” (where we see the writing process behind not only this play, but also of the novel which contains the play), authorship is still ironic but no longer transparent. Leyner here presents not just the lifestyle surrounding the “cult author,” but the process of becoming one, and ratifies the necessary presence of the author.

Along with shifting the target of his ironic language from the author’s products to the author’s artistic production in *Tooth Imprints*, Leyner has seemingly undergone a fundamental reconception of the reader. Leyner may still be manipulating his readers by orchestrating their responses, aiming for “flat-out drug overkill” with every sentence, but in *Tooth Imprints* he has begun to address the inherent impossibility of trying to control and codify the responses of his audience. In the chapter “Immoral Allure,” Leyner reminisces about the time in his childhood when he recognized for the first time the appeal of a life of crime. The realization occurs when, upon listening to a favorite album,

the interactive “Bozo Goes Under the Sea,” for at least the 4,000,000th time, he makes a different decision than the previous four million times he listened to the record:

At the end of the second disk, we find Bozo one thousand fathoms below the surface and in dire trouble. His oxygen has run out. He begs his juvenile listeners to ‘Please turn over the record and save me’ . . . Hearing Bozo’s asphyxial SOS, and like some skittish mom alerted to the distant puling of her neonate, I’d dash frantically to my Victrola from wherever I was in the house and, trembling with the exigency of the moment, invert the disk as if my *own* life depended on it. And then one day I didn’t. (108-9)

Leyner acknowledges that after this point, his enjoyment of the record was heightened, his “appreciation now piquantly seasoned with *Schadenfreude*” (109). While this deviant action of the young Leyner inverts expectations, echoing Hutcheon’s assertions about the semantics of irony conjoined to “the conditioning role of context and the attitudes and expectations of both ironist and interpreter” (*Irony’s* 57), it offers a clear statement on the reader’s power of interpretation.

Referring to his earlier works, Leyner states that he wanted to divest the reader of any decision-making ability in order “to make every line the center of the whole piece” (McCaffery “Maximum” 227), denying his readers the ability to create meaning on their own. But this story offers a new, more inclusive view of the relationship between artist and audience. While Leyner invests the young “Mark Leyner” with the power to end Bozo’s life by refusing to be complicit and enact his role in this highly coded script, he offers a message of empowerment to his readers. If “Mark Leyner” can enjoy the album even more after refusing to be complicit in the interactive artwork (“There I’d sit, Bozo

begging, me flipping him the bird and blowing imaginary smoke rings” [109]), then readers of his work can experiment with their own reactions as well. And this may be Leyner’s most avant-garde move—to raise the question of what happens when we don’t enact our roles in the script. Embracing the chaos that must ensue when the referent is divested of its relationship with the signifier, and when people interpret language any way they wish, is one of the hallmarks of the avant-pop movement.

Another example of this shift in the conception of the audience and their powers of interpretation comes in “The Mary Poppins Kidnapping,” when misreadings of the film “Mary Poppins” reach epidemic proportions among American teenagers. The comic nature of Walt Disney chairman Michael Eisner’s lecture—“Children shouldn’t be allowed to watch a film like “Mary Poppins” unsupervised. The parents should be there to stop the video at various points and engage their children in dialogue” (120)—does not overshadow Leyner’s bold declaration that meaning cannot be controlled by corporations, Blockbuster video rating labels, or parental guidance. The idea of a universal response to language has been rendered ridiculous because referents will always mean what individuals want them to mean. Every text, therefore, becomes unstable, impossible to codify because each individual will catect it differently, despite what “Powers” has attempted to teach Helen about the language of signs. Leyner’s vision here of the illogical response to “Mary Poppins” is perfectly logical in a world with no focused center and no fixed meaning. Signs float freely, and his own work here becomes a testament to, and embrace of, that fact. The producer of language must always surrender the creation of meaning to the audience, resulting in an infinite field of freeplay.

