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The past three decades have witnessed an explosion of narratives in which the literary greats are brought back to life, reanimated and bodied forth in new textual bodies. In the works herein examined—Penelope Fitzgerald’s *The Blue Flower*, Peter Ackroyd’s *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*, Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, Colm Toibín’s *The Master*, and Geoff Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence*—the obsession with biography spills over into fiction, the past blends with the present, history with imagination. Thus they articulate, reflect on, and can be read through postmodern concerns about language and representation, authorship and creativity, narrative and history, rewriting and the posthumous.

As I argue, late twentieth-century fiction “postmodernizes” romantic and modern authors not only to understand them better, but also to understand itself in relation to a past (literary tradition, aesthetic paradigms, cultural formations, etc.) that has not really passed. More specifically, these works project a postmodern understanding of the author as a historically and culturally contingent subjectivity constructed along the lines of gender, sexual orientation, class, and nationality.

The immediate implications of my argument are twofold, and they emerge as the common threads linking the chapters that make up this study. First, to make a case for the return of the author into the contemporary literary space is to acknowledge that the postmodern, its antihumanist bias notwithstanding, does not discount the human. Author fictions bring life and work into creative realignment, affirming and celebrating human creativity as the best means of illuminating and exploring the human, “all-too-human”

experience shared by authors and readers. Second, to emphasize the kinship between rewriting and the posthumous is to reveal the classic's capacity to renew itself and take on new meanings in different contexts. If, as J.M. Coetzee maintains, "criticism is duty-bound to interrogate the classic" (16), then author fictions assume some of the prerogatives of criticism: through the appropriation and implicit interrogation of the classic, they ensure its survival. Thus by fictionalizing celebrated biographies, within or alongside related bibliographies, late twentieth-century writers create an intriguing genealogy for themselves and their own cultural moment.

POSTMORTEM POSTMODERNISTS: AUTHORSHIP
AND CULTURAL REVISIONISM IN LATE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY NARRATIVE

by
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For my parents and brother, with love.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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PREFACE

WHEN THE DEAD AWAKEN:

THE MIRAGE OF THE GREATS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

“It is only after death that we will enter our life and come alive, oh, very much alive, we posthumous people.”

(Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 365)

“The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices.”

(Bloom, *Anxiety* 141)

This study originated in my fascination with the literary “afterlives” of canonical authors in recent, primarily British, but also American fiction, and my need to grasp not only what would be involved in narrating such lives but also why contemporary writers might be drawn to their predecessors, to “the mighty dead.” Propelled by these forces, I began a journey of discovery that many other readers and writers were making in the last decades of the twentieth century. In the course of this journey, I encountered one of the most dynamic and productive literary forms, life writing, and found myself reading intensively about the fictional uses of historical authors, the trope of the posthumous, theories of authorship, the practice of rewriting, as well as the vexed relationship between postmodernism and other aesthetic and cultural paradigms. The contemporary discourse of “author fictions” (a term I borrow from Aleid Fokkema) comprises a tight knot of all these issues and relationships that make it a rich field of critical intervention. And since “[t]he lives of the great come to us overlaid by interpretation” (Batchelor 5), the challenge for me has been to trace recurrent concerns and

patterns in these variegated forms of life writing. Author fictions, as understood here, constitute a recent supplement to a long history of life writing, broadening the space in which the writing subject is inscribed and opening this space out into the reader's (or the pseudo-biographer's) context.

A sub-genre of what Naomi Jacobs has labeled "fiction biography"—"a focused, fully fictional treatment of a limited period in the life of a single historical figure" (xix)—the literary form herein examined can be variously labeled "fictions of the author," "novels about authors," or "author fictions," which include ventriloquist biographies, or pseudo-memoirs such as *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, and those narratives in which the biographical subject is a character at a remove (as in Geoff Dyer's memoir about D.H. Lawrence). Taking my cue from Virginia Woolf's introduction to her topic "women and fiction" in *A Room of One's Own*, I define this category of texts in the following terms: authors and what they are, as well as were like; authors and the works they create; authors and the fiction written about them. Because "somehow all these are inextricably mixed together" (*Room* 3), I too will consider them in that light, exploring the fictional ground where historical reality is transformed by the workings of the imagination, and where "granite and rainbow," the solid truth of fact and the elusive truth of personality, meet in a happy "marriage" (Woolf, "The New Biography" 150).

My topic fits in with a heightened interest in the so-called genre of "the author as character"—a complex production of fiction or fictions lodged at the "crossroads between the historical novel, biography, and the *Künstlerroman*" (Franssen and Hoenselaars 18). After mapping these "tentative borders," Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars, the editors of *The Author as Character: Representing Historical Writers in Western Literature* (1999) recognized that "a huge, differentiated field remains as a subject for investigation" and that

“few have undertaken this kind of research in any systematic way” (20). This study strives to do just that: tease out the literary, cultural, and theoretical implications of “author fictions” with respect to three broad issues—authorship, the posthumous, and rewriting—that arise from considering such works through contemporary critical lenses. As I argue, late twentieth-century fiction “postmodernizes” romantic and modern authors, from Novalis and Chatterton, to Dickens and Wilde, Woolf and Lawrence, so as to understand them better, but also to understand itself in relation to a past (literary tradition, aesthetic paradigms, cultural formations) that has not really passed. Because each of these author-characters is a prominent figure of the romanticist, realist, or modernist canon, my investigation will focus on the ways in which culturally influential authorship paradigms have been transformed in the context of postmodernism. More specifically, the cultural revisionism contemporary writers effect by fictional means projects a postmodern understanding of the author as a situated subjectivity constructed along the lines of gender, sexual orientation, class, and nationality.

But how do we account for the enduring interest in the lives of the literary greats? In Joseph Heller’s posthumously published novella, *Portrait of the Artist, as an Old Man* (2000), an aging novelist, whose last name, Pota, is an acronym for the “portrait of the artist,” is desperately seeking a subject for a final masterpiece. One of his attempts involves recasting Tom Sawyer as an aspiring novelist in search of guidance and mentorship. In another sense, of course, Tom is also the character in search of his creator, Mark Twain. Both the account of Tom’s journey through the “literary hall of fame of America” and the lecture that Pota delivers on what he refers to “The Literature of Despair” present us with biographical facts about American as well as British writers who enjoyed early successes and who then fell out of favor. Pota insists that his lecture’s title does not refer to “the tormented and despairing people in familiar novels,” characters like Madame Bovary, Bartleby the Scrivener, Jay Gatsby, etc.,

but to “literary works about the authors who wrote such novels and what an examination of the lives of these authors reveals” (162-63). Almost invariably, he concludes, this revelation is tragic, for by cutting these figures down to their human dimensions, literary biographies measure their subjects’ creative accomplishments against personal struggles or, more disturbingly, against a sense of personal failure.

While sharing Pota’s fascination with literary biographies, I am also aware that his is but one answer to the question of why a certain writer’s life and work compels the attention of other writers. “Why does the writing make us chase the writer?” Julian Barnes has his narrator, Geoffrey Braithewaite, wonder at the beginning of *Flaubert’s Parrot* (2). Underlying Braithewaite’s idiosyncratic biographical research is the possibility that, “the leavings of a life contain some ancillary truth.” Geoff Dyer’s answer in *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence*, is along the lines suggested by Tom Sawyers’ “new” adventures: writers search for other writers “to claim kin with them, to be guided by them” (88). Both Dyer and Heller pay tribute, albeit obliquely, to those writers whom they admire yet struggle with for creative autonomy. But whereas for them, as for Barnes, these literary figures are objects of unceasing attention and inquiry, of scrutiny and speculation, for the other writers I will be discussing in this study, they become “objects of narrative representation” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 281), indeed characters in their own rights.

To the question pursued by Barnes’s narrator, I would add others, with which this study is primarily concerned: How do postmodern author fictions come about, and what kind of understanding do they bring about? What role do they play in their subjects’ posthumous reputation? What insights into the works of their subjects do they yield, and how do these insights bear on our understanding of postmodern authorship? What forces shaped the artist’s creativity and subjectivity? How do contemporary writers construct a narrative presence for

their subjects? What strategies for representation do they employ? And, finally, what does the phenomenon of the author as character say about our current cultural moment and these canonical figures? Do author fictions add up to a “literature of despair,” as Pota was led to believe, or do they express a more affirmative vision about an artist’s life and about the place of literature in our post-literary world? These questions form the basis of my inquiry into the process by which contemporary writers reclaim the value of an author’s personal history to literary and cultural history while also illuminating the enduring legacy of their works.

The author fictions herein examined—Penelope Fitzgerald’s *The Blue Flower*, Peter Ackroyd’s *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*, Colm Toibin’s *The Master*, Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, and Geoff Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence*—articulate, reflect on, and can be read through postmodern concerns about representation and meaning, authorship and creativity, narrative and history. In them, the obsession with biography spills over into fiction, the past blends with the present, history with the imagination. The impulse to fictionalize, and thus change, manipulate, interpret biographical data runs parallel to that of rereading and rewriting familiar and established texts such as *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, *Great Expectations*, *De Profundis*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*, underscoring their significance and endurance as works of art, as ways into the writer’s intellect and imagination. These classic texts send one back to consider the life, the personal history behind them, which in turn help one understand a good deal more about the texts. Cultural history plays itself out in the process as well, for these narratives partake of a larger body of writings that have performed revisions of canonical works and their authors. In them, the literary past comes alive as a “shaping force upon the present” (Coetzee 13), a treasure trove to be mined for pertinent connections to postmodernism, justifying the latter’s characterization as “a case of prodigious, ‘compulsive’ cultural recollection” (Moraru,

Memorious 21). Postmodern writers see themselves anew in the mirror they hold up to the past and, implicitly, in their chosen subjects.

My introduction sets up the theoretical framework for the connections pursued throughout the chapters that follow. Significant groundwork has been laid by scholars such as Seán Burke, Frédéric Regard, Andrew Bennett, Linda Hutcheon, Aleid Fokkema, and Christian Moraru, whose insights shed light on the intriguing genealogy of authorship that postmodern narratives construct through the practice of critical rewriting. The “rewritings” I scrutinize cut to the heart of what authorship means in postmodern times: over and against both the romantic myth of the individual genius and the modern notion of the “depersonalized and defaced author” (Boym 27) they pit the historically and culturally contingent writing self. The second half of my introduction is devoted to aesthetic considerations of the genre. Drawing on the critical writings of Naomi Jacobs, Jay Parini, Hayden White, Dorrit Cohn, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Michael Holroyd, among others, I show that the problematic of authorship is closely bound up with the long-standing debate surrounding realism. Thus contemporary authors’ attempts at balancing postmodern experimentation and traditional realism situate their works in the realm of “enhanced fact” (Atwood 18). Author fictions thrive on the cross-pollination of genres, literary and non-literary, which they appropriate and transform, thus allowing us to speak of hybrid, multidimensional versions of “realism,” charged with literary and cultural ideology.

The immediate implications of my argument are twofold, and they emerge as the common threads running through the chapters that I preview here. First, to make a case for the return of the author into the contemporary literary space is to acknowledge that the postmodern, its antihumanist bias notwithstanding, does not discount the human. Author fictions affirm and celebrate human creativity as the best means of illuminating and exploring

the human, “all-too-human” experience shared by authors and readers. They reposition the author-character closer not only to his/her work and world but also to the consciousness of a more clearly defined reader, such as Geoff Dyer in *Out of Sheer Rage*, Laura Brown in *The Hours*, and Charles Wychwood in *Chatterton*. In chapter II I seize on Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* as a telling illustration of a model of reading that sets forth not only the complex dynamic of Lawrence’s creative endeavors but also the reader’s personal connection with these endeavors. Throughout his memoir, Dyer uses memory and reflection, reading and writing, both to conjure up Lawrence and to make sense of his own life.

Second, to emphasize the kinship between rewriting and the posthumous is to reveal the classic’s capacity to renew itself and take on new meanings in different contexts. If, as J.M. Coetzee maintains, “criticism is duty-bound to interrogate the classic” (16), then author fictions assume some of the prerogatives of criticism: through the appropriation and implicit interrogation of the classic, they ensure its survival. This is to say that the afterlife a writer can achieve lies as much in the body of authored work as in the re-readings, rewritings, and critical commentaries this work has spawned. In addition, author fictions draw on and in the process re-narrate biographical narratives, which have been deemed “the most successful efforts at secular resurrection” (Schlaeger 68). Therefore my strategy in chapters III through VII is to combine an analysis of the crosscurrents among modern and postmodern writers with in-depth analyses of contemporary “rewrites.”

Since the birth of “the writer as hero” has been intimately linked to the emergence of the modern “autonomous subject” (McKeon 17), it is fitting that I begin with a reading of Penelope Fitzgerald’s fictionalized biography of Fritz von Hardenberg, a student of philosophy destined to become the romantic poet Novalis. Although *The Blue Flower* carries

us outside the English literary tradition, it harks back to that turning point in Western cultural history which saw the emergence of romantic sensibility and reflexive human consciousness. The novel tells the story of Hardenberg's infatuation with the twelve-year old Sophie von Kuhn, who, despite her plainness, becomes his "spirit guide," inspiring his aesthetic vision and religious idealism that would find symbolic expression in his unfinished novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. As I show, however, a postmodern suspicion of closure, unity, and absolutes informs the protagonist's lyrical effusions and philosophical speculations with which Fitzgerald punctuates her narrative, reinforcing her view of Novalis's life as an "endless novel."

Next I revisit two novels by Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton* and *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, in which the focus of interest shifts from the personal and cultural dynamics involved in the creation of a single literary work—i.e. Novalis's tale of the "blue flower"—to the re-creation of a living personality as a work of art (Henry Wallis's pre-Raphaelite portrait of Chatterton), a forged persona (Chatterton's invention of Thomas Rowley and Wilde's own self-forgery), a slippery linguistic construct, or a "textual effect" that takes shape in the minds of others. Ackroyd employs stylistic pastiche and the form of the ventriloquist memoir to re-write these artists into being—writing along with them but also against them, or rather against the myths they helped create.

The fifth chapter argues that in *Jack Maggs*, Peter Carey rewrites the power relations that construct the main plot of the "master narrative" (*Great Expectations*) so as to expose Charles Dickens's investment in an ideology that excludes the "unofficial" perspective of the marginalized, here the eponymous hero who stands in for Abel Magwitch. Tobias Oates, the author-character modeled after Dickens, mistakenly assumes that he can penetrate the "truth" about Maggs and that he can accurately frame this truth within his novel, ironically titled,

“The Death of Jack Maggs.” As Carey reminds us, however, this “truth” is a projection of the novelist’s own fears and anxieties towards Maggs. Oates’ “crooked business” of storytelling casts doubt on the moral authority behind Dickens’ own realist practice.

In chapter six I turn to Colm Toibín’s novel about Henry James, which I show to be charged with the energies and anxieties of both sexual self-definition and cultural validation. In other words, for James to achieve literary mastery and gain cultural recognition, he had first to *master himself* by accepting, more or less consciously, the renunciations exacted by the creative life. At the same time, however, *The Master* allows us to see the creator constantly inventing himself as he constructs fictional worlds and personae that conceal as much as reveal, and that leave him uneasily poised between desire and gratification.

Cunningham’s novel, *The Hours* further reinforces the postmodern sense in which truths are partial, contingent, relative to one another, and sensuously embodied. By intercutting scenes from three seemingly unrelated stories revolving around artist-figures—a contemporary embodiment of Virginia Woolf’s famous character, her friend, a homosexual poet dying of AIDS, his long lost mother, and most importantly, the creator of *Mrs. Dalloway* herself—Cunningham captures the various manifestations of creativity as shaped by gender and sexuality, memory and personal desire, culture and the unconscious. Most importantly, by making us privy to Woolf’s “ecstasies and despair,” her “moments of being” as well as “non-being,” the novel dismantles the myth of the impersonal modernist author, foregrounding instead the complex negotiation between the private and public selves Woolf enacted throughout her life and work.

As a way of grasping what author fictions accomplish from a broader perspective, I conclude with a brief excursion into the vast theoretical field of postmodernism. Taking my bearings from Jean-François Lyotard, Brian McHale, John Barth, Patricia Waugh, and

Christian Moraru, among others, I suggest that the distinct type of “memorious discourse” (Moraru) fostered by the fictional biographies of romanticist authors and their modernist heirs situates them within a larger project of historicizing postmodernism, of constructing origins which contemporary writers latch on to as sources of a new originality. More to the point, my conclusion opens up the possibility that the driving force behind late twentieth-century fiction is our culture’s need to overcome not so much the anxiety of influence as our acute anxieties over postmodernism’s lack of depth, cultural memory, and historical placement. While the immediate subject of these narratives is the figure of the author, their ultimate, constantly evolving object is a “story” about the foundations of postmodernism in pre-postmodern times.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Authorship and Cultural Revisionism

“Thus the Author, capital A, and the person whose double he or she is. They alternate. They are attached head to head. Each empties his or her vital substance into the other. Neither can exist alone.”

(Atwood 54)

“Postmodernism *as* extensive, critical rewriting is a form of asserting, changing, and reasserting—renarrating—identity.”

(Moraru, *Rewriting* 173)

We seem to be living in the heyday of a postmodern phenomenon that “delights in resurrecting historical authors as characters” (Fokkema 40). The past three decades have witnessed an explosion of narratives in which “the illustrious dead” (Coetzee 26) are brought back to life, reanimated and bodied forth in new textual bodies. These fictions challenge us to reflect on how previous models of authorship, along with the aesthetic and historical aspects of past texts, are continually being mediated, indeed revised, in light of postmodern critical thought on self, creativity, cultural identity, authority, history, language, and representation. A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*, Michael Dibdin’s *A Rich Full Death*, Pat Barker’s *Regeneration*, Robert Nye’s *The Late Mr. Shakespeare*, Jay Parini’s *The Last Station*, Coetzee’s *The Master*

of *Petersburg*, John May's *Poe and Fanny*, David Lodge's *Author, Author*, and Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* are only a sample of contemporary fictions that rework past authors, voices, and styles, highlighting the palimpsest texture of life writing, the ways in which it is shaped by other texts and bears the traces of intertextuality.

Postmodernism's attempt at building a genealogy for itself hinges on the very legacy of these cultural icons, a legacy that has been carried out over the years in many guises (biographies, films, plays, critical studies, and last but not least fiction). As Andrew Bennett has noted, postmodernism, "with its alleged intolerance for the sentimental humanism, the comforting essentialism, of authorship, is nevertheless—or perhaps therefore—fascinated by, fixated on, author-effects and author-figures" (*Author* 109). In this sense, Mark Twain's joke about the exaggerated rumors of the author's death "has taken on an ironically persistent afterlife" (Deane ix). The specter of the author haunts both contemporary literature and theory, but nowhere is it more apparent than in the fictions herein discussed.

From the outset, my study assumes an important distinction between two stages in the development of aesthetic postmodernism: a) the 1960s and 70s, when, under the sway of structuralism and poststructuralism, critical theories of authorial absence, death, or disappearance threatened to radically impersonalize discourse—precluding therefore the phenomenon of the author-as-character—and b) the "antimodernist phase of cultural critique" predominating in the 1980s and 1990s, and centering on politics of race, class, gender, and nationhood (Elias xxvi). Functioning as an antidote to the extreme versions of postmodern thought that seek to bracket both reality and subjectivity, these narratives restore the author as an elemental source of scholarship, a variable of textual meaning, and an ethical value obtaining from its various hypostases as originating genius, secular prophet, high priest of art, witness to the real world, celebrity, fraud, trickster, outsider, etc.

As I stress throughout this study, authorship has now become a powerful mode of engagement with the past, an opportunity to resurrect a “workable and theoretically sound author-concept” (Fokkema 40) that takes into account the vast pool of formative influences on the creative imagination: mass culture, literary tradition, biography, empire, sexual politics, and last but not least the writer’s unconscious. Author fictions offer an explicit exploration of what it means to be an author, of the boundaries that circumscribe authorial “presence,” and of the author’s chameleon qualities that so fascinated John Keats. They ground their subjects’ lives in a historical and cultural context that was central to their vision and craft as writers, and that serve as jumping off points for contemporary writers’ own explorations. In addition, they demystify the creative process by jarring readers into conscious contemplation of a work’s mode of production and of the inner experience that brought it forth. For in drawing upon their subjects’ creations, contemporary writers return not only to the words on the page, but also to the personality behind them: after all, no work can develop without an experiential basis, without a source of dreams, passions, and imagination that often elude discourse. The most famous reaction against personality can be found in T.S. Eliot, for whom poetry is “not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” His insistence that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind who creates” (54) betrays an aestheticism that “makes suffering of any kind unrelated to the present, and so to history” (Tambling 10). “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim,” Wilde writes in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (3). Ackroyd, however, has his Wilde say that an artist is “not a savant: the difference between his work and that of a philosopher, or even a journalist, is that his own personality enters and defines his work” (LT 123).