This unlimited field of play then necessitates a shift in the view of who the author “Mark Leyner” is, and we can see that Leyner’s vision of himself differs from book to book. If, in *My Cousin*, “I was an infinitely hot and dense dot” (5), then he becomes in *Et Tu, Babe*, “the most significant young writer in America” (16). In *Tooth Imprints*, Leyner fashions a new concept of himself in the chapter entitled appropriately “Great Pretenders.” In this exposé of the “ubiquity of dissemblance” (126), Leyner admits to being a willing prevaricator, deconstructing the carefully constructed façade of the artist as author that he has been developing in all his works of fiction/autobiography. According to Leyner,

When I recently became convinced that my daughter Gabrielle’s pediatrician was actually an actor playing the role of a pediatrician, I responded in kind. I hired a child actress and had *her* go in to be examined and inoculated. I crossed the proscenium and mounted the stage! I empowered myself by achieving conceptual parity. (128)

The acting of a part, the reliance on illusion as a normative response is reminiscent of Baudrillard’s thoughts on the pervasiveness of illusion, that it is “the most egalitarian, the most democratic principle there is: everyone is equal before the world as illusion, whereas we are not at all equal before the world as Truth and Reality, where all inequalities are engendered” (*Crime* 82). Leyner is advocating using performance as a strategy of empowerment to counterbalance inherent inequalities. But, even more significantly, Leyner is revealing authorship to be just another elaborate charade, and here he abjures his role as author, as the ultimate maker and interpreter of meaning, and

instead goes on to encourages his readers to join in the game as makers of their own meaning. Leyner encourages his readers to become avant-garde themselves, and to treat his work as raw material to be transformed by his audience.

Leyner continues to elucidate what happens once the illusion is embraced and everyone crosses the proscenium, transcending their conventional roles:

If we all shift to the simulacrum, then the simulacrum, for all practical purposes, becomes the real. (I am violating a solemn blood oath I made at the age of eight. One night, several friends and I hiked to the old hydroelectric plant on the outskirts of town; we cut out fingers and pledged never to use any word associated with French deconstruction, including “liminal,” “endo-colonization,” and “simulacrum.” (128-9)

Aside from providing an amusing satire on literary theory and the limitations of applying these theories to self-conscious authors like Leyner, this passage becomes a method for reading, rather than misreading, Leyner and his work. Issues of what is real and what is invented are not simple concepts in Leyner. These categories offer no stability or meaning because Leyner’s work renders them meaningless. We can never know what the simulacrum is or what is real, because Leyner’s irony prevents us from uncovering the true meaning. In *Irony’s Edge*, Linda Hutcheon asserts that the point of investigating how irony functions is not to get past “the structural or textual signal to reach the actual irony, or even of being led to some ‘real’ meaning intended by the ironist” (158). Even if we abjure the search for Leyner’s “real” meaning, we must acknowledge what Leyner is alluding to—that there is always a conflation between the simulacrum and the real.

Leyner is always an author as well as an actor and, because of his uniquely ironic use of language, we can never be sure of knowing through his language exactly what is real and what the simulacrum is.

Leyner next projects this transgression of the boundaries between illusion and reality onto his readers:

We will all pretend to be who we are, we'll all be actors and actresses. Then at some juncture, one of us who's, say, pretending to be fat, will decide to actually become fat in order to more effectively play that role. This will then engender a mass movement from the simulacrum back to the real . . . These migratory shifts back and forth from the real to the simulacrum will calibrate the rest of history. (129).

But, instead of outlining a plan for the future of these oppositions, Leyner is calling attention to the fact that they were never stable in the first place. Again, Baudrillard's theories on the relationship between thought and reality are applicable to what Leyner is suggesting:

There is incompatibility between thought and the real. There is no sort of necessary or natural transition from the one to the other. Neither alternation, nor alternative: only otherness and distance keep them charged up. This is what ensures the singularity of thought, the singularity by which it constitutes an event, just like the singularity of the world. (*Crime* 96)

Ideas and reality, according to Baudrillard, may not shift in an endless freeplay. The real world is “unthinkable, except as a dangerous superstition” (*Crime* 97). Leyner’s thoughts seem to ratify Baudrillard’s assertion, namely that the real is always a fiction, that the idea of isolating what is real in his avant-pop world is a laughably worthless enterprise.

Leyner further places his work in the realm of the hyperreal by insisting on the reader’s complicity in his “play.” At the conclusion of “Great Pretenders,” the reader is conscripted into this fiction, as Leyner confronts us with this direct invitation:

What do you say you and I put on a Show? . . . You play the sophisticated, erudite reader—prosperous, well-traveled, tanned and fit—whose esemplastic (sorry, boys) apprehension of the text is an art form in and of itself. I’ll play the elegant, mordantly witty belletrist whose writing combines the delicacy and voluptuousness of poetry with the rigor of science and the vivacity of jai alai. All right? Good. OK. Quiet. Places everyone. Now, from the top . . . (129-30)

Leyner here is co-opting the language of postmodernism, encouraging the reader to find their own way into the text, to join in the “play,” to shape things into a whole. By playing not only with how and by whom his work is read, but also how authorship is perceived and how literary theory is formed, Leyner’s avant-pop sensibilities are revealed. This ironic depiction of all aspects of the writing process validates Hutcheon’s assertion that irony can never simplify, but can only “complexify” (*Irony’s* 13), for the levels of irony here indict writers, readers, and theorists, who are all playing with, as well as simultaneously being manipulated by, language.