More recently, the boundaries between philosophical and autobiographical discourses have become blurred, as shown by the very father of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida. “I’m waging war against myself,” declared Derrida in an interview with *Le Monde* in 2004, published less than two months before his death. The “testamentary” character of this interview prompts Ramona Fotiade to remark that, “Having waged war against metaphysics, deconstruction has . . . turned to the ‘residual’ issue of the philosopher’s own temporal presence in the world, and the aporias of an autobiographical discourse, which having survived the demise of the traditional notion of ‘the subject,’ returns to haunt the self-sufficient proclamations of rational analysis” (1). Derrida takes up the concept of “spectrality” he had previously elaborated in *Spectres of Marx* in order to bring out the “undecidable character” of his confessional “I”: “neither dead nor alive, but hovering between the two.” Not only does this strike me as a fitting description of the posthumous figurations assumed by historical authors in recent fictionalized biographies, but Derrida’s startling recognition also brings to mind Jorge Luis Borges’s parable about a man who, shortly before his death, discovers that the large and labyrinthine picture he has painted “traces the image of his own face,” that it is in fact “a picture of himself” (*Conversations* 4). As Fotiade explains, “the defunct notion of the subject comes back to haunt deconstruction, or rather its autobiographical undercurrent which, in some form or other, has constantly accompanied the more impersonal dismantling of the metaphysical concepts of subjectivity and presence” (2).¹

Along with Roland Barthes’s and Michel Foucault’s landmark essays, “The Death of the Author” and “What is an Author?”, respectively, Derrida’s writings have largely set the terms for subsequent debates over the question of authorship. Derrida questions, in *Of Grammatology*, the notion that “‘Descartes,’ ‘Leibnitz,’ ‘Rousseau,’ ‘Hegel’ are names of authors,” since they indicate “neither identities nor causes,” but rather “the name of a

problem” (99). At one extreme, the author has been defined as the “actual individuals, firmly located in history” (Nehamas 686), the embodied self whose “inner life” is reflected in the text (Gass 267), while at the other, the author is “a complex and variable function of discourse” (Foucault 137-38) or a “scriptor,” created wholly by the act of writing, or born “simultaneously with the text” (Barthes, “Death” 147). For Barthes, the postmodern writer is an assembler of codes rather than their originator: he “no longer bears within him passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred” (“Death” 146). This idea seems hardly new to anyone familiar with Wilde’s famous slogan, in terms of which “Life imitates art, far more than art imitates life” (“The Decay of Lying” 78).

The work of Seán Burke—particularly his first book, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (1998) and his introduction to *Authorship. A Reader from Plato to the Postmodern* (2000)—has been extremely influential in reconciling the extreme positions outlined above. Burke’s pragmatic approach to the question of the author seeks to negotiate and ultimately reintegrate the view of a transcendental, “sublimated self” and the “particularities of authorial experience” (*Death* 204). According to Burke, the post-structuralist notion of the author stems from a romantic legacy whereby authorship is construed as a transcendental category. The romantics, who believed that spiritual and epistemological truths were accessible through imagination, as well as through man’s relations to the natural phenomena, invested the individual consciousness with the power to create, and not simply imitate, to project, and not simply mirror the world. At the same time that they emphasized subjectivity, the romantics also aspired to a sort of artistic impersonality and discipline of the kind we later find in such authors as Flaubert,

Henry James, and James Joyce. Andrew Bennett has called attention to the aporia inherent in this ideal of autonomy, for

While the Romantic author is seen as self-originating and original in a fundamental, radical sense, as wholly detached from social context, just the fact that she uses language, exploits certain genres, and operates within certain literary traditions and within certain conceptual and poetic conventions, determines her as an unequivocally social being. (*Author* 71)

The notion of the impersonal Author-God² resurfaces in Keats's idea of "negative capability," in Coleridge's insistence that "to have a genius is to live in the universal, to have no self," and later in the proto-modernist reflections of Flaubert, for whom "[t]he author in his work ought to be like God in the universe, present everywhere, and visible nowhere." All of these reflections were in turn to form "the blueprint for the image of the modernist writer as a disinterested artificer" (Burke, *Authorship* xxiii). Modernism replaces the "cult of the creator" with that of the work, a work that "consumes" the artist who brought it to life (Simion 52). In Foucault's terms, modern authorship presupposes "the effacement of the writing subject's individual characteristics." The "mark" of the writer, he insists, "is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence" (113, 114). Similarly, Derrida speaks of "literary suicide," of "death by writing" (*Of Grammatology* 142-43), in which the "value" of authorial "signature" replaces presence.³ On this view, the more a writer writes himself into his work, the more he "loses what might be called his 'authentic self' (Atwood 45). Author fictions fill in this gap by providing glimpses into "the daily life, the inner life, and the unrecorded experiences of the self" (Jacobs 43).

As I show in chapters III and IV, both Penelope Fitzgerald and Peter Ackroyd engage with, and in the process, reassess, the philosophical, aesthetic, linguistic, and social grounds of the romanticist notion of authorship, from its early manifestation in Chatterton, the epitome of

the “neglected genius,” to a full-blown embodiment in Novalis, the romantic poet-philosopher whose writings reflect on issues such as self, language, and representation in terms that are uncannily postmodern. While this freedom appeals to Fitzgerald and Ackroyd alike, the first is more wary of the irony inherent in a relativism of interpretation that ignores the role or needs of a situated subjectivity, be that the writer’s or the reader’s. Their novels set off the romantic idea of art as a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” against the modernist and postmodernist notion of art as a highly self-conscious process. This process is further thematized in Cunningham’s *The Hours* (chapter VII) and Toibín’s *The Master* (chapter VI), two novels that enact a complex negotiation between the private and public consciousness, between the lived and aesthetic experiences of Virginia Woolf and Henry James, respectively.

Virtually all of these writers, the romantics and their modernist heirs, developed a conception of the impersonal in their aesthetic theories, but their actual practice leaves room for personal considerations. For instance, James’s marginality in the marketplace has been explained as the result of an elitist construction of authorship, one prefigured in his review of Flaubert’s correspondence in 1893, where he writes that there are “moments when the restless passion for form strikes us as leaving the subject out of account altogether” (LC2: 310). The “great interest” of Flaubert’s letters for James resides in the fact they “exhibit an extraordinary singleness of aim, show us the artist not only disinterested, but absolutely dishumanized (297). At the same time, though, he cannot help noticing that, “in spite of visible gaps, the revelation [of Flaubert’s personality] is full enough and remarkable enough,” complete with “all the exaltations and despairs, tensions and collapses, the mingled pieties and profanities of Flaubert’s simplified yet intemperate life” (296, 297). As in Wilde’s case, a free-floating aestheticism would become a problem for James, who, in his Preface to *Portrait of a Lady*, reminds us that neither “the human scene,” that is, “the choice of subject,” nor the literary

form can exist “without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist” (8). Consequently the essentially impersonal, detached role James insisted on taking in the dramatization of his characters’ experiences gives way in *The Master* to a profound awareness of the author’s controlling presence and intimate share in his characters’ perceived reality. And like his characters’ moral and emotional dramas, James’s drama of consciousness was in turn representative of a wider cultural situation with profound implications for modernism and postmodernism alike.

Following Nietzsche’s “vigorous challenge to the Kantian notion of a transcendental subject” (Burke, *Authorship* xxv), postmodern writers re-embody the authorial subjects whose lives they narrate. Like Nietzsche, these writers value a “living philosophy,” a discourse chiseled out of their human subjects’ corporeality. And like Freud, they seek to re-situate the author “in terms of personal desire, memory, and biography” (Burke xxv). The author, as even Roland Barthes came to recognize in *The Pleasure of the Text*, is “no god and no authority, but a human being to be enjoyed, for his commitment to freedom, to multiplicity, and to delight, for his intelligence, and for the generosity of his intentions” (qtd. in Park 329). In *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *The Hours*, and *The Master*, the subject’s attempts at self-transcendence are thwarted by the unconscious that “resituates and returns author to text, subject to discourse, and the traumatically personal to the defensive will-to-impersonality” (xxv). As Burke argues, the only way to “deconstruct” modernity’s transcendent/impersonal subject is not to replace it, as poststructuralists do, with abstract “theories of language, *différance*, anonymity, *écriture féminine*, and so on, but to reposition authorship as a situated activity present not so much to itself as to culture, ideology, language, difference, influence, and biography” (xxvi).

This is precisely how the texts I examine manage to soften, if not solve, the “author-debate” that pits modern artists who, in their “worshipping of invention, originality, and the new,” *play down* the social construction of the author, and postmodern critics and artists who “*play up*, systematically uncover,” as Moraru states in *Memorious Discourse*, “the fictionality, the ‘constructedness’ of creativity, authorship, and subjectivity largely speaking” (19). Writers respond to the signs of the times, even as they reflect on their own signifying practices. Moreover, and contrary to poststructuralist thinking, their act of signification does not alienate the writing self from its subject. The “late modernity’s profound unease” about the author (Burke, *Authorship* xxiv) gives way in author fictions to a fascination with *both* their subject’s empirical person *and* textual persona, which together become “a composite of diverse bits and pieces, as in a mosaic” (Steiner 166). Put differently, the textuality re-inscribing the authorial construct remains “more or less transparent to its source material, to the manifold reality” of its subject’s existence (Steiner 166), just as, to quote Virginia Woolf, the “webs” of fiction remain “attached to life at all four corners.” These webs, she goes on to say, “are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in” (*Room* 43). Herein lies the “germ” of Burke’s formulation of the “biographical imperative,” which takes for granted that, “however supernal their final cast, literary works emanate from the human-all-too-human” (*Death* 193).

Though herself a biographical critic, Woolf sought “escape from female personality” by devising narrative personae that served to “deflect readers’ inquiries into the actual authorial origin” of her own work (Booth 87). Yet these personae, “never succeeded in discouraging widespread interest” in “the real Virginia Woolf,” nor perhaps did the latter “truly wish to deflect such interest” (Booth 87). Alison Booth concurs with Nancy Miller that, “to foreclose

. . . discussions of the author as a sexually gendered subject in a socially gendered exchange' may be to deny the material context of our theoretical discourse" (88-89). Hence the notion of authorship as a complex "contextual" activity that involves agency and shows the "marks of a producing subject" (Miller, *Subject* 16). With Booth and Miller, Fokkema finds the poststructuralist notion of the author as a mere discursive subject "rather deficient," for it seems to imply that an author's gender is "irrelevant" to the gender critic (40). Similarly, Cheryl Walker confesses that in her own practice of feminist biographical criticism she is "loath to give up all vestiges of the author" (109) and to see gender transformed into "a feature of textuality that cannot be persuasively connected to real women" (110). Her strategy of "persona criticism," which I have found extremely helpful, "focuses on patterns of ideation, voice, and sensibility, linked together by a connection to the author," here the protagonist of fiction. Like the "situated criticism" proposed by Burke, this strategy "allows one to speak of authorship as multiple, involving culture, psyche, and intertextuality, as well as biographical data about the author" (109).

Thus, if the terms "writer" and "author" are sometimes used interchangeably in this study is because, I believe, the one cannot be completely severed from the other. They remain ineluctably connected, even when we are reminded of their difference. As H.L. Hix points out in *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy* (1990), "common sense, long tradition, and current practice (even structuralist/deconstructive practice) all recommend the maintenance of some kind of connection between writer and author" (32). Both the "creative author" and the "created author" (Hix 39) are being "re-created," in narratives that, on the surface at least, tell stories that "have already been told" (Eco qtd. in Hutcheon, "Historiographic" 8), whether in the form of biographical documents, literature, or criticism, but in a deeper sense reinvent the selves they narrate, claiming no privileged authority to fix a life forever or exhaust the truth about it.⁴

As I show across the following chapters, each of these “stories” performs acts of interpretation that destabilize the subject’s identity, drawing out its tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities, so that he/she appears both familiar and estranged to us, readers. For, when the narrated author’s life is filtered through the vision of the narrating author, as is the case here, the “truth” about the first becomes a “complex event” (Regard 408) contingent upon recontextualization from the contemporary writer’s perspective. This chimes with Yury Tynyanov’s view of the literary personality as “dynamic, like the literary epoch with which and in which it now moves. The author’s individuality is not like a closed space in which something can be seen, it is more like a broken line, which the literary epoch keeps breaking and redirecting” (35). Thus the reflection cast upon each other by the historical person and trans-historical persona is key to our understanding of the author as specifically “male,” “female,” “British,” “colonized,” “queer,” or “marginalized.”

If the author has become postmodernism’s “stock character” (Fokkema 39), rewriting is postmodernism’s stock-in-trade. This practice partakes of the “larger phenomenon of intellectual revisionism” (*Anxiety* 28) Harold Bloom traced in a series of books, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), and *Agon* (1982) that theorize the history of Western poetry. Bloom employs psychoanalytic metaphors to depict the relationship of “belated” poets to their “precursor” poets as exclusively hostile, involving Oedipal rivalry, deliberate misreading, and an uneasy urge to evade, complete, or obliterate. For some contemporary writers challenging the authority of their predecessors and addressing their influence becomes the primary creative impulse and a source of their own originality. But, as Linda Hutcheon reminds us, the ideology of postmodernism is “paradoxical,” in that it “depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests. It is not truly radical; nor is it truly oppositional” (“Pastime” 289). Like historiographic metafiction, author fictions

incorporate previous representations—the “textualized past”—into “the text of the present” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 287). Moored in the past and attuned to the present, author fictions bear the “unmistakable signature” of postmodernism, which Moraru has identified as its “memorious condition” (*Memorious* 117).⁵ For if, as Moraru sets out to demonstrate, postmodern authors are “memorious writers who remember (texts) in order to—or because they—represent (the world),” then author fictions “remember” the makers of these texts in order to show how their representations bear on and catalyze the “evolving imagination of the present” (*Memorious* 24-25).

The systematic examination of what Christian Moraru elsewhere calls revisionist, “intensive-extensive” contemporary narrative rewriting leads him to argue that in postmodernism, the rewriting of highly canonical fictions is by no means a symptom of “creative exhaustion,” or of a “dead end,” to recall Barth (*Rewriting* xii, 8). Like the “largely transcendentalist, nineteenth-century-based ‘myths’”—the works of Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Twain—dislodged by contemporary rewriting, the biographies and works of earlier authors appeal to postmodern readers and writers because they tell them who they are and how they have come to be who they are (Moraru, *Rewriting* 8). Something more than simple revivalism, or a gratuitous “cannibalizing” of the literary past, is thus at work in author fictions, having as much to do with how we view the present moment as how we retroactively envision the past. According to Frederic Jameson, postmodernism “ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage; metabooks which cannibalize other books, metatexts which collate bits of other texts—such is the logic of postmodernism in general” (*Postmodernism* 96).⁶ In Moraru’s account, however, revisionist postmodernism is “a fairly discriminate operation.” Not only does it select “the bodies of literature it feeds off to

attain specific objectives” but it also “unfolds in response to precisely defined—aesthetic, social, political—conditions” (*Rewriting* 171).

The intertextual linkages built into author fictions remind us that literature is an echo chamber, a cultural archive, indeed a “memorious discourse” that “remembers” and “re-narrates” not only past texts but identity and authorship as well. This is because “authors’ lives, too, can be seen as texts with which later authors have similar relationships as with existing literary texts,” relationships that take the form of “appropriation” and “confrontation” (Franssen and Hoenselaars 24). More significantly, the cultural revisionism effected through fictionalization alerts us to the gendered, historical, and political identity of the authorial subject as well as to the “others” (the colonized subject, the feminine, the popular) summoned only to be suppressed by realist and modernist narrative practices. As my analyses will show, postmodern writers are *heirs*, and at the same time *others* to the romantics, the realists, and the modernists, as their writings help uncover “the reprise camouflaged” in the forerunners’ “originals” (Morau, *Memorious* 12). Thus understood, the genre of the author-as-character emerges as an important component in the ongoing reconfiguration of the categories and canons of literature. As Jameson has observed, the postmodern intellectual activity often implies the “rewriting all the familiar things in new terms and thus proposing modifications, new ideal perspectives, a reshuffling of canonical feelings and values” (*Postmodernism* xiv).

By and large, this revisionist impulse manifests itself as a reaction to Realism, the mode of representation that dominated the English novel of the nineteenth century and that has extended its reach well into the twentieth century. In fact, as George Levine insists, the Victorians themselves were aware of the contradictions inherent in the realist method: “The great novelists of the nineteenth century were never so naïve about narrative conventions or the problems of representation as later realists or modern critics have suggested” (7).⁷ In *The*

Realistic Imagination, Levine describes Anthony Trollope's realism as "rigorous only in its exclusion of extremes, or in its assimilation of them. . . . All kinds of extremes enter on the periphery of the Trollopian vision, but all are contained within the possibilities of sheer plot, which will assert the primacy of conventional and arbitrary order against the rebellious energies that provoke admiration at times but must be absorbed" (203). What Levine says here of Trollope applies to literary realism writ large, as a narrative mode primarily organized around the evocation and subsequent disciplining of supposed extremes. Thus, novels like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Foe*, *Jack Maggs*, and even *The Hours* have a clearly "cultural-political thrust" (Moraru, *Rewriting* 35) on behalf of the "other"—the self marginalized and silenced by the colonialist and/or patriarchal ideology. They are, in fact, typical of "the postmodern concern with power and representation that has inspired most of the postmodern 'author' fictions" (Fokkema 48). In *Chatterton*, this theme "surfaces as a resurrection of the minor author who has been neglected because of the mechanism of the canon" (Fokkema 48). This mechanism of exclusion, Moraru has argued, extrapolating from Foucault's essay, "The Political Technology of Individuals," characterizes modern authorship. "The great excluded," he explains, "is that which unsettles the modern myths of creativity, originality, authenticity, novelty, and artistic prop(ri)erty; it is the textual trace . . . the textual otherness subversively inscribed" into "original sameness" (*Rewriting* 18).

Bradley Deane's investigation of Victorian anxieties of authorship in the mass-market further supports my analyses of *Jack Maggs*, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *The Master*, and *The Hours*. According to Deane, the Victorian public's growing engagement with literature structured the divergent authorships of nineteenth-century novelists. Thus, the advent of serialized fiction gave rise to the image of the novelist as a "sympathetic friend," while the late nineteenth-century "contest between best-sellers and classics" set the stage for

the “proto-modernist artist” (xii). Focusing on *Pickwick Papers*, the critic argues that hidden behind this novel is the “narrative of Dickens’s emergence as a sympathetic friend to his readers, a paradigm of authorship that would dominate the Victorian imagination for decades” (xiii). Sympathetic friendship became a way to describe not only Dickens’s relationship with his characters, but also with his readers. “No one thinks first of Mr. Dickens as writer,” explained a critic in the *North American Review*. “He is at once, through his books, a friend” (qtd. in Deane 28). This view of a friendly, non-alienated author is undermined in *Jack Maggs*, where Tobias Oates, a younger version of Dickens, is portrayed as a detached, almost scientific compiler of facts about Jack Maggs, whom he regards as a case study, and not as a friend. This was because, Carey suggests, the novelist’s sympathy—his concern with justice and humanity—remained confined within national borders. Carey’s revisionist undertaking in *Jack Maggs* exposes the political and cultural stakes of an ideology of authorship that operated selectively in complicity with colonialism, and that also served both the “material interests and cultural capital of writers” (Deane 50).

In late-Victorian aesthetics, as literature lost its utilitarian function of promoting social harmony, or cultivating widespread sympathy, authorship became tantamount to artistic autonomy. In Wilde’s terms, “A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament,” an individual sensibility that Wilde, along with other writers of his generation, glorified as the sole authority in defining and interpreting “reality,” but which they sought to keep “mysteriously enshrined” (Deane 92). Ackroyd’s portrait of Wilde remains faithful to the latter’s conception of himself—set forth in *De Profundis*—as, by turns, a man of consuming passions, a troubled soul at home in the dark and uneasy in the spotlight of publicity, and the spectator of his own tragedy, the artist destroyed but not defeated by circumstances, some of his own making. As with Chatterton, whose twilight days are hauntingly presented by

Ackroyd, Wilde's final moments are lit by flickers of posthumous radiance. Both *The Last Testament* and *Chatterton* contemplate the possibility of future, posthumous recognition through the act of writing and—equally important—through the death of the author, both literal and figurative. At the same time, both works employ the trope of forgery as an analogue for the creative process that projects a counterfeit self—one that endures through stylistic flair as well as its proliferation across multiple layers of representations. Finally, the deep-running affinities between Chatterton and Wilde's attitudes toward art, self, and society that emerge from Ackroyd's novels warrant an intertextual reading which allows us to see the late eighteenth-century as a site inscribed with the particular anxieties of late Victorian culture over aestheticism, authorship, authenticity, and market forces.

Under the staggering influence of industrial production and mass consumption, the system of writer-reader relations was significantly reconfigured at fin de siècle, with intimacy and friendship giving way to an impersonal authorial style. A proto-modernist, Henry James revised the Victorian notion of sympathy into an authoritative model of “integrity and mastery” (Deane xvi). “We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it,” James insisted (*Portable* 438). As his position in the “art of fiction” debates of the 1880s indicates, James sought to resist the mass culture commodification he associated with the immense popularity of “bestsellers” like George Du Maurier's *Trilby*. While Walter Besant, his chief adversary in this debate, held that novelists should reveal and reinforce a common humanity, James privileged “the personal over the collective, and individual impressions over shared assumptions” (Deane 106). But, as *The Master* makes us aware, although James brought “the personal” into the realm of his art, he shut it out from his own life. In foregrounding the novelist's “individual impressions,” Toibín alerts us to what James simultaneously feared and desired—the feminine and the popular,

which have been invoked as the “others” of male literary modernism. James’s strategic self-effacement, as opposed to the “suicidal visibility” he criticized in Trollope,⁸ emerges as a source of power, and self-discipline a warrant of artistic control.

Despite his efforts to suppress his personality from his writings, however, James nevertheless wrote himself into the public sphere via artist-figures foregrounding the psychodynamics of male creativity. His dubious “theory”—incorporated in his short-story “The Lesson of the Master” and implicit throughout Toibín’s *The Master*—was that women, in any role, “might dangerously tap the vital energy of the artist” (Auchincloss 39). Auchincloss dismisses this as “nonsense,” but adds that the theory “fitted the picture of the great man dedicated solely to a great work” (39-40). James shared Flaubert’s “ideal of dignity, of honor and renown,” along with the wish “that nothing should be known of him but that he had been an impeccable writer” (LC2: 296). This image of the Master is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed in the very process of rendering “mastery”—of self *and* art—a matter of tenuous control due to both inner and outward forces with which the celebrated writer must reckon. Many threads from James’s life and writings weave their way into the intricate tapestry of Toibín’s book, but one that runs throughout is a powerful sense of a self, to borrow Edel’s formulation, “concealed behind a façade of discretion, civilization, [and] privacy” (67). By emphasizing the importance of James’s lived experience to his self-definition and aesthetic vision, *The Master* sensitizes readers to the synergy between “the man who suffers” and “the mind that creates” (Eliot 54), or more simply, between the man and the Master.

If sacrifice of the artist’s more human part of himself was demanded of, and, as Toibín suggests, only mildly resisted by James, how much more so of Virginia Woolf? Like James, Woolf was highly attuned to the human scene, as demonstrated by the ways in which she

wove private and public issues into her fictions. Much like *The Master*, *The Hours* replaces the austere impersonal modernist author with a vulnerable, lonely writer forced by the cultural pressures of her time to disguise her homosexual desires through artistic means. For both James and Woolf authorship involves what Toibín calls “the daily business of writing and remembering and imagining” (8). This brings me to one of the criticisms leveled at Bloom’s vision of the vengeful artist-son (the ephebe) murdering the father-figure (precursor), namely, that “it overlooks the process whereby someone becomes a poet in the first place (rather than, say, a doctor, or a race-track owner) and the long personal evolution that antecedes the identification of themes and hence of rivals and forerunners” (Tallis 91). Author fictions tell the story of this very process, that “lengthy chapter of accidents, decisions, [and] self-interpretations” leading to his or her “anxiety of influence” (91). At best, these works delve in the artist’s consciousness, offering ways of looking, speaking, remembering, inventing, and bearing witness that comprise the evolution of the artist. “It matters to our understanding of the shape of the writer’s life,” John Haffended insists, “to know what he reads, what his mind is possessed by, what he assimilates, what he cites, and the scope of his ambition—what he revels in, what he aspires to—the register of his language, the furniture of his mind” (453).

The works treated here bring to the fore their subjects’ life-stories, which often form the subtext of their authored works but become visible in confessions, letters, biographies, and memoirs. Thus, in *Out of Sheer Rage*, examined in chapter II, Dyer insists on turning to Lawrence’s letters, for here he can find “how literature is lived through”—the raw materials, as it were, for any work, be it scholarly or fictional, about Lawrence. At times, he approaches Lawrence indirectly by following the trails Lawrence followed, or by reading other authors (Rilke, Camus, Nietzsche) and carrying on this dialogue between authors. His “touching”

reading of Lawrence enables him to connect the latter's writings to the circumstances of their composition, as well as to the personality of their creator. Furthermore, in seeking out Lawrence, Dyer also aims at better understanding himself.

Perhaps stronger than the anxiety of influence is, therefore, the need to "escape from the prison of selfhood, from the endless exploration of one's own consciousness" (Jacobs 31) and claim kin with one's forebears: "every man," Henry James recognized in his own critical biography of Hawthorne, works better when he has companions working in the same line, and yielding the stimulus of suggestion, comparison, emulation" (*Portable* 417). The truth of James's statement appears to have hit home to a contemporary writer like David Foster Wallace, who in an interview with Larry McCaffery, has confessed: "The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back." The trope of orphanhood informs Derrida's discussion of the author as "orphaned, and separated at birth from the assistance of its father" ("Signature" 316). The contemporary writer's return to the "father" and his works is at the same time a gesture toward the future; they are part of one motion, suggesting interconnection between writers and between writers and readers.

If author fictions share a theme, this is the theme of "human connectedness," "the sparks of divinity that fly between one soul and another" (Iyer 170)—an issue I take up more closely in the second half of this chapter, where I put forth some generic considerations about author fictions, along with a model of "reading for the author." In author fictions, I argue, personal history returns to its original meaning of story, a human construct operating on the principle of selectivity and deploying strategies of representation that frame truth with fiction because, as Virginia Woolf put, it "where truth is important, I prefer to write fiction" (*Pargiters* 9). Author

fictions fulfill, to varying degrees, the vision articulated by Woolf in her influential essay on “The Art of Biography” (1939): “Could not biography produce something of the intensity of poetry, something of the excitement of drama, and yet keep also the peculiar virtue that belongs to fact—its suggestive reality, its own proper creativeness? (CE4: 224).⁹ Indeed, as I show in what follows, author fictions make for an emotionally *and* aesthetically satisfying experience, as readers become alert not only to how literature is lived through, but also to the ways in which literary lives can be illuminated through the lens of fiction.

Framing Truth with Fiction: The Poetics of Author Fictions

“How can we tell the man from the work, and both from the stories about him?”

(Nye 38).

“None of it seemed very real, but I suppose that’s the trouble with history, it’s the one thing we have to make up for ourselves.”

(Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 226)

The return to the subject, history, and the real in author-fictions does not occur at the expense of that which is most essential in making literature: the literary. Postmodern writers go back to traditional forms and structures, re-examining and reworking them to suit artistic purposes that are “not merely ironic” but also “deeply humanistic” (Wallace). If their incredulity towards “grand narratives”¹⁰ often translates into such formal characteristics as irony, parody, pastiche, infinite deferral of closure, polyphonic discourse, etc., their belief in the artist as a

morally conscious (and therefore responsible) human being prompts them to use formal innovations in the service of a vision which affirms the “nourishing and redemptive” power of literature. Taking issue with Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism as the “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (*Postmodernism* 65), Hutcheon responds: “Postmodernist ironic recall of history is neither nostalgia nor aesthetic cannibalization” (*Poetics* 24). For the presence of irony and play does not necessarily exclude “seriousness and purpose in postmodernist art” (27). This is because, as David Foster Wallace has remarked, “people who really care about the forms—the serious writers and readers in fiction—don’t want all the forms ‘broken,’ they want variation that allows the essence to emerge in new ways.”

Contrary to Jonathan Dee’s claim that the “appropriation of genuine historical figures” is an “epidemic” that threatens to subvert the novel’s “vitality” and inventiveness, I argue that the genre of author-fictions has reinvigorated the novel and narrative theory in the last two decades or so. What “rankles” Dee about the so-called “phenomenon of the psycho-historical novel”¹¹ is that its “imaginative capital is death” (81). A novel, unlike a fictionalized biography of someone who actually lived, offers the opportunity to know its invented characters “*completely*, through the fiction writer’s fully, uncompromised access” to their “interior lives, as well as to the ways in which they define themselves through the observable phenomena of speech and action” (77).

Dee’s emphasis on the superiority of fiction to hybrid genres like pseudo-biographies echoes the arguments advanced by Marie-Laure Ryan in “Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality” (1997) and Dorrit Cohn in *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999), both of which insist on maintaining the borders between fiction and nonfiction “effaced” by postmodern practices (Cohn vii). Responding to Hayden White, who stressed the “literariness of historical writing” (White, *Figural* ix), Cohn argues that the distinction of fiction inheres in its very

resistance to history, whether past or present. With Dee, she states that in fiction, “the minds of imaginary figures can be known in ways that those of real persons cannot” (116). Along the same lines, Marie-Laure Ryan builds her case against panfictionality. With Cohn and Dee, Ryan identifies fiction with freedom from the constraints of nonfiction. According to her, the “possibility of hybridization does not necessarily mean that the two categories are inherently indeterminate” (165). Ryan’s argument posits a dichotomy that “avoids the association of non-fiction with truth and fiction with non-truth.”¹² A text of nonfiction, such as a biography, cannot be evaluated in terms of truth because of its “competitive relation with other texts and other representations” (166). Fiction, on the other hand, by virtue of its contract with the reader, needs no external validation for the world imagined by the author. As a game of make-believe played between the author and her audience, fiction is said to operate under several rules, one of which holds that, “unlike texts of nonfiction, fictional texts do not share their reference world with other texts” (167). This rule, of course, breaks down in author fictions, where the “primary reference world” (Ryan 168) remains more or less firmly grounded in a recognizable human setting—what Michael McKeon has called the “objective surroundings” of the historical author (17).

McKeon has reaffirmed a “commonplace of historical argument” according to which the birth of “the biographical-novelistic subject” was concurrent with that of the “social type of the writer” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (17). Both biographies and novels, McKeon adds, posit “a self-conscious subjectivity, independent enough of its objective surroundings to provide, in itself, the occasion for a coherent and continuous narrative” (17). By “objective surroundings,” the critic means “those external social, historical, and metaphysical forces that were taken not simply to condition but fully to constitute human existence” (18). Thus, “early novels tend to be about nothing other than this experience of

disengagement” (18). By contrast, author fictions foreground the very experience of their subjects’ engagement with those “objective surroundings” that governed the relations between authors and their texts.

Regardless of the labels one may attach to them—“psycho-historical novels” (Dee), “nonfiction novels” (Ryan), “psychobiographies,” or “fiction biographies” (Jacobs)—the texts that interest me here show the impossibility of distinguishing “on linguistic grounds, historical and biographical facts from fictional ‘factoids’: those invented or selected details of environment, chronology, and thought that give fictional characters fullness and plausibility” (Jacobs xvi-vii). An umbrella term for this hybrid literary form is “life-texts,” which William H. Epstein has described as

powerful and influential discourses precisely and strategically situated at the intersections of objectivity and subjectivity, body and mind, self and other, the natural and the cultural, fact and fiction, as well as many other conceptual dyads with which Western civilization has traditionally theorized both the practices and the representations of everyday life. (2)

The creative conjunction of these dyads in author fictions, we will see shortly, challenges the realist conception of history as knowable and coherent.

The vibrant and expansive genre of the “author-as-character” can be analyzed according to the “interlocking criteria” proposed by Franssen and Hoenselaars: “the relative importance of the author-character within the work,” “the ontological status ascribed to the author-character in a particular work of literature,” the more or less extensive use of historical documentation, of the subject-author’s own texts, and the attitude displayed by the latter author toward the author-character” (21). At stake in author fictions is the vexed relationship between historical accuracy and invention, past and present, history and imagination, fact and fiction, literature and criticism, text and context, authored work and biography. While all

fiction pretends to narrate incidents in the ‘real’ lives of fictive characters, these works move in the worlds of literature *and* history, as contemporary writers imagine what it felt like to be Novalis, Chatterton, Dickens, or Wilde. Given that not all author fictions purport to chronicle the “real” life of a historical figure, their treatments range from the “relatively realistic” to the “more stylized and fantastic” (Jacobs xix). Nor do they lay claim to knowing the past in all its fullness and particularity. The shortage of information about Shakespeare, for instance, accounts for Robert Nye’s inventive take on the life of *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* (1989): “Town history . . . facts and figures . . . ruled by the head” mingle throughout with “country history . . . wild and mystical and passionate . . . ruled by the heart” (67-8). The narrator, an imaginary actor in Shakespeare’s company, introduces his story about Shakespeare—that “hero with a thousand faces, and none” (39)—as one inspired by a “desire to come at the truth by telling lies” and justified by the fact that, a “dwarf sitting or standing on shoulders of a giant may see farther than the giant himself” (42). In his turn, David Malouf has seized on the sparse facts about the “most modern of the Latin poets,” Ovid, to imagine his life more freely in *An Imaginary Life* (1978), which he describes as “neither historical novel nor biography, but a fiction with its roots in possible event” (154, 153).

With the disappearance of a clear-cut distinction between historical discourse (hypothetically real) and literary discourse (presumably fictional), not only does history undergo a process of fictionalization, but also fiction may become as valuable and important as any verifiable document which tells us of the past from a fresh perspective. Archives offer us only “textual traces” of events, which take on meaning, that is, become ideologically charged, as writers and critics of different stripes configure them into “facts” (Hutcheon, “The Pastime” 291). If for White historical discourse is similar to, but not the same as, fiction, for J. Hillis Miller, “it is literary fiction that models itself after history” (qtd. in Ryan 178). Thus,

“the novel’s imitation of history”—more precisely, of Hegel’s teleological concept of history—enables it to have structure with a “beginning, middle, and end” (Ryan 178). This desire to gather the fragments of a writer’s life into a coherent narrative and to weave the threads of his works into a meaningful pattern, one that corresponds to some sense of human destiny, some movement of progress or decline, fuels all literary biographies. These have lately become “more personal, more idiosyncratic, imaginative, experimental, more hybrid” (Holroyd 30).¹³ The current upsurge in fictions about real authors can be regarded as a natural outgrowth of these developments. As Randall Stevenson explains, “In ways often missing from the contemporary novel,” biography tends to offer “a satisfying sense of the significance of the self, continuing to present character as destiny, and usually finding psychological or just logical, explanations for the nature and development of individual lives” (440).

It may therefore be that author fictions arise not only from the “shortcomings of history” (Novalis), as Fitzgerald’s chosen epigraph to her novel suggests, but also from the dissatisfaction with what Raymond Federman has called the “pathetic condition of the novel in our time.” “The genre,” he states, “having squandered its substance, no longer has an object. The character is dying out, the plot too”(160). A famous passage from Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (1988) reminds us that, in our century of wars and violence, “history stopped paying attention to the old psychological orientation of reality . . . these days, character isn’t destiny any more. Economics is destiny. Bombs are destiny . . . your pathetic individual self doesn’t have anything to do with it” (pt. VII, ch.2). Hence the paradox in the postmodern conception of identity, noted by Eugene Goodheart: “On the one hand, postmodernism affirms the coherent identities of racial and ethnic groups, and, on the other, it deconstructs the idea of a coherent personal identity. Identity obtains in cultural politics, but not in personal psychology” (85). Goodheart hastens to qualify this statement by referring to the

“unprecedented obsession with autobiography and personal memoir—as if writers are trying to recuperate from the fragmentation of their being and experience some sense of coherence” (85). This neatly describes Geoff Dyer’s efforts, in *Out of Sheer Rage*, to piece together a whole out of fragments, a “totalizing” picture of Lawrence out of several snapshots.

But order, coherency, and pattern are introduced into the subject’s life only through the creation of a narrative, an “imaginative revision and rearrangement—a mosaic that is, in effect, an interpretation” (Parini 245). Author fictions extend the possibilities of straight biography, enriching it with strategies (perspective, voice, figurative language, episodic structure, character description and psychological development) that are intrinsic to the novel-making process. The rich metaphor, playful quality, and descriptive power of fiction render significance to the authors’ lives in more fundamental ways than would mere chronological accuracy or factual fidelity. Jay Parini believes that, “One can describe events on the surface”—as conventional biographies do—“but one can’t get into them and under them in the same way that novelists do” (251). The commitment and passion these writers often bring to the task of rewriting both the lives and the works of their predecessors distinguishes them from “objective” researchers and authoritative biographers. Their imaginative vision takes them to places other than the conventional, fact-oriented biography, as well as criticism, for as Michèle Roberts writes in *The Mistressclass*—a poignant recreation of the bond between Charlotte and Emily Brontë—unlike the language of criticism, which “depended on theories that wore out as they became unfashionable and were replaced,” “the language of poetry and novels was hammered out of something else; metaphor, purer and sparer. Like bones and blood” (109).

Unlike conventional biographers, contemporary novelist-biographers anchor themselves in the place of their subjects and assume their perspectives; penetrate beneath the

public surface to explore the artists' private lives; allow authors to reveal themselves in their own words by quoting or paraphrasing their letters; go beyond their subjects' recorded statements and indulge in psychological speculation, teasing out motives and moods; think, or imagine their way into the lives of their precursors, even though it means "laying illusion on illusion" (Malamud 20). For, indeed, no matter how close the life-writer comes to his or her subject, the latter remains "unknown, unknowable, and yet tantalizingly real; other, odd, and yet disturbingly familiar; dead, gone, yet still here and lively" (Jacobs 44). We are reminded that in fiction, as in life, what matters more than the substance of the truth is the process of truth seeking, which opens up unexpected possibilities. As Franssen and Hoenselaars maintain, "it is the adventures of the mind, not of the body," that draw modern writers to their famous predecessors. Hence the element of "self-reflection" that often accompanies their voyages into others writers' creative processes, and that reveals much about their own poetics (18).

For example, Toibín's description of the point of view Henry James employed in *The Turn of the Screw* also fits his own novel about "the Master": "Thus the reader would see the world through her eyes, but somehow see her [the governess] too, despite her efforts at self-concealment and self-suppression, in ways she could not see herself" (139). By focusing the narrative in the subject's consciousness, Toibín fleshes out a psychologically nuanced portrait of Henry James, making us aware of the latter's vulnerability in his private life and beyond. The Irish novelist does not let his subject's life overshadow the work, however, for he lends equal attention to both. In so doing, Toibín is taking his cue from Edel, who has insisted that "an artist's work is less incidental than it has seemed" and that "there exists an equally consistent effort—an inescapable use of the buried materials of life and experience—to which the artist constantly returns" (HJ4: 17). Toibín's memory-invoking techniques take us through

different stages of the novelist's life, dissolving barriers of space and time and highlighting the threads of memory, loss, and survival at the heart of his work. He thus unearths memories of James's childhood, the American Civil War, his friendship with Holmes, the family pressure to give up writing for a steady job, as well as his discovery of French authors and Hawthorne. James remains, however, an elusive figure, a detached yet intimate observer of the life around him, his mind attentive to and absorbing every nuance of speech, manner, thought, and feeling.

An accomplished literary biographer, Ackroyd offers compelling variations on old facts about the lives of Chatterton and Wilde, reshuffling these facts into new combinations, taking on the voices of his subjects, and telling their stories through revealing passages from their own works.¹⁴ Along with Herman Broch's *The Death of Virgil* (1945) and David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978), *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* is an example of "apocryphal memoir," defined by Moraru as "an openly fictional narrative published under a name different from its subject (typically a historical figure)" (*Memorious* 33). Since in a postmodern frame, the real author's textual double works to undermine suggestions of psychological wholeness and stable signification, the "personae" through which Ackroyd traces the enticing myths of Chatterton and Wilde deepen the mystery surrounding them. In *Chatterton*, Philip and Charles agree that "there is a charm and even a beauty in unfinished work—the face which is broken by the sculptor and then abandoned, the poem which is interrupted and never ended"; as Philip wonders "Why should historical research not also remain incomplete, existing as a possibility and not fading into knowledge?" (213). In the same novel, Harriet Scrope tells her friend Sarah Tilt that completing her memoirs "would reinstate all of her old fears [of death]. For this would be her last book." Therefore, she expresses a wish she could "begin all over again" (34).