Leyner also caricatures his own struggles with language in detailing the difficulties he routinely experiences with the writing process. Such obstacles to artistic accomplishment would have been unthinkable to the “Mark Leyner” of *Et Tu, Babe*, the head of Team Leyner, for whom writing is accomplished with ease, leaving time for his other pursuits (bodybuilding, forensic pathology, etc.). In “The Making of ‘Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog’” chapter, Leyner allows his readers an intimate look at his problematic and arduous creative process. We see “Mark Leyner,” struggling to complete his assignment for *Der Gummiknüppel* (“the German equivalent of *Martha Stewart Living* but with more nudity and grisly crime” [141]), who have commissioned him to write a poem for them—“1,000 lines of free verse in the *poète maudit* tradition of Arthur Rimbaud, but infused with the ebullience and joie de vivre that made ABBA so popular in the 1970’s” (141). The “Mark Leyner” depicted here is differentiated from the “Mark Leyner” of *Et Tu, Babe*, for this “Leyner” is vexed by deadlines, admits to experiencing trepidation at this assignment, and needs solitude that he can only receive by checking into Room 25 of the Chateau Marmont. The writer who was once bored with explaining how he started writing notes now gives his audience “24 hours of the postmodern writer in vitro” (142). And in the portrait that follows, it seems clear that the victim of Leyner’s irony in this chapter is “Mark Leyner” himself.

The arrogance and self-aggrandizement of *Et Tu, Babe* have been transformed into something else, but vestiges of this attitude emerge when “I set up my Apple Macintosh PowerBook 180 on the dining room table, and I invoke my muse . . . my sullen muse in strapless black-lace bra, black velvet short-shorts trimmed in fur, black

fishnet stockings, quilted clogs and black ET TU, BABE cap” (144). Of course, what writer would not want to have his muse marked by a sign which signifies “the most significant young prose writer in America” (*Et Tu* 16)? This “Mark Leyner,” though still “slashing a path through the rank vegetation of American popular culture with the warped machete of my mind” (145) is not as self-assured in his command of language as he was in his earlier incarnations. “The elation of an hour ago had collapsed into severe depression. I am wracked with doubts about ‘Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog’” (151) bemoans this version of “Mark Leyner.” In this portrait of the artist, we see the inversion of the *künstlerroman* that Leyner crafted in *Et Tu, Babe*. That version of “Mark Leyner” flaunted his talents and confidence, and would have been incapable of experiencing these “alternating waves and troughs of euphoria and despair” (151). Leyner here also echoes the shift postulated earlier in “Great Pretenders” from the simulacra to the real. Answering the question of what is real for “Mark Leyner,” the waves of elation or the troughs of despair, is an impossibility because of the layers of irony inherent in every statement concerning his own acts of authorship.

After hours spent composing more verse, “the air is rent by a cacophonous peal of imbecilic laughter as a group of rickshaw pullers drinking contaminated home-brewed liquor beneath my balcony react to the verse that I have just recited—the opening stanza of the seventeenth canto” (153). If the intent of irony, according to Hutcheon, is to undermine “stated meaning by removing the semantic security of ‘one signifier: one signified’” (*Irony’s* 13), then this passage perfectly illustrates how Leyner undermines his own authority and the effect of these words on his audience. The rickshaw pullers are

certainly different from the sophisticated and erudite reader that he imagines reading his work in “Great Pretenders,” and are clearly not the intended audience for *Der Gummikniippel*. But, conversely, the verse itself is filled with images taken from popular culture (SCUD exhaust, 7-Eleven “Big Gulps,” go-go dancers), thereby blurring the line between the erudite reader and the average targets of popular culture. The laughter of the rickshaw pullers is ironically charged as well, for is it laughter of derision, or a reaction to the humor inherent in Leyner’s writing? Examining “Mark Leyner’s” insecurities about writing this piece would suggest that his audience is proffering a critical evaluation of Leyner’s work. But, laughter is the natural reaction to a canto of verse featuring a writer in a go-go cage screaming “Swing me, gringo!” to the crane operator.