Ackroyd's outlook in both novels I analyze in chapter III dovetails with postmodern views of history, identity, and narrative. Unlike realism, postmodernism is characterized by a lack of faith in the cohesion of experience or the ability of language to contain it. White points out in "The Fictions of Factual Representation" that realist fiction was informed by the belief that 'reality' is not only perceivable but is also coherent in structure" (122). In his turn, Lyotard sees in the conventions of realism a means to "deceive, seduce, and reassure" (Lyotard 76). George Eliot's famous declaration in *Adam Bede* serves to undermine, rather than reinforce, the mimetic illusion created by the realist novel: "The mirror is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused" (177). In Carey's rewriting of *Great Expectations*, Oates's representation of Maggs is false, indeed defective, and yet the novelist-character would pass it off as "real." *Jack Maggs* undermines the realist assumption of a "direct correspondence" between art and life, of a direct "transcription from 'reality' to novel" (A. Lee 18). Tobias Oates mistakenly assumes that Maggs's past is knowable, coherent, and available for representation, when in fact, his knowledge merely projects his own fears and anxieties: "For the writer was stumbling through the dark of the convict's past, groping in the shadows, describing what was often a mirror held up to his own turbulent and fearful soul" (Carey 91). Through the novel's eponymous hero, however, Carey suggests that the past is inevitably mediated by the "caprices of memory" and "the layering of experience" (Lee 60).

And finally, in *The Blue Flower*, the incidents and incidentals drawn from Hardenberg's life and set against the larger background of late 18th century German life combine to make up what the poet himself described as an "endless novel," one that reinforces both the open-endedness of the romantic quest for the Truth and Fitzgerald's own quest for the "truth" about Novalis. This novel poignantly shows how difficult it is to retrace the paths of a

life that is “ever rewoven, constantly renewed or reconstructed, constantly evolving, a story and a work in progress” (Olney 344). Writing in the margins of her subject’s “endless novel,” as it were, Fitzgerald gives us “the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders” (Woolf, “The Art” 226).

Within postmodernism no work of representation can ever be complete, in the sense that writers can never exhaust the matter of their characters’ lives. “Never say you know the final word about any human heart!” The opening sentence of Henry James’s story “Louisa Pallant” (CT6: 233) might stand as an admonition to novelists and biographers alike.¹⁵ Pseudo-biographers may fail to bridge “the gulf between the knowable and unknowable” about their subjects, but this does not render their works any less valuable or powerful than traditional novels. The appeal held by the first lies precisely in the “illusion of ‘reality’ they create but also call into question (Jacobs 36). Since the brute facts of life are not directly accessible to us, mapping this life becomes an exercise in approximation and imagination. As early as 1861, when he published *The Life of Jesus*, Ernest Renan recognized that, “In such an effort as this, to restore life to the great souls of the past, an element of divination and conjecture must be permitted. A great life is an organic whole, which cannot be portrayed merely by assembling little facts. It requires a profound sensibility to embrace them all, fusing them into perfect unity” (qtd. in Novick 106). Author fictions insist that their subjects can only be “known” through language and layers of representation. As Hayden White has observed, “The historical past is, in a word, ‘uncanny,’ both known and unknown, present and absent, familiar and alien, at one and the same time. Thus constructed, the historical past has all the attributes that we might ascribe to the psychological sphere of the ‘imaginary’” (qtd. in Jacobs 37).

By the same token, even though they cannot lay “any legitimate claim to greatness” (Dee 84), such narratives show us what greatness is all about by shedding light on the multiple dimensions of the authorial craft, by probing the mystery of creation and the hidden complexities of the artist’s mind. Nor, for that matter, can Don DeLillo’s “claim” on behalf of this genre be as “grand,” or overstated as Dee sees it: “Fiction,” DeLillo has written, “slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen anew” (qtd. in Dee 84).¹⁶ In author fictions, the earlier writer’s textual hypostases include “the uniquely personal and the inclusively human” (Rusk 3), which accounts for the powerful tendency in contemporary literature and theory to “encourage our identifications not only with characters but with these strangers, these others, these authors” (Bennett, *Author* 127).

Much like biographies and autobiographies, author fictions offer a keen sense of encountering another individual. A cultural icon, the author takes on significance in the heart of the empathetic reader, or “by a kind of magical transfer of authorial sympathies” (Dee 76). For indeed, “it takes an unusually ardent devotion to imagine, as Cunningham does [in *The Hours*], that Woolf’s novel [*Mrs. Dalloway*] might enter the world as an instrument of fate, influencing lives for three-quarters of a century—even the lives of those who never read it” (Dee 76). For it would seem that, as Steiner has argued, “The further the artifact moves from the artist, in time, in the interpretations and uses others make of it, the less reparable it becomes, the less integral to its producer” (35). But in foregrounding both the necessity of creation and the creative process itself, fiction biographies help restore some of that “primordial unity and cohesion” (of the artist’s inner vision) which was “ruptured” by the production of the actual work (Steiner 35). Works such as *Chatterton*, *Out of Sheer Rage*, and

The Hours highlight the regenerative experience that may come when the work of the author-character creates a bond of mutual understanding and affection with the common reader. The bond between writer and reader rests on the recognition that the value of the artist's life lies in his ability to touch the consciousness of others, to have, like one of James's characters says in "The Middle Years," "made somebody care" (CT9: 75). Author fictions affirm the complex and intimate connections between writers and their books, on the one hand, and readers, on the other. In the remainder of this chapter, I sketch out a model of reading that will be further examined in relation to both Geoff Dyer's pseudo-memoir, *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*. This model connects the text to a human source or presence compounded by the author, his or her subject, and the reader.

The premise of Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading—namely, that, "a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work" (1)—plays like a riff on George Poulet's statement that, "Made of paper and ink," he says, books "lie where they are put until the moment someone shows an interest in them" (101). Both Rosenblatt and Poulet are interested in how a text works/functions, how it affects readers, drawing forth their participation/imagination. Poulet is intrigued by what he calls the "interiority" of a book, drawn to its appeals, and moved by how it offers and opens itself up to him to the point where something extraordinary happens: the barriers between the book and him (the reader), the outside and inside, object and subject, collapse. Poulet's description of the "experience of interiority" comes close to Rosenblatt's account of "aesthetic reading," as it describes the inevitable and intimate encounter between the consciousness inherent in the book—the "mental entities" represented by its ideas, images, and words—and the reader's "innermost self" (103, 102). The act of reading entails then a "strange invasion" of the reader's person by the thoughts of another: "When I am absorbed in reading, a second

self takes over, a self which thinks and feels for me” (106). Rosenblatt’s argument assumes, however, a more active role for readers, emphasizing—in the manner of Wilde and Pater—their projective contribution to the reading process. Wilde, for instance, in “The Critic as Artist,” did not deny that, “the meaning of any beautiful created thing is at least as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it” (1401). Thus the “vital inbreathing” that animates a literary work is as much the reader’s as it is the writer’s.

What happens, though, when the book in which we immerse ourselves is focused in the consciousness of an author-character? Following Poulet, one could argue that the consciousness that informs an author-fiction and that “invades” us is a composite of two subjectivities: that of the novelist-biographer, on the one hand, and of her subject, on the other. For indeed, the writing of author-fiction takes the form of a “dialogic exchange,” produced through an “intersubjective operation,” between the narrated author and the narrating author (Regard 408). And like the novelist-biographer, the reader, who is caught in the “same transferential space,” is “redefined” from her encounter with what Regard calls the “truth of the other,” in particular, the ‘truth’ of the narrated author (408, 396). For Regard, as for the writers treated here, this “truth” is bound up with the contingencies of the author-character’s private and public history. Thus a certain frame of reference brought into play by the reader’s disposition and historical situation partakes of a broader system of reference implicating both the earlier and later author.

Poulet, on the other hand, is careful to distinguish between knowledge of the writer, of his flesh and bone existence, and the “internal knowledge of the work.” In his view, the work is everything, the man behind the work irrelevant. As he puts it, “Nothing external to the work could possibly share the extraordinary claim which the work now exerts for me. It is there within me, not to send me back, outside itself, to its author, nor to his other writings, but on

the contrary to keep my attention riveted on itself” (107). With a Janus-like gaze on both life and writing, the novelist-biographer shows the extent to which the subject-author’s humanity and creativity implicate, rather than exclude each other. By virtue of their “complex, incessant joining of event and composition” (Ellmann, *James Joyce* 3), these novels achieve the very function that Poulet ascribed solely to an author’s writings. These, he says, represent “the means by which an author actually preserves his ideas, his feelings, his modes of dreaming and living” (106). In author fictions, the subjects carry on their lives and works in dialogue with the “modern conjurors of their spirit” (Byatt 43). The very fact that these works have stood the test of time proves their inexhaustible cultural richness and vitality.

This sense of identity predicated on the future, yet tied to the past, defines the posthumous, the unifying trope of postmodern author fictions. According to Andrew Bennett, among the “deeply vexed issues of posthumous survival and recognition” are the fact that “one cannot experience one’s own posterity,” along with the fact that “becoming ‘eternal’ or ‘immortal’ in one’s work means ‘dying’” (*Romantic* 201). The relation between “writing and death” is one of the themes running throughout Foucault’s essay, “What is an Author?” Inverting the older conception of narrative as a shield against death, or even as a guarantor of immortality,¹⁷ Michel Foucault claims that, “Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself; it is a voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes place in the everyday existence of the writer” (117). Author fictions, it has become clear by now, establish a relation between re-writing and the posthumous by showing how writers live on not only in the imagination, voices, and textual bodies of other writers, or in the minds and hearts of their readers. For “[w]ritten language, stored in books, let you travel backwards, through and beyond death. It let you stand in the presence of the person who made it,” as well as “in the presence of its making” (Roberts 107,

108). This makes reading “a form of resurrection,” with language “the skein” binding generations and embodying the writer’s immortality (Roberts 108).

Postmodern experimentation, in the form of intertextuality and self-reflexivity, should not be understood, then, as a denial of literature’s connection to the world, for, as Moraru explains, “the postmodern fundamentally rests upon a complex ‘engagement’ with the world, upon a relational pathos that renders postmodernism’s texts, tunes, and art objects deeply ‘dialogic,’” in the Bakhtinian sense (*Memorious* 9). This world, as we have seen, encompasses both past and present, the life and times of the author-character, as well as the cultural moment of his or her pseudo-biographer. Thus, “despite their wordplay, their awareness of the conventions of narrative fiction, their anticipation of readers’ expectations, their blatant and subtle referencing of other texts,” postmodern writers “care deeply about the world” (Haffended 59). I would add, in light of the chapters that follow, that they also “care deeply” about literature and its makers, whose legatees they are, but whose contemporaries they are still learning to be.

Notes

¹ The post-deconstructive subject then is “neither purely abstract nor wholly contingent or particular,” inaugurating what Derrida, in *Spectres of Marx*, calls “hauntology,” which initially referred to the rapidly proliferating virtual modes of communication.

² This theory of a transcendent, impersonal, and disinterested author goes back, as M.H. Abrams suggests, to the “theological tradition which portrays God as both transcendent of, and omnipresent within, creation” (qtd. in Burke, *Authorship* xxii). For to become a “Creator-God,” the author had to be able to empty himself of subjective concerns, and thus transcend and disperse his personality throughout his work (xxii).

³ Derrida uses the metonym of “signature” to address authorship in “Signature Event Context” and “Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger): Two Questions.” In the former essay, Derrida posits the author as part of a context (his personal circumstances at the time of writing, his intentions, etc.) that is absorbed and transcended by the various contexts of re-reading and re-writing. In the latter essay, Derrida challenges the traditional notion that an author’s texts give unity to his or her name. For, as he asks, “who ever has said that a person bears a single name?” (256).

⁴ For a list of terms designed to discriminate authorial personae from the historical agent(s) who produce the text, see the appendix (128-129) to Andrew Bennett’s study *The Author* (2005).

⁵ Derived from Borges’s story, “Funes the Memorious,” which foregrounds the associative workings of the eponymous hero’s memory, Moraru’s critical metaphor of “memorious discourse” captures the “interrelational nature of postmodern representation, its quintessential intertextuality” (*Memorious* 21).

⁶ In his turn, Vincent Leitch sees the poststructuralist formulation of the intertext as “simultaneously (1) an inescapable and determining archive of historical material and forces, and (2) an unlimited hodgepodge of sources, conscious and unconscious, infiltrating and disrupting all stable discourse” that undermines the “cherished idea of the artist as a supremely conscious artificer” (12).

⁷ Similarly, in *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*, Nancy Armstrong argues that, “contrary to modernism’s view of the Victorians as simple-minded imperialists, they knew exactly what they were doing when they presumed to show a mass readership what was real” (vii).

⁸ In “The Art of Fiction,” James takes issue with novelists like Trollope who, in addition to pandering directly to their readers, give themselves away by revealing the secrets that should be

kept hidden. So alarming was for both James and Dickens the establishing of a biographical link between the man and his art that they burnt most of their personal letters and papers. Not surprisingly, in *The Aspern Papers*, James's famous novel about a Romantic poet's love-letters, the young American researcher is referred to as a "publishing scoundrel."

⁹ Virginia Woolf is among the first to have raised the crucial question of why and how to read biography: "These biographies and autobiographies, for example, lives of great men, of men long dead and forgotten, that stand cheek by jowl with the novels and poems, are we to refuse to read them because they are not 'art'? Or shall we read them, but read them in a different way, with a different aim?" (*Essays* 3).

¹⁰ In Jean-François Lyotard's terms, postmodernism is characterized by an "incredulity towards metanarratives" that "no longer provide an authoritative way of understanding past events" (110). See *The Postmodern Condition* 27-41.

¹¹ Dee links this phenomenon to the "New Journalism" movement from the 1960s and 70s, which was "primarily a realization of the fantasy of carrying the novelist's fundamentally unreal powers of perception into the world of real people and events" (79). For Marie-Laure Ryan, the so-called "Nonfiction Novel," the primary offspring of the same movement, "represents an attempt to recuperate what modern and postmodern fiction have largely discarded: the immersive techniques of the nineteenth century novel" (170). In so doing, the "neo-realist novel" mediates "between the poles of fiction and nonfiction" (171). Dee singles out Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1975), Tom Woolf's *Public Burning*, and E.L.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1997) as representative of this "genre," along with most recent works, such as Joanna Scott's *Arrogance*, Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*, and J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*.

¹² Ryan's main reason in pleading for the fiction/nonfiction distinction is that "it provides our only protection against the 'hyperreality syndrome'"—a concept she borrows from Baudrillard—"the replacement of reality (or the masking of its absence) by the simulacra thrown at us by culture and the media" (180).

¹³ According to Michael Holroyd, these texts belong to the "second golden age of biography," which followed the era inaugurated by Samuel Johnson's *Life of Savage*, and which, in our age, culminated with Richard Holmes's "Stevensonian" *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage* (30). A systematic attempt at theorizing this increasingly popular, and therefore highly marketable narrative form can be found in David Ellis's book, *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding*.

¹⁴ Following his ingenious re-creations of the lives of Chaucer, Dickens, T.S. Eliot, William Blake, and Saint Thomas More, Ackroyd has recently delivered his crowning achievement with *Shakespeare: A Biography* (2005). Immersing himself in the culture of Shakespeare's age, Ackroyd brings to his biographical reading the keen intuition of an extremely knowledgeable historian and the imaginative insights of a gifted poet and novelist.

¹⁵ In one of the interviews recorded for the provocative, beautifully realized documentary *Derrida* (2002), the French philosopher questions the very concept of biography. According to him, "the one who reads a text by a philosopher, even a tiny paragraph, and interprets it in a rigorous, inventive and deciphering fashion is more of a real biographer than the one who knows the whole story." The "whole story," which encompasses the details, anecdotes and daily events in one's life, can "be only inadequately told," and therefore, what remains essential, for Derrida, about a person is what that person "thinks and writes philosophically." Applied to literature, Derrida's ideas about biography suggest that the author lives in his/her work first and foremost, but he/she can claim no authority over the meanings of that work.

¹⁶ Dee's "apprehension" stems from a "nagging sense, even in the most sophisticated of these books, of a lowering of the literary bar" (83-4). Impersonated real-life characters, he argues, are less "vivid and memorable" than invented ones, and the very act of their impersonation is dismissed as a matter of "creating graven images" (84).

¹⁷ As Atwood notes, "*all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated deep down by a fear of and fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead" (156). Equally terrifying, Atwood points out, has been, especially in the twentieth century, writers' fears of their own inconsequence (98). This helps explain the "sense of empowerment" enabled by their engagements with famous literary predecessors. According to Jonathan Dee, "writers take upon themselves the task of impersonating geniuses—ostensibly as an act of homage, but also, not coincidentally, as a way of grabbing up the genuine cachet those geniuses still deliver, in order to enhance the value of one's own work" (82).

CHAPTER II
HOW LITERATURE IS LIVED THROUGH:
TOUCHING READING AND GEOFF DYER'S "SHEER RAGE"

“If you want to see how literature lives, then you turn to writers, and see what they’ve said about each other, either in essays, reviews, in letters, or journals—and in the works themselves.”

(Dyer 102)

“In short, every secret of a writer’s soul, every quality of his mind is written large in his works, yet we require critics to explain the one and biographers to expound the other.”

(Woolf, *Orlando* 103)

This chapter explores Geoff Dyer’s 1997 pseudo-memoir *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* as a rich ground for probing the dynamics and implications of a phenomenological model of reading that allows us to see, on the one hand, how texts act and work through their readers and, on the other, how readers both connect with authors and reach an experiential understanding of their lives. Reattaching the text to the human source from which poststructuralist criticism has severed it defines what Valentine Cunningham calls “touching reading,” an interpretive activity that engages “the presence, the rights, the needs of the human subject, in texts, in the origination of texts, in the reception of texts” (142). While acknowledging

the necessity of theory for reading and the good it has done, Cunningham takes issue with those interpretations that disregard “the otherness of the author and his/her text.” Most often, he points out, theory “bypasses, smothers, overcomes, belittles authors and texts.” Along the same lines, Steven Monte insists that, “critical readings should not lose touch with the reading experience” (495). “Articulating and accounting for reading experience,” he maintains, “may be hard today because professional pressures have widened the gap between reading and reading professionally” (494).

In *Out of Sheer Rage*, Dyer bridges the gap between reading for pleasure and reading professionally by never losing “touch” not so much with Lawrence’s work, whether fictional or non-fictional, as with the “circumstances of its composition” (103). Craving “an increasingly intimate relationship with the author, unmediated, in so far as possible, by the contrivances of art,” Dyer, or his textual double, follows the trajectory of Lawrence’s life and turns to his occasional writings, particularly his letters, so that he can “feel the Lawrentian vibes” (12) and understand “the man and his sensations” (103). By the same token, what he calls the “Lawrence Experience” entails a process of self-exploration and self-understanding, for Dyer comes to terms with himself and finds a way out of his despair only through (re)reading Lawrence. In fact, the narrator moves to the center of his narrative, from which vantage point, he fashions both an endearing portrait of Lawrence and an amusing, self-mocking self-portrait. Finally, Dyer must accept that his attempts at fixing a biographical image of Lawrence are doomed to fail, and that he can only give us a glimpse into the many-sidedness and radical contingency of Lawrence’s identity.

Part memoir, part novel, part biographical criticism, *Out of Sheer Rage* partakes of a changed literary landscape whose frontiers have been radically redefined, if not rendered invisible, by the postmodern hybridization of genres. With Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes, Alain

de Botton, Penelope Fitzgerald, and Michael Cunningham, among others, Dyer shares a writer's fascination with another writer's life and works, as well as an implicit yet strong belief that a text is never totally independent of the consciousness that gives it life, even if that consciousness changes from author to reader. At one point, Dyer wonders whether his "preference for writers"—not just Lawrence's—notes and letters" partakes of "a general, historical drift away from the novel." Contemporary literature, Vince Passaro reminds us, "has moved steadily away from narratives of heroic action and myth towards narrative of life as it is lived: quotidian, internalized, and pathological" (299). As I show in the first part of this chapter, however far Dyer does take us from anything like conventional narration, he does not abandon the enterprise of the novelist altogether, for he claims the freedom to explore every available form of writing. Vacillating between a biographical and autobiographical project, between a critical exegesis and fictional enterprise, Dyer freely mixes up narrative and discursive writing, the factual and the fictional to develop a philosophy of reading that is tightly bound up with a philosophy of life. *Out of Sheer Rage* bears the signature of the literary critic's delightful wit and gift for an impressionistic prose style featured by two of Dyer's previous books, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger* (1986) and *But Beautiful: A Book about Jazz* (1996). In addition to disrupting the traditional hierarchies of genres, the "somber, academic study" Dyer fails to write also testifies to a general drift away from theory. For Dyer, reading Lawrence "unquoted" means leaving theory behind because academic criticism tends to "kill everything it touches" (101).

Throughout his book, then, Dyer is wrestling not so much with Lawrence, as with a certain way of reading, but also writing, about Lawrence's words and world. As I argue, his memoir deconstructs theory only to reconstruct the author's humanity, his flesh and bone existence, by emphasizing the personal dynamics at work in Lawrence's creative endeavors as well as in those of his "biographer's." The second half of this chapter elaborates the implications

of this dynamics at greater length, highlighting both those places where the personal narratives of the two writers intersect and where they part company. For to be sure, Dyer's sense of closeness and intimacy, of recognition and immediacy triggered by Lawrence's writings is just as strong as that of strangeness and resistance, distancing and displacement. The book Dyer ends up writing may lack the rigor of a "somber academic study," but the author's "touching reading" of Lawrence, involving as it does the interaction of their subjectivities, makes it insightful, illuminating, and rewarding.

Touching Reading

"Since we are so cerebral
We are humanly out of touch."

(Lawrence, "Touch" 468)

"Had I read you right? But the human face—the human face at
the top of the fullest sheet of print holds more, withholds more."

(Woolf, "An Unwritten Novel" 15)

Over the last twenty years, many critics and writers have rushed to judge Lawrence on the basis of ideology, condemning him as "a sexist, crypto-fascist, and racist" (Adelman 17) and pushing his works out of the reading lists for survey courses in British modernism. Thus whereas Pico Iyer regards Lawrence as "one of the great androgynous writers" who "has appealed to women as much as to men" (177), Terry Eagleton dismisses Lawrence as "perhaps the most pathologically sexist author that the modern English canon . . . has managed to produce" (qtd. in Adelman 39). In his turn, Milan Kundera pokes fun at Lawrence's belief that

“there was a life force in people that his words could liberate” (qtd. in Adelman 29). In *Anglo-English Attitudes*, an eclectic collection of “essays, reviews, and misadventures,” spanning the period between 1984 and 1999, Dyer takes issue with John Carey’s treating of Lawrence “as though he is nothing more than a raving racial supremacist. That he actually wrote one of the great novels of working-class life is seemingly irrelevant.” He goes on to state that, “even if, like Carey, we concentrate on the expressed opinions of the essays rather than the fiction, it is dishonest to isolate one aspect of a writer whose life was predicated on the notion of ceaseless flux” (252).

Dyer’s response to Carey points to a striking anomaly: academia’s current hostility towards D.H. Lawrence, on the one hand, and, on the other, his continuous relevance to writers and their high regard for him. Besides Dyer, other practicing writers have felt the need to “speak out” in defense of Lawrence, as shown by Gary Adelman’s book, *Reclaiming D.H. Lawrence: Contemporary Writers Speak Out* (2002). The book grew out of Adelman’s correspondence with over 40 novelists and just under 60 poets, whose spirited “testimonies” bear witness to “an influence about which they feel little or no anxiety” (12). Far from being a passé artist—a casualty of political correctness, abstract theorizing, and willful misreading—Lawrence emerges from these essays as a flawed yet powerful writer “whose work will outlast the fluctuations of literary reputation” (29). Adelman wonders “if it is not Lawrence who is wanting, but the academy itself—for promulgating an aesthetic woefully divorced from the literary interests of writers and from the creative process” (16). With both Dyer and Cunningham, A.S. Byatt bemoans the “violent field of stock responses which make true judgment and patient and generous reading [of Lawrence] almost impossible” (qtd. in Adelman 29). She too believes that modern readers have spent so much time reading theory that “they simply don’t have the range of reading in the original literary texts to get an ear for them” (27-

28). Consequently, writers (John Fowles, Helen Benedict, Doris Lessing, and Ursula K. Le Guin, among them) who connect with Lawrence as an artist are more likely to make allowance for his passionate commitment to politically incorrect ideas, or for his “frequently despicable, frequently silly” (Le Guin) excesses and obsessions. The gratitude that Ursula K. Le Guin feels for Lawrence stems from the same reading experience that Dyer describes in *Out of Sheer Rage*: “Even when he was dead wrong it was exciting. I had to argue with him, engage my mind and soul with him. Wrestling with the angel—one of his pet images, no?” (qtd. in Adelman 34).

Dyer’s memoir derives the first part of its title from comments Lawrence made about his unfinished study of Thomas Hardy: “Out of sheer rage I’ve begun my book on Thomas Hardy. It will be about anything but Thomas Hardy I am afraid—queer stuff—but not bad.” The subtitles of the British and American editions of the book—“In the Shadow of D.H. Lawrence” and “Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence”—point to the anxiety-driven process of writing this study: for Dyer, Lawrence is “primarily a source of stress and anxiety” (207)—the literary father whom Dyer reveres yet struggles with for creative autonomy. Where Lawrence shed his sickness in books, Dyer wants us to think that, in writing a book about Lawrence, he is only shedding his interest in him. The more he insists on wanting nothing else but to be done with Lawrence, to have nothing else to do with him, the less we believe him. He cannot convince himself either, for he admits that he cannot resist Lawrence: “When nothing interests you any longer . . . then you can stop writing and be happy: then you can despair” (208). Insofar as Lawrence’s writing “urges us back to its source, to the experience in which it originates” (104), any criticism of it should acknowledge the very premise of responsible biographical criticism: “between the lines of a text lie the invisible lives of the writers” (Holroyd 30).

Out of Sheer Rage condemns academic criticism for driving a wedge between the semiotic and the ontological dimensions of texts, that is, for severing the connection of the work

from the manifold reality of the author's existence. Biographers and critics do not see eye to eye because the latter insist that "the author is finally dead," or that "the man is nothing, his work everything" (Holroyd 27).¹ Furthermore, as Seán Burke has remarked, the "movement against the author" advocated a "'Reader' no less ambiguous and mystified than the 'Author' whom it sought to supplant" (xix). Dyer's book has the merit of demystifying both figures by repositioning Lawrence closer to his/her work and world, as well as to a more clearly defined reader (in this case, the narrator, or pseudo-biographer). The critical studies included in *A Longman Critical Reader on Lawrence* arouse the narrator's indignation: "How could these people with no feeling for literature have ended up *teaching it*, writing about it?" "Writing like that," he maintains in terms very similar to those used by Cunningham, "kills everything it touches. That is the hallmark of academic criticism: it kills everything it touches" (101). But does it really? No sooner has Dyer made this sweeping generalization than he declares it to be "nonsense," for "scholars," he says, "live their work too" (102).

A scholar of sorts himself, Dyer concedes that, "criticism is an integral part of the literary tradition and academics can sometimes write excellent works of criticism but these are exceptional" (101-02). His speech on Lawrence and Englishness, which he gives in Denmark, pokes fun at critical papers delivered in academic settings. Throughout, Dyer shuttles back and forth between three words—English, man, and writer—"constructing something that was utterly devoid of substance, totally meaningless . . ." (201). Dyer's sense of academic criticism, while not altogether inaccurate, is exaggerated to the point of parody. Such tongue-in-cheek remarks on the vacuity of contemporary literary theory are tempered by more serious philosophical musings that turn criticism into what Oscar Wilde called, in "The Critic as Artist," "the record of one's soul" (1400).

Just as the memoirist's openness about his own experiences does not seem to fit comfortably with the current model of academic scholarship, so the book he is trying to write fails to meet the scientific standards of rigor. These standards call for "facts," which are inevitably distorted by the biographer's intrusions. Steven G. Kellman's assessment of the book deserves special mention here: *Out of Sheer Rage*, he poignantly states, is "a manic meditation on the nature of biography and on human nature, blithely razzing readers who seek a conventional reconstruction of the life of D.H. Lawrence" (141). In his turn, Frédéric Regard stresses the impossibility of giving a "definitive, truthful account" of a writer's life. Should such an account be possible, he argues, "[t]he serial chain of biographical narratives of the author would find in this absolute revelation the sure sign of its demise: there would be no need for further biographical enquiries, and my desire would have to focus on another object" (399-400).

In an important sense, *Out of Sheer Rage* is a lively work of creative scholarship with Lawrence as its subject. As the author puts it, "to see how literature is lived through," one needs to turn to the "great books" that "add up to a tacit 'syllabus of enacted criticism'" in which "the distinction between imaginative and critical writing disappears" (102). Dyer's preference for taking "the imaginative line" to conducting laborious research² renders literary criticism an entertaining experience—"aggressively, and yes, refreshingly anti-academic" (Cushman, "Searching" 293). Indeed, over and against theory's "stock responses," Dyer pits the more appropriate, commonsensical response that takes into account what Cunningham, quoting Virginia Woolf, recognized, namely, that "Somewhere, everywhere, now hidden, now apparent in whatever is written down is the form of a human being" (140). It is especially fitting that, alongside Woolf, Cunningham invokes Lawrence, himself a champion of the simple touch and of the implicitly sympathetic consciousness. As Lawrence famously wrote, morality in the novel is "the delicate, for ever trembling and changing balance between me and my whole circumambient

universe.’ This moral balance was only maintained if the novelist did not put ‘his thumb in the scale to pull down the balance to his own predilection,’ which is ‘immorality’. And so it is with reading. Tact means not having clumsy thumbs; and Theorists have clumsy thumbs” (157).

The critic, then, must begin by being a tactful reader, attuned to the lived-through experience engendered by the text. The contrary is also true, for the reader—here the biographer—is inevitably an interpreter. As Dyer suggests, the most insightful interpretation is that which tallies, indeed resonates, with one’s reading experience. A terrible procrastinator when it comes to writing, Dyer is a rather whimsical reader, who evinces what Matei Calinescu calls “the consciousness of intertextuality.” This consciousness, Calinescu states, “always implies some form of rereading, or at least the project to reread. By the same token, rereading is always intertextual, even when the intertext is nothing but the remembered virtual text of a more or less distant and foggy first reading” (55-56). Dyer sets out to reread *The Rainbow*, hoping he

might discover, like a flower pressed between the pages, the dried remains of my younger self preserved within it. In the most literal sense, I was there, the underlinings and annotations, made when we did the book at Oxford (i.e. when we read a load of dreary critical studies about it) were still there but in any kind of metaphorical sense—no, there was nothing, no traces my earlier self, no memories released by the act of re-reading the same page that I had years before one particular afternoon wherever and whenever that was. (104)

Given his “more or less unaltered” impression of *The Rainbow*, Dyer stubbornly refuses to reread *Women in Love*, yet another Lawrence novel whose impact has been considerably diminished by a “load of dreary critical studies.” In fact, Dyer wants to refrain from reading *all* of Lawrence’s books: “I want to keep some in reserve—I want to know that there are bits and pieces of Lawrence that are still out there, still fresh, waiting to be discovered (by me at least), waiting to be read for the first time” (105). Apart from asserting Dyer’s faith in the power of human

curiosity, this statement also indicates the extent to which his approach welcomes the discovery of subtle, unexpected, personal nuances in the other's texts.

Equally important, in view of the book he is attempting to write, Dyer ascribes “[p]art of the excitement of reading Lawrence” to our sense of how the potentialities of the novel “are being expanded, forced forwards” (120). Mark Schorer has seen this “expansion” as a movement into poetic vision propelled by Lawrence’s faith in man’s capacity to be fully human:

if Lawrence knew what the limits of the novel are, his novels nevertheless continually strain to get beyond those limits, and it is in this strain that both his imperfections and his greatest writing inhere. All the stress and strain in Lawrence’s novels and stories, all the experiment in style and structure, all the push towards the visionary and the prophetic— all this is there to tell us one thing: that we can be wholly human. (92)

Without questioning either Lawrence’s faith in the novel or the vision that justifies it, Dyer rejects Marguerite Yourcenar’s statement according to which, “[i]n our time the novel devours all other forms; one is almost forced to use it as a medium of expression” (120). “No more,” comes Dyer’s blunt comment, for, although novels continue to be written, their “moment of historical urgency has passed” (120). He goes on to argue that the process of “novelisation” has gradually given way to what Milan Kundera calls “a new art of the *specifically novelistic essay*” (121).

The kind of “novels” that Dyer prefers then “are ones which bear no traces of *being* novels” (121). In their postmodern expression, “novels” incorporate, indeed “devour” related narrative forms and types of discourse. The term “postmodern” aptly describes Dyer’s sensibility as a reader, writer, and cultural critic. Situated at the intersection of biography, fiction, autobiography, travel book, and literary study, *Out of Sheer Rage* bears out and at the same time celebrates the protean vitality of the novelistic genre, its capacity to create narratives out of experience despite how seemingly random the text of that experience might read. Dyer’s “after-theory” approach is ostensibly selective, for, as we will see shortly, Dyer privileges certain

aspects of Lawrence's daily and artistic life at the expense of others. As the narrative builds up, we get the same impression as the author did while reading Lawrence's *Study of Thomas Hardy* and *Studies in Classic American Literature*: "Each of them an electrical storm of ideas! Hit and miss, illuminating even when hopelessly wide of the mark" (103).

Another way to account for this playful overlap of genres is to read Dyer's memoir in light of the contemporary "Poetics of Biography" as defined by Michael Holroyd in his recently published book, *Works on Paper: The Craft of Biography and Autobiography*. According to Holroyd, "A vital literature needs cross-border trading" (9). By taking on the "sympathetic forms" of fiction, literary biographies

can supply parallel narratives to those of novels. 'Never trust the author,' warned Lawrence. 'Trust the text.' But by converting the author into a related text we do not break Lawrence's rule, but create a reading principle, with possibilities of illumination and enrichment, that should feature in any Poetics of Biography. (26)

This reading principle, Holroyd maintains, represents the ethical foundation of biography, for it aims to "rekindle life"—"to chart illuminating connections between past and present, life and work" (19). In more general terms, this model of reading fosters an ethos of connectedness grounded in the individual experiences of the writer and his/her readers/critics, without collapsing the distinction between self and other, losing sight of the text, or obscuring its larger context. At best, Holroyd indicates, literary biographers are "fascinated with human nature" (17). Or, in Regard's formulation, they are fascinated by the author as "a complex whole, as a conglomerate of lived experience and literary achievement" (398).

Dyer has obviously learnt much from novelists and critics alike, but having found scholarly criticism too limiting, he claims the freedom of the novelist to "roam wherever his instinct takes him" (Holroyd 9). Unlike Peter Ackroyd, another postmodern fictional biographer drawn to writers' complex, fluid personalities, Dyer foregrounds subjectivity, rather than

textuality: Lawrence remains the book's elusive center, yet he is far from being a purely textual construct in the manner that Wilde and Chatterton emerge from Ackroyd's novels. Keith Cushman is therefore right in ascribing "the triumph of this fresh, audacious book" to "the way it seems to put the reader into true contact with Lawrence" ("Searching" 94). But what does it mean in living terms to be touched by a writer such as Lawrence? What emotional nuances and intellectual complexities attend Dyer's encounters with the "otherness" of Lawrence's writings? These are some of the questions I take up in the second half of this chapter, as I show how the model of "touching reading" is enacted throughout the book and to what effect.

How Literature Is Lived Through

"There is no better way of coming to be aware of what one feels oneself than by trying to recreate in oneself what a master has felt. In this profound effort it is our thought itself that we bring into the light, together with his."

(Marcel Proust qtd. in Botton 178)

The vital relation between art and life to which *Out of Sheer Rage* testifies is as intensely felt by Dyer's persona as by the eponymous pseudo-biographer in Bernard Malamud's novel, *Dubin's Lives* (1997). William Dubin is drawn to D.H. Lawrence because he wants to elucidate the mystery of what, to his mind, that "fierce consumptive bright blue-eyed red-bearded man" was trying to tell him when Dubin first read Lawrence, but that he could not understand at the time. "He picked me. There's something he wants me to know" (171). In the course of reading Lawrence's letters and re-reading his novels, the middle-aged biographer is gradually learning what Lawrence "saw better" (313), namely, that the enormous, "cosmic mystery living in our minds" reflects "our small biological and psychological ones" (44). The deeper he goes into Lawrence's life, the more clearly is Dubin able to see into his own life whose center he finds

lacking in the “dark force of blood-consciousness through which man experiences the primal mystery” (33). Thus, working on the fittingly titled biography *The Passion of D.H. Lawrence* allows Dubin to understand himself and his “hunger for love, regret for life unlived, sorrow for the shortness of life” (137). What Lawrence teaches Dubin is to risk himself (through an affair with a younger woman) for a “plenitude of life through love” (303).

In his turn, Dyer throws himself “wholeheartedly” into his study of Lawrence but deludes himself into thinking that this would take him out of himself (3-4); in the end, he comes to realize that it does not actually matter whether he writes a study or a novel “because books, if they need to be written, will always find their moment” (4). The lines between study and novel become further blurred when Dyer refers to those “issues” he intends to address, “in different ways, either in mediated form in my study of Lawrence, or directly, in my novel, or vice versa . . .” (6). He soon resigns himself to the failure to pursue both, for it strikes him that he is not even qualified to research his own life, to be his own biographer, let alone Lawrence’s (187). The problem, Dyer explains, is this “unlimited capacity to generate friction between giving in to oneself as one is one moment and the equally strong urge to re-shape and seize control of how one *was* at some later date” (187-88).

It thus becomes clear that one “issue” threading itself through both projects is that of writing—or rewriting—the self. Dyer’s narrative inscribes the writing self as both object of inquiry (Lawrence) and subject of experience (himself). Like *Women in Love*, Dyer’s book represents “a record of the writer’s own desires, aspirations, struggles; in a word, a record of the profoundest experiences in the self” (“Foreword” viii). Admittedly, many of Dyer’s experiences are not very profound, yet still, in “wrestling with D.H. Lawrence,” Dyer is also “wrestling with his own soul.”³ True to the Lawrentian spirit, the author writes the process of life experience,

which is an ongoing re-seeing of his self through various lenses, replaying and remaking ideas and memories in order to shape himself anew.

The shadow of D.H. Lawrence looms large on the very first page of the memoir, where we find a subtle allusion to his famous declaration: “Art for *my* sake.” Suffering from what he calls a “rheumatism of the will, this chronic inability to see things through,” Dyer embarks on his Lawrence project motivated, on the one hand, by the desire to pay homage to “the writer who had made me want to become a writer” (2), and on the other, by the need to keep depression at bay, to pull himself together (1). Like Lawrence, he, too, sheds his sickness in books, repeating and presenting again his emotions so as to come to grips with them. Writing about Lawrence alters the biographer’s relationship with him to the point where Lawrence becomes a source of strength rather than stress, of consolation rather than anxiety.⁴

Dyer’s indecision about where he is going to live invites yet another comparison with Lawrence: “Where does one want to live?” Lawrence asked in a letter to William Gerhardie. In Dyer’s case, the answer hinges upon the decision about which book he is going to write—the study or the novel. “I knew that I had to live in a place which had some strong connection with him, where I could, so to speak, feel the Lawrentian vibes” (12). That required being constantly on the move, for Lawrence, as Dyer described him in one of his essays, was “nomadic to the point of frenzy” (*Anglo-English* 157). The fascinating opening sentences of Lawrence’s travel book, *Sea and Sardinia*—“Comes over one an absolute desire to move. And what is more, to move in some particular direction” (45)—instill in the author the desire to retrace Lawrence’s steps and follow the “train” of his thoughts: “a train that was moving out fractionally ahead of its appointed time, doors still ajar, leaving the reader running along after it, unsure where it was heading, but convinced of the need to climb aboard before it gathered too much momentum” (45).

Dyer's "chasing" of Lawrence calls to mind Virginia Woolf's famous statement about the elusive nature of the character which imposes itself upon the novelist's conscience or imagination: "Come and catch me if you can," Mrs. Brown—the prototype of all characters—whispers in the writer's ear (94). Yet, Woolf astutely observes, few of those writers engaged in this irresistible pursuit of "the spirit we live by," of "life itself" (114), "catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair" (94). In Dyer's case, the pursuit is rendered difficult not just by the "slipperiness of the other," but by "the clumsiness of the quester" (Kellman 140).⁵ At the same time, though, both the possible revelation of "the truth" Lawrence's arresting personality embodies and the self-revelation enabled by this "truth" continue to motivate the quest. As in *Dubin's Lives*, writing about one whom you have to "strain" to understand is like "chasing a runner you would never catch up with" (Malamud 303-304).

We learn that "after years of avoiding Lawrence," Dyer moves into what he calls a phase of "pre-preparation," during which he visits Lawrence's birthplace, Eastwood, reads his biographies, and collects photographs of Lawrence. Due to numerous distractions, to indecision and procrastination, he does not get much farther beyond this phase.⁶ However frustrating this may be for the author, it is in the end deeply satisfying for readers who get a sense that Dyer is probing the depths of Lawrence's life and writings even as he seems to be only scraping their surface. With *Tristram Shandy*, Dyer too can say that "[N]othing which has touched me will be thought trifling in its nature, or tedious in its telling (Sterne 6). In Holroyd's terms, he gives us "not just an inventory of facts, but the fertile fact, not trivia, but the significance of the trivial in our own lives" (30).