As in all of Leyner’s work, unpacking the irony from this brief passage is complex, but all possible interpretations appear to firmly encode “Leyner” and his insecurities as the object of an ironic critique, along with his hypocritical, self-conscious, and arrogant self-image. Further evidence of Leyner’s targeting of his own persona comes when artistic inspiration strikes him in the midst of his morning ablutions: “I was applying benzamine gel to a rash I’d developed after attending The McLaughlin Group Inaugural Reception in Washington, when it came to me—the final stanza of the final canto—verbatim, end-stops and enjambments intact” (165). One hour and fifteen minutes later, the poem is finished and has been faxed to Baden-Baden. The day in the life of this author has ended, with divine inspiration allowing him to finish the poem and celebrate the fact that “It doesn’t get much better, indeed” (165). Insecurities about authority and authorship have been (temporarily) banished as “Leyner” returns to the over-inflated

author persona of *Et Tu, Babe*. It has only taken twenty-four hours for “Mark Leyner” to deconstruct and reconstruct “Mark Leyner.”

Irony and the targets of that irony are never simple in Mark Leyner’s work; in fact Leyner employs strategies that intentionally promote the deferral of meaning for his readers. And by including “Mark Leyner” as a target of his irony, Leyner only further subverts any strategies of uncovering the targets of Leyner’s satire. But, if as Linda Hutcheon has asserted, irony is never about revealing what stands behind the remark but merely reading it correctly, then we must simply accept and enjoy what Leyner gives us: a world infused with non-stop energy that moves at breakneck speed and displays no mercy for any potential targets of irony, not even himself. The “infinitely hot and dense dot” has become a bull’s-eye, the center of the target for Leyner’s ironic parody of authorship, authority, and all of those avant-garde artists who have moved from the margins into central positions of authority by crossing the proscenium and mounting the stage.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

One of the most fascinating (and enjoyable) parts of this dissertation was the emphasis on community that I found both as I was planning the scope of my argument and making decisions about which texts and authors to focus on. This sense of community was also mirrored within the works I was reading. As I told people of my plans for this project, many shared suggestions with me of works they knew of with authors as characters; one colleague told me about *The Feast of Love*, another about *Galatea 2.2*. I even designed a class in the spring of 2005 entitled “Writing about Writing: Author Figures in Contemporary Fiction” and included on the syllabus two authors that later appeared in this study: Charles Baxter and Philip Roth. Discussing some of these ideas about authorship and the author figure in fiction with my students helped me to clarify and focus my thoughts and bibliography. Other suggestions made to me (such as Jack Benny) were intriguing, but fell outside of the boundaries of this project. With every suggestion, my own writing process was illuminated and inspired, and I had another opportunity to discuss and hopefully clarify what I was attempting to accomplish.

This creation of a community of readers also mirrored what was happening in so many of the texts I was reading. The bleak (and clichéd) imagery associated with the life of the writer is a theme returned to again and again in the books included in this study. “Charlie Kaufman” sits alone for hours staring at his blank computer screen. “Charlie

Baxter,” restless because of his inability to push past his writer’s block, roams the streets accompanied by his trusty dog. “Richard Powers,” nursing a broken heart, cannot write (he can only proofread) until he reengages with another woman (the fact that she is a machine ultimately becomes a problem for him). But these clichés are deconstructed, or reinvented, as the author figures come into contact with other writers and readers. Just as “Charlie Baxter” comes to depend on so many other voices and stories to write his novel *The Feast of Love*, the author figures I have included here need the voices of others to complete their work—apparently, multivocality has indeed become the hallmark of contemporary narrative. Example after example of the author’s reliance on these other voices can only lead to the conclusion that as they fracture into other, multiplied versions of themselves, these authors resist the responsibility of a singular voice. According to Bakhtin, in his discussion of discourse in the novel,

the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (276)

All of these authors mirror this process as they portray the creation of their own works as social product, rather than inspired creativity. The need of these authors to participate in a social dialogue leads them into a symbiotic relationship with their readers and collaborators. “Baxter” needs Bradley, “Charlie Kaufman” needs Donald, “Maxine” needs Fa Mu Lan, “Foer” needs Alex’s grandfather, “Jerry” needs George—all of this

need is dictated by another desire: to deconstruct the traditional author-reader relationship. The death of the author implies the death of the romantic idea of the writer as solitary artist seeking a divine spark of inspiration, and instead, recasts the author as another character, dependant on others for guidance, becoming merely one source helping to creating a new social discourse.