Throughout his narrative, Dyer brings Lawrence's life into focus with arresting sharpness of detail. Some of these details he gleans from photographs of Lawrence that he has collected through the years out of curiosity about the "appearance of Lawrence the man *as he actually*

was,” as opposed to the “enduring, iconic image of Lawrence the writer” (36), fixed by or after death. What Dyer refers to here is not merely physical death—“the end of becoming” (38) which photographs allegedly prefigured for both Lawrence and Rilke—but the symbolic demise of the author-concept: “A photograph,” Dyer reflects, “serves to consolidate—to embody—the idea of the writer” presumed dead by Roland Barthes. For the latter, “Photography has the same relation to History that the biographeme has to biography” (30). As Barthes defined them, “biographemes” refer to those “tenuous details” and “vivid novelistic glimmerings” compiled by “some friendly and detached biographer” (qtd. in Dyer, *Anglo-English* 189). Aware of the “considerable degree of distortion” that “takes place when a single photograph represents a working life covering several decades” (36-37), Dyer draws his own composite portrait of Lawrence—a portrait that is rife with contradictions and puzzles and that resists the fixation of personality through a single photograph or through theory-informed readings of his works.

“It is impossible to think of D.H. Lawrence without thinking of the way he looked,” Cushman writes in the introduction to his study of Lawrence’s personal and artistic growth at the time of *The Rainbow* (Lawrence 1). “From the start,” Dyer tells us, he read Lawrence “in order to make sense of—to better understand” a photograph that showed the writer “standing towards the edge of a vast horizontal landscape.” Its caption—a line from “Song of a Man Who Has Come Through”—stuck in his memory since he was seventeen: “A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time” (98). The line resonates throughout *Out of Sheer Rage*, reinforcing the sense that Dyer’s interest gravitates not towards the canonic image of Lawrence—an image that death rendered “incapable of further development”—but rather towards the vital, dynamic Lawrence who rejected permanence and embraced the provisional, who found process in everything and fixity in nothing, and who believed “the whole” to be “greater than the part”: “Now I absolutely deny that I am soul, or a body, or a mind, or an intelligence, or a brain, or a nervous system, or a

bunch of glands, or any of the rest of these bits of me” (“Why the Novel Matters”). Despite the valuable insights these photographs—indeed, “bits” of Lawrence—yield, the author plays with their visual details not for the purpose of pinning Lawrence down, but ultimately, in order to make us question what we think we can know about Lawrence, or any other writer, for that matter.

Intrigued by the fact that there is no photo of Lawrence at Fontana Vecchia, the house in Taormina, where Lawrence lived off and on, from 1920-22, Dyer sets out on a literary pilgrimage in search of “Lorenzo’s house.” The place itself fails to evoke any feelings of awe the visitor had anticipated, mainly because it is not the same place anymore, unlike Eastwood, which is still “an ugly little town in an ugly little county” (170). The author recalls his earlier trip to Eastwood, where he followed the so-called “Blue Line Trail” linking Lawrence’s Birthplace Museum with other Lawrence-related sites, including the White Peacock Café. Despite the “lack of direction” and the “overwhelming purposelessness” of the Blue Line Trail, Dyer felt determined “to stick with it, to stick with the peculiarities of a path determined less by Lawrence than by an unswerving fidelity to the vagaries of my nature” (171). Nevertheless, Lawrence remains a constant presence with Dyer, for, as he himself admits, “the borders of the Lawrence trail were so vaguely defined that it was difficult to imagine an activity not undertaken with Lawrence in mind, that could not be justified by appeal to his name” (170). Like his trip to Algiers, where he visited the monument erected by friends of Camus after his death, this pilgrimage, stemmed from the desire, acknowledged only later, “*to claim kin with them, to be guided*” by one of the literary masters (88).⁷

Much of the narrative traces Dyer’s efforts to sort through his own memories and interpret his life experiences in light of those desires that Lawrence’s photographs and writings have awakened in him. While searching for Lawrence, he becomes attuned to the particularities

of his own feelings. Indeed, to a great extent, Lawrence does for Dyer what Alain de Botton believes “all books might do for their readers—namely, bring back to life, from the deadness caused by routine and inattention, valuable yet neglected aspects of experience” (176). As a matter of fact, in his essay “The State of Funk,” Lawrence makes explicit his “real concern” as a novelist, namely, “the change inside the individual.” The novelist’s province, he states, is “to know the feeling inside a man, and to make new feelings conscious” (60). In retrospect, Dyer’s more or less aimless wanderings fulfill Lawrence’s professed purpose: had Dyer and his girlfriend, Laura, not been to Rome, Alonissos, Taormina, Taos, and Oaxaca, and, equally important, had they not noticed the hundreds of things, more or less ordinary, on the way there, they would not be the people they are (226).

Among the pictures of Lawrence that compel Dyer’s attention is the one presumably capturing the ideal image of the writer at work: “Lawrence, sitting by a tree in the blazing afternoon, surrounded by the sizzle of cicadas, notebook on his knees, writing” (93-94). The author fleshes out this image for us with details about Lawrence’s physical appearance, his clothes, most notably his buttoned up jacket, and the graceful formality of his pose. Equally telling is an observation Lawrence recorded during his travels through Taos in 1922: “the tree’s life penetrates my life, and my life the tree’s. . . . Thank God I am not free any more than a rooted tree is free” (qtd. in Dyer 95). Both the verbal and the visual representations of Lawrence’s closeness to nature lead Dyer to conclude that, “It is typical of Lawrence that, on the one hand, he became more and more anxious about finding a place to settle and, on the other, achieved an ideal condition of being at home anywhere” (95). In fact, Lawrence “had found a home within himself and in what he did, in his *being*” (96). Hence Dyer’s decision to leave “the only uncaptioned image in the book,” free of its actual context: “it seemed fitting that this photograph of Lawrence sitting there, ‘happy as a cicada,’ should elude place and time” (97). Thus, if the bust made by Jo

Davidson at the sanatorium in Venice showed Lawrence “what he would become in death,” when “the loose pages of his life were bound and dated,” then this picture showed Lawrence “unbound, alive” (97).

Dyer sees Lawrence’s approach to his work as a direct reflection of his approach to life. “The novel is the bright book of life,” Lawrence famously wrote. Dyer reminds us that, unlike Rilke or Yeats, Lawrence was “untroubled” by the conflicting claims of life and work, for, as Dyer explains, “All the work of maturity was built on his relationship with Frieda.” Life and work were mutually constitutive for Lawrence: admittedly, to the miner’s son “who had grown up amidst the ravages of grueling physical labor,” writing (“living by the pen”) was not a “bad option,” but ultimately he devoted himself to living: “not the work I shall produce, but the real Me I shall achieve, that is the consideration.” (90-91). In theory, this seems to be Dyer’s consideration as well, but, as I intend to demonstrate shortly, with Dyer practice and principle are somehow out of step.

Let us consider first Dyer’s reasons for putting together an album of all his Lawrence pictures and, more interestingly, for “interspersing them, when appropriate, with pictures of my family and myself,” providing lengthy captions for each of them, and then removing the pictures and rearranging the captions “so that they existed, instead, in relation to each other” (35).⁸ This process highlights the intertwining of their selves and points tentatively to the form that, according to Regard, biographical writing generally takes: that of a “dialogic exchange” between the subjectivities of the “narrating author” and the “narrated author” (405). Throughout Dyer’s memoir, the narrator’s life is filtered through the vision of the author that interests him. Both narrator and readers respond to the “complex event” that the author represents by a “recontextualization” of their own ‘truth’ (Regard 408). The complex truth that Lawrence

embodies, at least for Dyer, is keyed to his philosophy of “becoming,” a belief system modeled on Nietzsche’s.

Central to this philosophy, and implicitly to Lawrence’s aesthetics, are the concepts of inner freedom—“a project to be constantly renewed”—and strife—the struggle one needs to put up to maintain this freedom (137). In view of Lawrence’s injunction—“Let a man go to the bottom of what he is and believe in that,”—it becomes important that Dyer learn to accept himself as he is, rather than being “resigned to accepting this inability to accept myself as I am” (188-89). The first step towards achieving self-knowledge is to face up to failure and abide by its consequences, no matter how miserable the very thought of that failure makes one. As already indicated, Dyer takes Lawrence’s precepts to heart and brings them wonderfully alive for us, yet he has considerable difficulty when it comes to applying these principles to his own life.

For one thing, Dyer seems to lack Lawrence’s confidence that he can find “richness and satisfaction” in himself. The difficulty of finding the “ideal conditions to work,” or of finding the place that would be most congenial to his writing about Lawrence contributes, indeed compounds his anxiety. Dyer moves restlessly from place to place, starts working on one project only to be “seduced” by the other, and consoles himself that he can be the most productive when most idle. His comments on and reflections about place and other people in the context of place may seem a parodic version of the intensely evocative depictions of place and nature found in Lawrence’s travel narratives, but they are just as colorful and spontaneous.

Brilliant flashes of psychological insight break out of humorous passages, as when Dyer contrasts Lawrence’s idea of contentment—with its emphasis on the need to embrace change and accept, or at least prepare oneself, for failure—to his own. Unlike Lawrence, Dyer initially resists change and indulges his easily irritable temperament—for which Lawrence was also famous—by “shaking his fist at the world” even for the smallest grievance.⁹ Lawrence’s letters, however, give

him the confidence necessary to believe that once beyond the edge, exhausted and depleted of energy, he will be “serene as a windless afternoon” (156). In some of these letters, the writer vents his rage at the “awfulness of wherever he happened to be,” whether Ceylon or Taormina, or some other place. The exasperating tone of these letters place them in “the European tradition of the literature of neurasthenia, of anxiety, fretting, complaint,” all variations on as well as symptoms of what Lawrence called “the life-exhaustion feeling” (158-59). In Lawrence, nevertheless, this “life-exhaustion feeling” manifests itself as a “life-affirming gesture,” whose origin lies in his “faith in the religion of blood” (159). Thus, as a record of “all the little inconveniences” that life inflicted upon him, Lawrence’s letters serve a therapeutic function for both their writer and reader(s).¹⁰

If reading Lawrence’s letters helps Dyer navigate his life over the rocky shoals of depression, reading Lawrence’s novella *The Virgin and the Gipsy* helped Pico Iyer cross the threshold into adulthood. Iyer recalls feeling “at home” in this story “about a young and inexperienced soul awakening to its destiny (its passion)” and suffused with Lawrence’s “heroic energy” (168). For Iyer, Lawrence embodied “a seeker pledged to the holiness of the heart’s affections [a phrase Iyer borrows from Keats] and committed to individuality at any cost” (167). The study of Lawrence at college, in the late 1970s, strengthened Iyer’s sense of kinship with Lawrence: “Not forbidding like Joyce, not rich with metropolitan polish like Woolf, Lawrence came across as less a text than a man, shouting in our ears” (169). Interestingly enough, Lawrence entered Iyer’s life again when he read Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage*, a “portrait of Lawrence so Lawrentian,” that Iyer feels compelled to put aside all “imperfect reflections of Lawrence” and “read the man himself again” (173). One of the lessons he has absorbed in the process—and that we also take from Dyer’s memoir—is that one does not read books by “breaking them into pieces” but by taking them on their own terms and by relating to them. Lawrence enjoins us to

read him with the soul: “either you surrender to him, and to a spirit that flings out every sentence as if it were its last, or you are condemned to remain forever on the sidelines” (179). For Iyer, too, Lawrence remains provocatively indefinable, “so far outside the usual categories” that it is “hard to assign him a race, a class, even at times a gender” (169).

Dyer seems to prefer Lawrence the “comic figure,” “angry even in his sleep” (according to Frieda), to Lawrence the sexual prophet and social visionary. He feels equally drawn to Lawrence the painter—“perhaps the first great DIYer in English literature” (141)—as to Lawrence “the word-painter” whose memorable descriptions of place sometimes take on a semi-mythical quality. Further, the fact that Lawrence wrote *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* means “next to nothing” to Dyer; what matters instead is that “he paid his way, settled his debts, made nice jam and marmalade, and put up shelves” (149). As Dyer reflects, his memoir is “comprised entirely of irrelevancies” like these “except insofar as it confirms” something “central” about Lawrence: “he was always in the midst of what he was doing, was able, as Huxley noticed, ‘to absorb himself completely in what he was doing at the moment’” (149).

Throughout *Out of Sheer Rage*, we hear Lawrence’s voice in an ongoing counterpoint with Dyer’s as well as the voices of other writers, such as Camus, Rilke, and Nietzsche, with whom he had “an affinity of the soul.” Dyer is particularly moved by how Lawrence and Camus—one the son of a miner, the other poor and fatherless—discovered Nietzsche and took him to heart, or, as Rilke put it, became “slightly intoxicated” with him, each in his own way. Both Lawrence and Camus—the first passionately, “defiantly,” the latter “calmly, lyrically”—“were not so much transformed as formed by Nietzsche” (168). Yet, unlike Lawrence, Camus “never flirted with the political extrapolations of Nietzsche’s thought,” (167). Biographical details like these and the connections Dyer establishes between them partake of what Regard calls a “global conceptual character,” here named Lawrence, Camus, or Nietzsche (395). They also

indicate the extent to which both self and other, that is, both the narrating author and the narrated author(s) position themselves “biologically, psychologically, linguistically, ideologically, etc.” (399).

From all of these writers Dyer has learnt that love of life and despair of life implicate each other; when applied to his writing, this paradox allows him to turn failure into a valuable experience in itself: “Looking back through my diary is like reading a vast anthology of regret and squandered opportunity. Oh well, I find myself thinking, life is there to be wasted” (169). The author’s own twisted version of *amor fati*—“regretting everything but resigning myself on this regret” (170)—prevents him from despairing over his failure to write a “sober, academic study of D.H. Lawrence.” Instead, he considers it as an opportunity to write “a case history” of “how breaking down became a means of continuing (170). In the book’s final pages, Dyer slips almost imperceptibly from a discussion of physical illness into an account of psychic and spiritual recovery. Despite his “pathological dread of getting ill” (189), Dyer admits that “Still, better to get flu than become a germ paranoiac, a germ recluse. Only by going out into the world can you build up resistance to it” (191). Finally it is Lawrence’s letters that replenish Dyer’s flagging energies and give him “the courage to live.”

To be sure, the most vibrant portrait of Lawrence as a person is, for Dyer at least, the one the author himself drew in his letters. Lest he should lose interest in Lawrence, Dyer convinces himself that he must put off, on the one hand, writing about these letters, and, on the other, perusing them all, seven volumes, “cover to cover.” He keeps glancing at Volume 7 of Lawrence’s letters, “touching it, holding it, opening a few pages, reading the introduction.” He knows that once he opens the book and starts reading it, he will not be able to stop (106). More than a “perfect excuse” for not writing his study about Lawrence, “whizzing” through all these

letters traps Dyer in “the gathering momentum” of Lawrence’s death. “I was running out of letters to read just as Lawrence was running out of life” (108).

Dyer wants these letters “not to end” so that he may not lose touch with their writer, especially since he also read them “out of sequence.” Although aware that, “I could not be closer to Lawrence than I was while reading his letters for the first time,” Dyer embarks on a process of re-reading them, hoping he would be “back under their spell” (108-09). And he surely is, for he is now able to discover in them intimations, “pre-echoes,” or first touches, of Lawrence’s future poems, “Snake” and “The Ship of Death,” among them. As rough drafts of experiences that Lawrence was to capture/re-create in his works, these letters open up a space for reflection: “Who can say when a poem begins to stir, to germinate, in the soil of the writer’s mind,” Dyer asks himself. The poem, he concludes, “is already there,” waiting for the poet to discover it and for the reader to live it through, or to see her own lived experience in what she has discovered.¹¹

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the reader who wants “to get nearer” to the person behind these letters, to connect with his or her “being,” a “curious reversal takes place” as “the finished works serve as prologue to the jottings.” In Dyer’s case, Lawrence’s notes touch a responsive chord with him, imparting a sense of immediacy and urgency to the reflections they occasion. Dyer wants the experience of reading Lawrence to be “as intimate as possible,” and therefore his interest gravitates not so much towards Lawrence’s “great works,” on which his reputation is built, as towards their “source,” “the circumstances” of their composition, “the man and his sensations” (111) as they emerge from his letters. The affirmative, indeed celebratory note—what Frieda called “saying yes”—of these letters explains much of their seductive appeal for Dyer.

The final pages of his memoir convey this life-affirming stance as the most powerful moment of intensity or illumination resulting from the memoirist’s encounter, or coming together

with Lawrence's words and world. "From the start I'd known that I had to write my book as I went along," Dyer tells us midway through the narrative (105). The book refuses, however, to build to a definite conclusion. On the one hand, this provisional ending ensures that Lawrence's work will survive in rereading by sending us back to this work with renewed interest and curiosity. On the other hand, the lack of narrative closure comes down to a typically Lawrentian gesture that defies existential closure. Dyer has gradually come to share Lawrence's view of destiny as a process of becoming, growing, or "coming through": "a destiny," he writes, "is not what is finally achieved but the act of incrementally nudging towards it" (140).

A personal recollection that throws light on Dyer's approach throughout this book and prefigures its rather arbitrary "ending" is fused, for the narrator, with thoughts triggered by his Eastwood visit. In the early part of the book, Dyer reaches back in his memory toward his mother who, when he was twelve, would be sitting in their semi-detached house, waiting for him to come back from school. He fondly remembers her passion for jigsaws as well as the way she went about making them. One particular jigsaw—an illustrated map of the British Isles—stands out mainly as a reminder of his own composing process. Thus, while working on this map, mother and son reversed their "usual method"—that is, starting with the edge of the puzzle—and instead, "started in the middle and worked our way outwards to the coast" (74).

Similarly, he reflects—in a parenthesis that carries more weight than he invests it with—"There was no plan to frame this book, to hold it in shape. I started in the middle with one or two images and am working my way outwards, toward an edge that is still to be made." We might add that this edge remains to be made even after we finish reading the book, for the trajectories of Lawrence's self and life are intimately bound up with those of each reader. We, too, Dyer reminds us, might flounder about in our search for Lawrence, but in the end it is the search that matters, rather than its destination:

One way or another we all have to write our studies of D.H. Lawrence. Even if they will never be published, even if we will never complete them, even if all we are left with after years and years of effort is an unfinished, unfinishable record of how we failed to live up to our earlier ambitions, still we all have to try to make some progress with our books about D.H. Lawrence. (231-32)

Whether unfinished or simply abandoned, Dyer's book about Lawrence offers a vivid, intimate, often humorous portrait of a writer who touched a host of readers, inspired as many writers, and whose legacy continues in the 21st century. The initial despair felt by this Lawrence enthusiast gradually gives way to a moving affirmation of life, passion, creativity, authenticity, and humanity.

Out of Sheer Rage reveals the inner workings of a creative process that is half-biographical, half-autobiographical, as it inscribes a search not only for the author, but for his would-be biographer as well. In *The Blue Flower*, the novel I turn to next, the focus shifts from the fictional manifestation of the self-conscious narrator to the fictional representation of the biographical subject in question. Much like Dyer's "touching reading" of Lawrence, Penelope Fitzgerald's re-reading of the German Romantic poet Novalis is motivated by a similar need to connect with her predecessor's vision and world, to capture, in other words, both an individual consciousness and a particular cultural moment. The chapter that follows traces Fitzgerald's search for understanding Novalis's life and writings, which combine to make up an "endless novel." As I show, the incidents and incidentals depicted in *The Blue Flower* serve to reinforce both the endlessness of the Romantic quest for the Truth and the open-ended nature of Fitzgerald's own quest for the "truths" about Novalis.

Notes

¹ At worst, Holroyd wryly observes, literary biographers are regarded as “slaves of their absurd and meager theories,” “parasites” feeding off literature and attempting to replace it (6).

Interestingly enough, Valentine Cunningham levels the same charges against those critics whose theoretical paradigms render the empirical person invisible and thereby destroy the humanistic conception of an originating subjectivity.

² Ironically, of course, most of his insights into Lawrence’s work and life are indeed based on extensive research, as the notes at the end of the book attest.

³ As Lawrence put it in the Forward to *Women in Love*, “Every man who is acutely alive is acutely wrestling with his own soul” (viii).

⁴ Along similar lines, Steven G. Kellman notes that Dyer conceives of his Lawrence project as his reason and means to keep living. He adds that, “like the Sisyphus of Albert Camus, whom Dyer seems to admire as much as he does Lawrence, each of us must push a boulder, take up cheerfully a pointless task that reconciles us to the absurd” (143).