The efforts by all my helpful readers mirrored another important aspect of all the authors included here; they all wanted to join in the play represented by this authorial construct. Play has been one of the trademarks of postmodernism; the experimentation, equal privileging of high and low culture, and stylistic innovation all involve an exuberant play with materials and boundaries. The collages of Robert Rauschenberg, the photographs of Cindy Sherman, the architecture of Philip Johnson, and the music of John Cage all feature a playful dimension as they cross boundaries, and use formal innovations to invest their work with an energy that will challenge audiences out of complacent practices. And the writers in this study all cannot resist becoming a part of the story, crossing over into a realm of unlimited narrative possibility.

The fun these authors have here does not obscure another project of all of these texts: to cast doubt on our individual realities, to make audiences aware of how our identities are constructed by society and by ourselves. According to Larry McCaffery, “we can never objectively know the world; rather, we inhabit a world of fictions and are constantly forced to develop a variety of metaphors and subjective systems to help us organize our experience so that we can deal with the world” (“Postmodern” 8). Each of these writers has developed a fictional system that reflects their world back to them in a

way that allows them to critique the contemporary acceptance of simulation. Dealing with a world where simulations have become a representation of our existence forces authors to turn the fiction making process back on themselves, to use themselves to reflect the endless circularity in our postmodern existence.

The popularity of the trope of using yourself as a character to organize experience is evident, but it is surprising that some of these authors have retuned to this organizing metaphor again and again. Lee Siegel has made a cottage industry out of exploiting the “confusion” between him and “the writer Lee Siegel” in multiple books and articles.¹⁹ “Mark Leyner” has continually written about “Mark Leyner,” “Kathy” makes an appearance in many of Kathy Acker’s works, and Philip Roth has turned more than once to recounting “Philip Roth’s” experiences in his fiction. And Larry David has now written and produced two television series about “real” people blundering their way through a world that always encodes them as an outsider. And given the numbers of these self-conscious author figures appearing in both high and low forms of contemporary narrative, this subjective system will become its own cliché.

Linda Hutcheon was exactly right when she termed these types of metafictional studies “narcissistic narratives,” but the narcissism involved here is playful and should not be viewed pejoratively. Instead, this type of self-involvement signals to reader an engagement in the world, giving hope that we can order our own worlds through our own projections. To paraphrase “Charlie Kaufman,” including yourself as a character may be self-indulgent, narcissistic, and solipsistic, but these author figures reveal more than the life of an artist. They shed light on the life of the mind and this fiction making unmask a

world of complex systems of creativity, revealing them to be shared textual constructions that allow readers a chance to participate in the construction of meaning.

More important than engaging the reader is the degree to which these narratives both reflect and help create a sense of intertextuality in our everyday life. Our lives are hybrid texts, made up of connections to other lives and other texts. These writers cannot create texts that adhere to rigid generic rules for this would not reflect Barthes' conception of the plurality of the text and the plurality that we see all around us; our lives can be seen as patchwork texts themselves. These authors react to their world with its flawed constructions, blurry lines and crossing of boundaries and create a reflection of what they see, constructing a metafictional mirror that reflects a postmodern view of the world.

In a way, this project became a cultural studies project as well. Investigating the self by creating a simulation of the self reveals very significant cultural practices. Revealing how the individual is shaped by their environment is another function of these author doubles. The doubles I encountered here are productions of an age of simulation and as a result they highlight our obsession with self-fashioning and our subsequent fear that we are losing the power and the freedom to freely remake ourselves as we wish. In an era of customization (the popularity of customized phone ring tones, names [spelling of popular names are altered to give a sense of uniqueness to that person], blogs and web pages), people need to remind themselves that they still have some control over their existence. Quinn's disappearance at the end of *City of Glass* may suggest to the narrator that he has disappeared to start over again somewhere else, but this American idea of re-

invention is an abstract cultural idea that has retained its allure in contemporary society while becoming a relative impossibility. These author figures become another attempt at self-determination, reflecting our desire to create ourselves, while mocking a system that prevents such self-determining from occurring. A recent study showed that the Horatio Alger story that played such an important role in the creation of the “American Dream” is disappearing—the self-made man or woman who could cross class and socio-economic lines is a contemporary myth. Stories of Americans climbing out of poverty to become wealthy and successful are for the most part apocryphal, as it is harder and harder to cross these lines. Given this situation, it is understandable that artists would look to the idea of self-invention as a powerful idea, tapping into the fascination readers have for those who are able to reinvent themselves. The fact that so many of the authors in this study re-write themselves as weak victims speaks perhaps to the conflicting ideas that self-invention inspires.