⁵ See also Keith Cushman’s reading of Dyer’s persona as “a depressed, insecure, inept fellow who regularly seems like a character in a novel by Samuel Beckett” (“Searching” 93).

⁶ The novel that apparently distracted Dyer from working on his “somber, academic study” of Lawrence in *Out of Sheer Rage* turned out to be *Paris Trance: A Romance* (1999), whose main character is an expatriate writer, aimless and dissolute, who finds Paris life much more absorbing than fiction-writing.

⁷ “That is why I came here: to claim kin with him, to be guided by him,” Dyer wrote about his visit to Camus’s apartment on Rue de Lyon in Belcourt, Algiers (*Anglo-English* 176).

⁸ Much like Lawrence, who saw himself in a picture of his father, Dyer sees himself in pictures of Lawrence and his own father in pictures of himself: “The reciprocal relation of these photos—

mirror-images, reflecting each other back across a generational divide of almost forty years—is not accidental. It is a visual preparation for my father’s inevitable death” (145). Incidentally, photographs become objects of sustained reflection, of provocative “close readings,” in Dyer’s latest book, *The Ongoing Moment* (2005).

⁹ Here is a passage revealing Dyer’s penchant for self-dramatization: “I have had so much disappointment in my life that the tiniest amount of it is now enough to drive me to despair. I am so brimful of disappointment that even one more tiny drop will send me spilling over the edge” (155).

¹⁰ For Dyer, “The endless fascination of the letters lies in his bottomless capacity for change—from blazing anger to good humor in the space of a few hours or minutes—his capacity to recover from any setback, to always give life, to always give himself one more life” (137).

¹¹ See also these lines by Jan Sackel that Milan Kundera quotes in *The Art of the Novel*:

Poets don’t invent poems
The poem is somewhere behind
It’s been there for a long long time
The poet merely discovers it.

“For the poet,” Kundera explains, “writing means breaking through a wall behind which something immutable (‘the poem’) lies hidden in darkness. That’s why (because of this surprising and sudden unveiling) ‘the poem’ strikes us first as dazzlement.”

CHAPTER III

WRITING IN THE MARGINS OF AN “ENDLESS NOVEL”

“All the chance events of our lives are materials from which we can make whatever we like. Whoever is rich in spirit makes much of his life. Every acquaintance, every incident would be for the thoroughly spiritual person—the first element in an endless series—the beginning of an endless novel.”

(Novalis, MO 33)

One of England’s most celebrated novelists, Penelope Fitzgerald (1916-2002) shares with the other writers discussed in this study a keen interest in the relation between books and life and, implicitly, in the human connection that links the subject, the writer, and the reader. She once explained that, “Biographies and novels are the forms that I feel I can just about manage. They are the outcome of intense curiosity about other people and about oneself” (341). That “intense curiosity” has produced a body of work that digs into the past, both human and literary, only to uncover things that are surprisingly current. Her most successful novel, for which she won the National Book Critics Circle Award, remains *The Blue Flower* (1998), based on the early life of Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772-1801), later to become, under the penname Novalis, the most influential figure of Early German Romanticism. This author fiction centers on the protagonist’s unconsummated romance with the twelve-year old Sophie von Kuhn, whom he idealizes and idolizes as his guiding spirit. Fitzgerald’s instinctive sympathy as a biographer and her inventive energy as a novelist combine in *The Blue Flower* with the historian’s eye for accurate detail to achieve “both a brief resurrection and an imaginative vision” of Novalis and his world (Byatt 62).

In her 1996 review of Hermione Lee’s biography of Virginia Woolf, Fitzgerald ascribes the great number of literary biographies, as opposed to any other kind, to the simple fact that

“writers like writing about other writers” (*Afterlife* 197). She herself has written extensively about the lives and works of her predecessors (Jane Austen, George Eliot, William Blake, William Morris, Virginia Woolf) and her contemporaries (Muriel Spark, Richard Yates, Amy Tan, Carol Shields, and others). Not surprisingly, Fitzgerald wrote two biographies, *Edward Burne-Jones* (1975) and *The Knox Brothers* (1977), before publishing her first work of fiction, *The Golden Child* (1977). Another biography, *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends* (1984), examines the life and work of a British poet whom she feels contemporary critics have for the most part overlooked. In Fitzgerald, biographies and novels mirror each other, as they both inscribe what Michael McKeon has called “that narrative paradigm with which the modern world has,” since the eighteenth century, “become so familiar, the portrait of the artist” (18). According to McKeon, the qualities of the novelistic protagonist and the “distinguishing features of the individual subject” coalesced in the “modern notion of the artist as a man of letters” (19).

Straddling the line between fiction and biography, and blending poetic symbolism with social realism, *The Blue Flower* offers, despite its brevity, a tender and often humorous portrait of a young artist in love. The novel’s tragicomic vision turns on the disjunction between the alarmingly dull and limited Sophie and Fritz’s idealistic perception of her as a fascinating being that embodies “the mystery of our spirit” (FI 112). To the pathos *and* absurdity of this relationship, Fitzgerald adds a transcendent dimension consistent with Fritz’s belief that “there is no barrier between the seen and the unseen” (129). Wearing her research lightly, Fitzgerald places this unusual love-story in the context of the cultural and political upheavals of the 1790s from which modernity originated. Thus, when read alongside other contemporary works that explore the influences and legacies of 18th century literature and culture, *The Blue Flower*, testifies to the enduring appeal of this era to adroit storytellers like Fitzgerald. “[F]rom our current perspective,” Todd Kontje writes, “the eighteenth century takes on particular interest, for it marks an earlier

period of crisis in the institutional history of art in which writers struggled to establish the aesthetic principles that are once again being called into question today” (10). In *The Blue Flower*, the protagonist’s concern with questions about the grounds of being, knowledge, and faith situate him at the precarious border between modernity and postmodernity. As such, the book can be placed alongside “historiographic metafiction” that “self-consciously problematize the making of fiction and history” (Hutcheon 228). Fitzgerald adopts a saying of Novalis as her book’s epigraph—“Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history”—but she also suggests that novels contain their own shortcomings, their representation of history (and life-stories) being just as unstable and indeterminate as history itself.

By drawing attention to the constructedness of the narrative, historiographic metafiction breaks the mirror of reality and conflates the notions of subjectivity and textuality. In *The Blue Flower*, however, Fitzgerald resists the poststructuralist tendency of turning everything into discourse, as she reclaims the enduring values of lived experience, of dreams and passions that cannot be contained by language. Biography, even when fictionalized, remains for her a referential genre, a “way into life” (*Afterlife* 197), into those inward and outward forces that shape both subjectivity and creativity. Fiction is not much different, in that “Watching a good plot is like watching something alive, or if it is adroit or sinuous enough, something struggling for life” (*Afterlife* 359). To be sure, part of Novalis’s appeal to Fitzgerald stems from his belief that, “Life must not be a novel that is given to us, but one that is made by us” (LFI 66). As the epigraph to my chapter indicates, this “life-novel,” governed by chance rather than *telos*, is by necessity “endless,” an elliptical narrative that subsequent writers and/or readers fill in through their own creative contributions.

Hence, the overarching argument I develop in this chapter, namely, that by underscoring the incompleteness and fictionality of life writing, *The Blue Flower* renders possible, in Milton’s

famous words, the “life beyond life” of a “master-spirit” such as Novalis. My argument is consistent with the trope of “the afterlife,” which provides the title to the posthumous collection of Fitzgerald’s literary essays and reviews,¹ while also speaking to the Romantics’ own fascination with “the Immortality effect”—the ability of an artifact to survive beyond the death of the artist. In *The Blue Flower*, I would submit, this effect extends both to Novalis’s unfinished novel, *Henry von Ofterdingen* (1802)—to which Fitzgerald’s book constitutes a kind of pseudo-biographical replica—and to the poetic self, which Novalis, like the other Romantic poets, conceived as an artwork that continually gives birth to itself.

Before I examine the specific ways in which Novalis is brought back to life in the open-ended narrative of *The Blue Flower*, I want to consider briefly the provocative nexus between romanticist and postmodern discourses about a wide range of issues that preoccupied Novalis and now feed into his “life-novel.” Most helpful for the purposes of my argument has been Alice Kuzniar’s critical reassessment of Novalis as a “proto-deconstructionist” based on his “rigorous pursuit,” in both his philosophical and literary writings, of “nonclosure.” As I show in the second part of this chapter, *The Blue Flower* postmodernizes the romantic quest for the “truth” behind the veil of appearances by thematizing all three of the categories of “nonclosure” discussed by Kuzniar—formal, conceptual, and metaphysical. Implicit in *The Blue Flower* is an awareness of the impossibility of ever finding this truth, and therefore of ending the quest.

Novalis and the Romantic Seeds of Postmodern Thought

“The art of writing books has not yet been invented. But it is on the point of being invented. Fragments of this kind are literary seedlings. Many among them may indeed be sterile—still if only some grow.”

(Novalis, MO 28)

Fitzgerald's portrait of Fritz von Hardenberg in *The Blue Flower* undoubtedly owes much to the unique role the young artist would assume upon joining the Jena circle in 1798, at the threshold of modernity. Together with the Schlegel brothers and Ludwig Tieck, Hardenberg contributed, in an exercise he called "symphilosophising," to the journal *Athenaeum*, where they laid the theoretical foundations of Romantic aestheticism. The pseudonym Novalis he adopted at the time was no accident, aligning him both with the past and with the future: derived from "de novali," a name that Hardenberg's early forebears used, "novalis" also means "clearer of new land." This latter meaning serves to remind us of the distinctly advanced, cross-disciplinary nature of Novalis's thought—culminating in his attempts to harmonize poetry, philosophy, and science into a "progressive, universal poesie"—as well as of the ground still left to be explored. Novalis embraced Friedrich Schlegel's definition of Romantic poetry,² making it the blueprint for his encyclopedic, yet unfinished novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. He won the admiration of his fellow artists for his innovative thinking, experimental boldness, nostalgic evocation of the past, and fervent faith in an afterlife.

Recent studies have enhanced our awareness of the striking affinities between Novalis's self-reflective poetics and postmodern critiques of truth and objectivity, language and representation, self and non-self, being and becoming. Taking their cue from the French critic Jean-Francois Lyotard, contemporary theorists interpret the Romantic desire to achieve a unified theory of life, self, and literature against the equally strong assertion of questioning, irony, and uncertainty. According to Lyotard, the cultural condition he diagnosed as "postmodern" has already been active within modernity for a long time, and therefore the two paradigms cannot be defined in simple opposition to each other. "A work," Lyotard famously maintains in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), "can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant"

(79). Lyotard uses the term “modernism” to reflect what the German theorist Jurgen Habermas calls “modernity”—the scientific and rationalist discourses (“metanarratives”) of the Enlightenment. In his seminal paper “Modernity—an Incomplete Project,” delivered in 1980, Habermas defines the modern spirit as the faith in the power of reason to lead to the betterment of humankind. The Enlightenment “project” entails a “break with tradition, blind habit, and slavish obedience to religious precepts and prohibitions” (Barry 85).

A continuation of the German *Sturm und Drang* (“Storm and Stress”) literary movement of the 1770s, German Romanticism was a protest against the cold rationalism of the Enlightenment or *Aufklärung*. Novalis, like the other young Romantics, clearly recognized both reason’s powers and limits: while valuable for its critical power because it frees the individual from rigid systems of belief, reason is essentially destructive rather than creative because it leaves no place for the visionary. Over-reliance on rationality had estranged the modern individual from nature (which was now stripped of all mystery, magic, and beauty), from other individuals, and, most disturbingly for Novalis, from God. “Sensing this condition of loss and rootlessness, Novalis stated that philosophy originates in ‘homesickness’ (*Heimweh*), the urge to feel at home again in a demystified world” (Beiser xvi). This urge, triggered by the vision of the blue flower at the beginning of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800), propels the eponymous hero to embark on a journey of self-discovery, a journey that he intuitively feels to be circular:

The magic flower was before him, and he gazed over into Thuringia, which he was just leaving, with the strange premonition that after long wanderings he would return to his native land from distant regions toward which they were now traveling and hence with the feeling that *it was really his native land he was approaching*. (HO 27; italics mine).

For Novalis, as for Hegel and for the other Romantic poets, “every voyage towards a source is a homecoming” (Steiner 17)—an idea that, as we will see shortly, carries different implications for M.H. Abrams and Alice Kuzniar, respectively. The famous opening, which Fitzgerald works into

her own novel, has Heinrich lying “restless” on his bed, thinking about the stranger and his stories: “There is no greed in my heart; but I yearn to get a glimpse of the blue flower.” So captivated is he by this image, that he feels as if “slumber had carried me into another world” (HO 15), a world where inner and outer reality flow seamlessly into each other.

Influenced by Fichte, Novalis advances a mystical spiritualism, or “magical idealism,” that reconciles Christian spirituality with Platonic ideas by positing a world beyond the senses—the realm of absolute truth that we can only approach intuitively but never fully grasp. As he put it, “We *look* everywhere for the absolute and only ever *find* things” (MO 42). We have access to mundane, imperfect particulars but not to the hidden forces which create them and which belong to the realm of the pure being. Only introspection and imagination bring man in touch with the absolute:

The imagination places the world of the future either far above us, or far below, or in a relation of metempsychosis to ourselves. We dream of traveling through the universe—But is not the universe *within ourselves*? The depths of our spirit are unknown to us—but the mysterious way leads inwards. Eternity with its worlds—the past and future—is in ourselves or nowhere. (MO 17)

In affirming the primacy of subjective truth and the creative power of the imagination, Novalis builds upon “one of Kant’s and Fichte’s fundamental insights—that we live in a world that we create,” adding to it that “our creation should be a work of art” (Beiser xvii). The same artistic autonomy informs the project of “self-fashioning,” for as Novalis maintains, “Self is not a product of nature, it is not nature—not a historical being—but an artistic one—an art—a work of art” (GD 128). For Novalis, “The artist stands on the human being as a statue does on a pedestal” (LFI 55).

Todd Kontje has rightly observed that, “the beginning of this autonomy aesthetics contains the seeds of its own critique” (10), seeds that began germinating after Novalis’s

intensive study of Fichte during 1796 and, equally significant, after the death of his beloved in 1797. What Novalis found lacking in Fichte's philosophy, namely love, now became the energizing principle behind the Romantic search for the blue flower. In stressing the necessity and power of love as an opening of the self to the other, Novalis comes to re-locate the "seat of the soul" at the meeting-place of the inner and the outer worlds (MO 26). In Géza von Molnár's interpretation, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* crystallizes this very idea: "The topic is the inner change the individual must undergo" in order to bridge the gap between self and world (99). Along similar lines, Margaret Stoljar argues that for Novalis the "way inward" leads ultimately outward, as the poet-philosopher who is "gifted with the ability to recognize magical truth" takes on the task ("mission," as Novalis calls it) of guiding others toward this recognition (6).

This mediation between self and world is achieved through language, whose transfiguring potential Novalis celebrates in a series of fragments from *Miscellaneous Observations* and his short essay, "Monologue." Novalis's insights into the origin and nature of language prefigure Martin Heidegger's ideas on the relationship between poetry, language, and thought. Both thinkers regard language as an innate quality of the mind that structures the self's relation to the world within and without. Moreover, for both, authentic language is poetry, the disclosure of "the unconcealment of Being" (*Poetry* 74), the original way in which the world is called into being. In "Monologue," Novalis wonders:

But what if I were compelled to speak? What if this urge to speak were the mark of the inspiration of language within me? And my will only wanted to do what I had to do? Could this in the end, without my knowing or believing, be poetry? Could it make a mystery comprehensible to language? If so, would I be a writer by vocation, for after all, a writer is only someone inspired by language? (230)

Here Novalis implies what Heidegger (and before him, Mallarmé) will make explicit, namely, that it is not we who speak language but language that speaks us. And if, like Heidegger, Novalis

deplores, in *Hymns to the Night*, the loss of an original connection between words and the things they represent, in “Monologue,” he seems to affirm the arbitrary, yet self-sufficient playfulness of words, which function the same way as mathematical formulae: words, he maintains, “constitute a world in itself” and “express nothing but their own marvelous nature” (214). Poetic symbolism, Novalis believed, serves to make up for the “poverty of words”—their failure to “express several ideas all at once” (MO 70). Implicit in Novalis’s conception of language as a self-conscious medium of conveying magical truth is a rejection of the constraints that imitation places on representation. Following Fichte, Novalis locates the source of creativity within the poet’s mind: “Poetry is representation of the mind—of the inner world in its entirety. Its sole medium, words, indicate this, for they are indeed the outer revelation of that inner realm of energy” (LaF 160).

Novalis’s theory of representation posits a dialectical relationship between presence and absence, and therefore has an unmistakably Derridean ring: “All representation rests on making present that which is not present” (GD 134). To represent, for Novalis, is essentially to “make Romantic,” to imbue the ordinary with the extraordinary, the mundane with the magical so that the poet can “find the original meaning again. To make Romantic is nothing but a qualitative raising to a higher power. . . . By endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the *appearance* of the infinite, I am making it Romantic” (LFI 60; italics mine). “Appearance” is a key word here, suggesting the illusory nature of this transfiguring process from which both poetic form and the embodied substance emerge as fragmentary, incomplete, and imperfect.

This leads us to the crux of Alice Kuzniar’s argument and the basis of what I argue in relation to Fitzgerald’s fictionalized biography about Novalis. In *Delayed Endings*, Kuzniar investigates Novalis and Hölderlin’s preoccupation with “nonclosure,” a concept she defines in formal, conceptual, and metaphysical terms—all three definitions implying a “criticism of

integral systems, a questioning of monadic totalities and ultimacies” (4). Formal nonclosure involves the repeated “avoidance of endings” and is illustrated by the fragmentation of narrative into “episodic plots” that “follow no probable and inevitable sequence” (3). The mixture of verse and prose within texts such as *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and *Hymns to the Night* further radicalizes the form, epitomizing the Romantics’ reaction against the neoclassicism of the previous generation. In one of his entries, Novalis maintains that, “The style of a novel must not be a continuum, but each part must have its own architecture. Each passage must have something to achieve, define, and constitute a work in itself” (JI 223).³ This does not mean, however, that a work is self-contained, or that the artist is its sole creator. Thus fragmented, the text awakens the readers’ desire and curiosity, in that no sooner does the narrative approach completion, than it “draws us back into a state of anticipation” (Kuzniar 4). Satisfaction, Novalis reminds us, can only be temporary, and meaning only provisional, indeed open.

A testimony to the fertility of his mind, Novalis’s first major publication in Schlegel’s *Athenaeum* bears the symbolic title *Pollen* (1798) and consists of a collection of prose fragments, each purposefully incomplete.⁴ Figuratively speaking, the fragment is “like the pollen grain wafted by the wind,” being “received elsewhere than at its place of origin” and exciting “further reflection” (Kuzniar 95). By virtue of their incompleteness, books constitute for Novalis the expressions of “fragmentary concepts about *the real world*” (JI 228; emphasis mine). In this instance, it appears that for Novalis literature must still have a referent outside itself. But, as we will see shortly, his reflections on language also prefigure Derrida’s notion of *difference* on which conceptual nonclosure is premised; according to Derrida, a signifier “obliquely relays” not to a signified, but to “other signifiers in a chain” (Kuzniar 6).

The metaphysical and theological implication of nonclosure has to do with the questioning of “an ultimate ending,” or of a “purposeful goal” (*telos*) to the “human story”

(Kuzniar 7). In both Novalis and Hölderlin, this critique takes the form of “deferral”—the suspension of the trajectory towards an absolute end. Kuzniar takes issue with the more traditional scholarship that has claimed to uncover “teleological emplotment,” or “utopic intentionality” in the works written around 1800. Faulting the advocates of “secularization” for perpetuating a “conservative ideology,”⁵ she sets against their arguments her own reading of Novalis as “our metacritic of secularization,” the poet-philosopher who voices skepticism about transcendent salvation (75), even as he retains a belief in life’s metaphysical coverings. Similarly, Kontje maintains that in Novalis, “the divine as perfection, as absolute unity and comprehension, is only negatively present, present only through its absence” (98).