Viewed in this fashion, these author doubles in fiction become much more than just a playful intrusion, or an amusing cameo appearance. They become signs themselves, signifying a desire to expose the construction of the self as a hybrid text, made up of an infinite number of (sometimes conflicting) signs itself. James Frey may have been pilloried for ignoring the categories of fact and fiction, but the debate over his book has focused attention on the blend of these categories in our own lives, and shed light on the very real possibility that isolating the real from the unreal may be a larger challenge than we think.

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NOTES

¹ Two recent television shows have featured actresses playing themselves; in 2005, *Fat Actress* starring Kirstie Alley as “Kirstie Alley” debuted, and in 2006 actress Tori Spelling served as the co-producer of a sitcom, *So NoTORIous*, in which she plays the actress “Tori Spelling.”

² Ellis references characters from his other books in *Lunar Park* (as well as intertextual references to characters from other books), echoing Auster who has recycled his own characters (“Paul,” a fiction writer from Brooklyn appears in the screenplay Auster wrote for the movie *Smoke*, which also featured a story told in his novel *Ghosts*).

³ Adam Sternbergh wrote an article for Slate.com in July 2004, entitled “The Art of the Ironic Movie Cameo,” about the cameo appearance as postmodern cliché.

⁴ William Wilson is a reference to Poe’s story of the same name, one of the many intertextual markers in Auster’s text. “Wilson,” about the confrontation between doubles, resonates within *City of Glass* and also Lee Siegel’s *Love in a Dead Language* (examined in Chapter IV).

⁵ Madeleine Sorapure has suggested that *City of Glass* is a “meta-anti-detective novel” that questions the “methodology of detection itself” (72).

⁶ In *Ghosts*, the second novel in Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*, Blue is a detective hired to follow Black. He sets up shop in a room across the street from Black, so he can observe him through the window. He is disappointed to realize that all Black will be

doing in his room is reading and writing; Blue states “to watch someone read and write is in effect to do nothing” (166).

⁷ Quinn, as an accomplished writer of detective fiction, certainly understands the rules and conventions of this genre well enough to convincingly impersonate a detective.

⁸ The red notebook will reappear in the final book of the *The New York Trilogy*, *The Locked Room*.

⁹ Auster leaves open the possibility that Quinn may have remade himself in another place—“Wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck” (158).

¹⁰ The town in question is Ann Arbor, Michigan; all of Baxter’s fiction takes place in this same geographic region.

¹¹ In 2006, Roth published *Everyman*, a novel which, by virtue of its title and reference to a medieval allegory play, suggests Roth may be seeking to universalize his concerns.

¹² The real Philip Roth is angry enough to want to kill his double, echoing the murderous rage felt by the first “William Wilson” in Poe’s story.

¹³ Alex calls “Foer” the “hero” throughout the novel; Alex’s problems with English prevent him from being the consummate story-teller that he so clearly desires to be.

¹⁴ Later in “The Survivor,” Larry is forced to apologize to his mother-in-law for speaking to her harshly after Solly and Colby’s argument; in his apology, he blames his temper on his knee-jerk response to their argument as he was “flummoxed” because of “what my people went through during the Holocaust.”

¹⁵ It is actually the first and last piece of writing in the book; an excerpt from the letter appears on the first page, the letter in its entirety is printed on the last page.

¹⁶ Leyner co-authored a book in 2005, *Why Do Men have Nipples?*, a compendium of questions and answers about some of the more mysterious qualities of the body.

¹⁷ Powers has often been compared, by literary critics, to Thomas Pynchon; clearly the belief in systems and science connect him these two writers. The great difference between them two lies in Powers's ultimate belief in the power of the individual to remake himself in the face of these systems—"Powers" returns to fiction writing after his work with Helen, having regained his passion for his own writing.

¹⁸ Both revel in the ideas of their bodies "flexing" while on display for others.

¹⁹ When asked by a journalist from The Asia Society "What is the relationship between yourself and the character that bears your name in *Love in a Dead Language*?" Siegel answered, "In real life I am much more handsome than the Lee Siegel in the novel."