Kuzniar points out that Novalis deliberately invests *the telos* with negative connotations of annihilation, as when he writes: “To what extent do we never reach the ideal? To the extent that it would destroy itself. Therefore the self can never be elevated to an absolute position, for then its effectiveness, its pleasure, i.e. its victory, in short the self would cease to exist” (qtd. in Kuzniar 81). Thus, we infer, his project of romanticizing the world *must* remain incomplete lest what falls short of the ideal, i.e., the mutable self, is annihilated. To defer the realization of this ideal and construct a *Perpetuum mobile*, Novalis focuses upon the “production of intervals and interims, instead of what is absent or remains hidden” (Kuzniar 6). He goes so far as to invert the traditional meaning of eternity by defining it in terms of secular, as opposed to sacred time: “It is nature that is eternal, and not the spirit. . . . It’s in the spirit that we must find the reason for transitoriness. *Perpetuum mobile*” (JI 129). As shown in the following section of this chapter, Fitzgerald’s own version of Fritz von Hardenberg’s quest for an absolute ideal brings out both the eternal qualities of his Romantic spirit and the transitory aspects of his “human, all too human” existence.

I have dwelled on the above critical readings of Novalis, first, because they highlight those directions in which his thought is already moving in the course of *The Blue Flower*, and second, because the concept of “nonclosure” bears directly on Fitzgerald’s approach to life-writing as infinitely cross-referenced. A postmodern suspicion of closure, unity, and absolutes informs the protagonist’s lyrical effusions and philosophical speculations with which Fitzgerald punctuates her narrative, reinforcing her view of Novalis’s life as an “endless novel.” Uncomfortable with abstract pronouncements, Fitzgerald fleshes out the portrait of an actual living, breathing, and feeling individual attached to the work whose seeds have become deeply embedded in the soil of intellectual and artistic Postmodernism.

Postmodernizing the Romantic Quest

“I show that I have understood a writer only when I can act in his spirit, when, without constricting his individuality, I can translate him and change him in diverse ways.”

(Novalis, MO 28)

The Blue Flower contributes to the cumulative life-story (“the endless novel”) of Novalis in ways that resonate with the other author fictions that make up the subject of this study. As we have seen, Dyer’s memoir enriches the discourse about Lawrence’s life and works beyond the conventionally academic and scholarly. To a great extent, Fitzgerald’s novel achieves the same effect in its foregrounding of the romantic plot, central to which is the mystery of Hardenberg’s spontaneous infatuation with the 12-year-old Sophie von Kuhn. Within minutes of their first meeting, Fritz told Sophie they would marry when she was 16. He was convinced that they were destined for each other: “What I have looked for, I have found: What I found, has looked for me”

(154). From that point on, the novel chronicles their three-year courtship, which was tragically cut short by Sophie's death in 1797 from a liver tumor infected by tuberculosis.

The Blue Flower renders both the hopes and defeats of Novalis's youthful romanticism. On the one hand, the book is infused with Novalis's optimism—his confidence in the natural goodness of man, in the immortality of the soul, and in the power of the imagination to transfigure the commonplace. On the other, it tends to view human beings through much darker lenses, seeing them as victims of social forces and irrational impulses. In depicting her characters' passions and struggles, Fitzgerald remains true to her "deepest convictions—I mean to the courage of those who are born to be defeated, the weakness of the strong, and the tragedy of misunderstandings and missed opportunities which I have done my best to treat as comedy, for otherwise how can we manage to bear it?" (*Afterlife* 347). Fitzgerald's moral position implies a commitment to human, as opposed to merely aesthetic, concerns, a commitment that also does justice to the actual historical and cultural conditions under which Novalis lived and wrote in late-eighteenth century Saxony.

The comment with which Novalis prefaces the "Teplitz Fragments"—"Notes in the margin of life"—may well apply to Fitzgerald's own "marginalia" to the unending life story of Novalis, for much like his entries, the vignettes constituting the novel touch on everyday things—foods, illness, medical treatments, the relations between men and women, family life, art, politics, the role of religion in society, etc. One might even say that each of the 55 very brief chapters, many only a page or two long, calls to mind the Romantic fragment, as it allows the writer to move freely across her subject's life and distill its essence from the mountains of evidence at her disposal: Novalis's surviving work, letters from and to him, the diaries and official and private documents, which were published by W. Kohlhammer Verlag in five volumes between 1960 and 1988.

The portrait of the artist that emerges from the novel's "web of quotation and fiction" (Byatt 62) represents a delicate balance between Hardenberg's social persona and his deeper self. Whereas the first is embedded in the fabric of daily life that Fitzgerald weaves out of incidents and incidentals, the latter is inscribed in Novalis's writings, echoes of which resonate throughout *The Blue Flower*. This other self, the full-blown manifestation of Hardenberg's budding genius, makes his humanity (his earth-bound self), more clearly apparent. But where does one begin the search for the artist's "true" self? Fitzgerald's answer falls in line with the realization to which Dubin, Malamud's biographer-hero, has arrived after looking into Lawrence's life: "One did not necessarily begin at the beginning. . . . Beginnings may be more effective independent of strict chronology—where the dominant action of the life starts, the moment of insight, cohesion, decision. You can search that out or perhaps define a moment as a beginning and let what follows prove it" (24).

What an apt way to describe Novalis's own understanding of beginning as an arbitrary point that presupposes something else, yet another beginning, in an unending causal sequence. Halfway through *The Blue Flower*, Fritz von Hardenberg makes the following comment: "If a novel begins with finding, it must end with searching." This statement, while directed at the story Fritz has been pondering, a cryptic tale of the blue flower, also comments on Fitzgerald's own narrative, which, "opens with finding—finding the main character returning from college to his home in a small German town—and ends with searching—searching for the meaning of the blue flower" (Smelstor). As we have seen, for Novalis, the search for the ideal never ends, involving as it does a series of transformations that seem complete only on a moment-to-moment basis. In *The Blue Flower*, this complex interlocking of finding and the search it prompts, of being and becoming, leaves the mystery of Hardenberg's irresistible passion unresolved and the meaning of the blue flower open.

Just as Novalis does in *Ofterdingen*, Fitzgerald depicts the interim of the poet's life-journey, de-emphasizing its departure and terminal points⁶ and foregrounding those "moments of being," to use Virginia Woolf's famous phrase, when he glimpses the laws governing existence and feels the certainty that comes with knowing his fate. *The Blue Flower* begins *in medias res*, after the episode pivotal both to the plot development and to Hardenberg's transformation into a visionary thinker. The first meeting between Fritz and Sophie is dramatized only later in the novel (chapter 18), and so is his brief stay in Jena (chapter 33), where Hardenberg invites Jacob Dietmahler to visit with him at his house in Weissenfels. Dietmahler arrives at the Hardenbergs' on washday, a yearly ritual that, judging by the quantity and quality of the linen falling from the upper windows of the Hardenberg home, indicates to the visitor that Fritz comes from a family of minor nobility. "A numerous family, also," since Fritz is the second oldest of eleven children. What starts off as a description of the homely and the everyday turns subtly into a foreshadowing of the protagonist's imaginative "flights" from the constraining austerity of his childhood home into the sublime realms of poetry and philosophy: "The underwear of children and young persons, as well as the larger sizes, fluttered through *the blue air, as though the children themselves had taken to flight*" (1; italics mine). Towards the same end, the narrator remarks that, "[i]mpatience, translated into spiritual energy, raced through all the young Hardenbergs" (4).

This opening chapter shows how family and friends perceive Hardenberg, while also alerting us to his father's domineering nature and conservative views. In response to the Freiherr's anxious query about Fritz's romantic entanglement with a "young woman of the middle classes," Dietmahler suggests that his friend cannot be judged by "ordinary standards," for he is a poet and a philosopher deeply interested in "the vocation of man" (6).⁷ The Freiherr insists, however, that Fritz will follow in his footsteps and earn his living as an Assistant Inspector of Salt Mines. His reasons for pushing Hardenberg in this direction are practical rather

than romantic, speaking to the same mistrust of dreams that Heinrich's father exhibits in Novalis's own tale of the blue flower. Here the father dismisses dreams as "useless and harmful reflections," and counsels his son to "turn away" from them. To the hero, as to Novalis, however, dreams "seem to be a defense against the regularity and routine of life; a playground where the hobbled imagination is freed and revived and where it jumbles together all the pictures of life and interrupts the constant soberness of the grown-ups by means of a mere child's play" (HO 19). This passage brings forth the escapist dimension of Novalis's attempts to create a dreamlike world out of life's "accidents."

In *The Blue Flower*, Fitzgerald also pits the freedom and joy of the imagination against a daily life of cares, inhibitions, and petty formalities. Chapter five offers a brief history of the family into which Hardenberg was born in 1772 to Auguste Bernhardine (née von Bölzig) and Heinrich Ulrich Erasmus Freiherr von Hardenberg. His father had served in the Hanoverian legion during the Seven Years' War, which brought about the financial ruin of many loyal landlords, among them Hardenberg himself. The Oberwiederstadt property had to be sold, but it remained their "true home and lands" (5), even after they moved to Schlobe-bei-Jena. During the smallpox epidemic that killed his first wife, the Freiherr converted to the Moravian Brotherhood, a religious denomination based on the principle that, "A human soul is converted as soon as it realizes that it is in danger, and what the danger is" (17). To the stern father, his eldest son's inclination for dreaming appeared dangerous, which is why he sent him to the Brethren's boarding school at Neudietendorf to receive religious instruction. Here, Fritz exasperated the Prediger because he "perpetually asked questions, but was unwilling to receive answers" (18). In the course of the children's catechism, he displayed a precocious intelligence that bemused his instructors, who dismissed as "incorrect" his answers to questions such as "what is the body?" or

“how does one know when people have died?” The Prediger wrote to the Freiherr: “A child of not quite ten years old, he insists that the body is not flesh, but the same stuff as the soul” (18).

This early attempt to make Fritz a practical person failed, as did subsequent steps in the child’s education, carefully documented by Fitzgerald. At the age of 16, Fritz was sent to live for a year with his father’s brother, a prestigious aristocrat and Governor of the Saxon division of the Teutonic Order, at the opulent Lucklum castle. Though brief, this visit opened up a new world for Fritz, who, besides “learn[ing] to understand wine,” acquainted himself with uncle Wilhelm’s vast library and the distinguished company he kept, which included musicians, politicians, and philosophers. Unfortunately, though, in the worldly society of “His Mightiness,” as uncle Wilhelm is referred to, women’s opinions did not count for much since their only function, in the mind of Erasmus, at least, was to do the washing (23). Unlike women in a college city, such as Jena, provincial women were bound to a subservient role and excluded from intellectual circles. Later, in a conversation with Fritz, Coelestin Just advises him to stay away from his friends in the Jena circle, particularly the women, whose behavior he deems scandalous, for not only do they have husbands *and* lovers, but they insist on having opinions of their own.⁸ Hardenberg’s own views on women deserve more extended scrutiny, so I will turn to them later. For now, it suffices to say that he, too, denies women any real intellectuality when he calls them “children of nature,” or says that, “nature, in a sense, is their art” (57). To his sprightly mother Auguste, he confides that, “in the world of Nature the female is often stronger than the male” due to the mysterious power she exerts over men. As Fitzgerald tartly notes, Auguste’s “narrowness of mind” gives her an “advantage” over her husband, in that, unlike him, she seems unperturbed by the disturbances in France, viewing them as “no more or no less important” than her daily chores (25).

The French Revolution, which put the ideals of the Enlightenment to a severe test, figures in a significant way in *The Blue Flower*, being linked to the radical changes effected within the

nation, within the mind and the imagination of the individual, and last but not least, within the family structure. To the Freiherr, the king of France is “the father, [and] the nation is his family,” and therefore to accuse him of treason is “an act of madness” (27). Bernhard protests that, “When the golden age returns there will be no fathers.” For Fritz, too, “It is possible to make the world new, to restore it to what once was, for the golden age was once a reality” (26). In response to Coelestin Just’s comment that, “The Revolution in France has not produced the effects once hoped for,” that “[i]t has not resulted in a golden age,” Fritz remarks: “the spirit of the Revolution, as we first heard of it, as it first came to us, could be preserved here in Germany. It could be transferred to the world of the imagination and administered by poets” (60). He then adds, “Politics are the last thing we need” (61), an idea we find in Novalis’s own fragments, where he comments that the distractions of everyday life prevent “the higher development of our nature. Divinatory, magical, truly poetic people cannot come into being under circumstances such as ours” (LFI 55). His country struck Novalis as spiritually sterile, politically bankrupt, and socially divided—in a word, “un-poetic”—which is why he envisioned a state that would “be one family, bound by love” (61), embodying, in other words, the ideal of “Romanticization.”⁹

Sibling love compels Fritz to go in search of his little brother, Bernhard, known variously as the Angel or the Angel in the House. During Diethmahler’s visit with the Hardenbergs, Bernhard has run away to the Weissenfels’ bridge. Finding Bernhard trapped between two gunwales and fearing he will drown, Fritz pleads with the boy to heave himself up, to which the latter replies: “What would it matter if I did? . . . You said once that death was not significant, but only a change in condition” (12). This incident further illustrates Fitzgerald’s discreet way of introducing ideas that carry Novalis’s indelible signature, here his belief that there exists no barrier between life and death: “Death is at once the end and the beginning” (MO 15). Moreover, the image of Bernhard trapped between the gunwales obliquely points to Fritz’s own position in

regard to his father's expectations of him, on the one hand, and his own romantic inclinations, on the other. The Freiherr deemed it best for his eldest son to receive an education "in the German manner, at as many universities as possible": Jena for a year, Leipzig for a year, and then a year at Wittenberg to study law, theology, and the constitution of the Electorate of Saxony. Instead of these subjects, however, Fritz opted for history and philosophy.

Thus, on his very first day in Jena, in October 1790, Fritz attended a lecture by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who, building on Kant's ideas, set forth his own theory of solipsistic idealism and dangerous relativism: "We are all free to imagine what the world is like, and since we probably all imagine it differently, there is no reason at all to believe in the fixed reality of things" (28). Fitzgerald pokes fun both at Fichte's practical application of his theory, as when she has him call upon his students to withdraw into their minds until "thought will be the wall" (29), and then she has Fritz imitate him: "[L]ook at the washbasket! Let your thought be the washbasket! Have you thought the washbasket? Now then, gentlemen, let your thought be on that that thought the washbasket!" (2). While his peers were driving themselves "mad" trying to grasp Fichte's system, Fritz recognized that "There is no place in it for love" (29). Over and against the self-withdrawal advocated by Fichte, he pitted the heart embraced by love, whereby the human being experiences an expansion of sympathy and sensibility. For Novalis, as for John Keats, the human soul must be constantly receptive to love if it is to attain self-transcendence.¹⁰ Inspired by love, poetic vision renders possible "the most intimate *communion* of the finite and the infinite" (LF I 54).

On one of his walks in a churchyard he knew well, Fritz sees, on one of the grass mounds, a young man, still almost a boy, "with his head bent, himself as white, still, and speechless as a memorial." The sight is consoling to Fritz, who intuited that the stranger, "although living, was not human, but also that at the moment there was no boundary between them." Fritz then says out loud: "The external world is the world of shadows. It throws its

shadows into the kingdom of light. How different they will appear when this darkness is gone and the shadow-body has passed away. The universe, after all, is within us. The way leads inwards, always inwards” (126). The wording of this passage is strikingly analogous to the fragment quoted earlier, in which Novalis asserts that self-knowledge is reached over the secret path to inwardness, a path stretching both in the past and in the future (MO 17).

At Jena, Fritz also meets the celebrated Professor Friedrich von Schiller, his history teacher, whom he greatly admired and respected.¹¹ When Schiller came down with pneumonia, in 1791, Fritz helped nurse him through the illness along with other students, all taking notes at their master’s dictation. One of the questions they pondered was, “To what end does man study universal history?” (31). Hardenberg would later equate “[t]he significance of history” with that of the “novel itself” (JI 223). The novel he had in mind was one of education, along the lines that Schiller envisioned in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) and that Novalis began mapping out in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Schiller described the long history of civilization in terms of an educational journey leading through “three major stages, from the natural through the aesthetic to a third thing, a moral state that will preserve the values of both nature and aesthetics” (Abrams 212).¹² *The Blue Flower* charts a similar trajectory, albeit on a smaller scale, of the artist’s inner life, following the “natural” and “aesthetic” stages of Novalis’s education and culminating with the strict moral discipline he imposed upon himself in order to become worthy of Sophie. For him, then, the “end of history” is not so much a universal goal, but a “question of personal salvation” (O’Brien). Thus, in his poem for her thirteenth birthday, Fritz credited his beloved with having set him on the right path: no longer the “man of yesterday,” careless and irresponsible, he had experienced, due to Sophie’s ennobling influence, a moral and spiritual transformation (146).

Upon Schiller's advice, Fritz transferred, in the fall of 1792, to the university of Leipzig, where he befriended Friedrich von Schlegel, later to become one of the chief theoreticians of German Romanticism. Though only two months older, Schlegel was more experienced in worldly matters than his provincial friend, for whom he assumed the role of mentor, leading him more deeply into the study of Kant and Fichte, while also opening his eyes to life's moral ambiguities. Impressed with Fritz's uncorrupted enthusiasm, Friedrich Schlegel wrote to his elder brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel:

Fate has put into my hands a young man, from whom everything may be expected, and he explained himself to me at once with fire—with indescribably much fire. He is thin and well-made, with a beautiful expression when he gets carried away. He talks three times as much, and as fast, as the rest of us. On the very first evening he told me that the golden age would return, and that there was nothing evil in the world. I don't know if he is still of the same opinion. His name is von Hardenberg. (31)

In Leipzig, “the largest city he had lived in,” Fritz would often neglect his formal studies and indulge in the boisterous student life. His brother Erasmus joined him for a while, and together, as Novalis recalled later, they played “brilliant roles on the stage of the world” (qtd. in Neubaer 14).¹³ When he could no longer maintain the allowance that could be spared for his life's necessities, both those of the soul and of the flesh, he turned to his father, only to be reminded that, “there is no money” (38). The ensuing “disagreement” (as this chapter title has it) seemed inevitable: “Some urgency, some private resolution seemed to possess him” (40). He informed his father and uncle about his decision to follow his brother's Karl example and enter the military, which would cost his family nothing, would cure him of “romantic tendencies,” and would teach him discipline to boot. There was nothing to fear, because “life, after all, is a goal, not a means” (41).

The next chapter, fittingly titled “The Sense of Immortality,” sharpens into relief those “romantic tendencies” Fritz thought he could “correct.” Riding back from Wittenberg at the end

of his year's studies, Fritz looks back on his comprehensive education, fondly remembering all the men of "passion and intellect" whose teachings he has absorbed and in whom he still believes, despite their disagreements. He reflects that, in addition to Fichtean philosophy, geology, chemistry, combinatorial mathematics, Saxon commercial law, he has also been greatly stimulated by the work of his friend, the physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter, in galvanism.¹⁴ To Fritz, these theories "are all one," for "All human knowledge is one," with mathematics "the linking principle" between poetry, reason, and religion, just as Ritter considered electricity "the link between body and mind" (51). In his diary, Fritz writes down those words belonging to the Romantic vocabulary which have left a profound impress on him: "weakness, faults, urges, striving for fame, striving against the crushing, wretched, bourgeois conditions of everyday life, youth, despair," and last, but not least, his belief in "a certain inexpressible sense of immortality" (46).

After completing his studies in jurisprudence at the University of Wittenberg, Fritz is sent by his father to Coelestin August Just, tax-inspector and magistrate of the salt mines in Tennstedt, Thuringia, to learn administration and business management. In his turn, Fritz teaches the Justs to see the world through the lens of poetic philosophy (or magical idealism). To Rahel, Just's wife, he confesses to being struck with a revelation of the beauty surrounding him, which he ascribes to the fact that "he had not seen their everyday, but their spiritual selves" (49). He soon forms a lifelong friendship with Just's niece, Karoline, a young unmarried woman with an alert and sensible mind. Justen, as Fritz calls her, learns from the young poet that "the world is tending day by day not towards destruction, but towards infinity" (56). This statement validates Kuzniar's argument regarding Novalis's "deferral of parousia (absolute, divine presence, or the apocalypse)" as one of the ways in which he thematizes nonclosure (7).

Fritz's impact on Just is equally strong, arising out of their conversations about matters to which the latter "has never paid much attention before" (61). When Karoline finds herself falling in love with Fritz, who unwittingly flirts with her, Just notices that he is "losing the narrow-mindedness of an old man" (61). He comes to learn of a fable about the problem of universal language found by his apprentice in the works of the Dutch philosopher Franz Hemsterhuis. This fable, alluded to in both *Hymns* and *Ofterdingen*, tells of "a time when plants, stars, and stones talked on equal terms with animals and with man" (61). Fritz believes that, "Once we knew the words of this language, and we shall do so again, since history always repeats itself" (61-62). In the meantime, he comforts himself with the ludic virtues of the literary craft, having arrived at an insight widely accepted in today's discourse on language: "Language refers only to itself, it is not the key to anything higher. Language speaks, because speaking is its pleasure and it can do nothing else" (75).¹⁵

On a business trip to the tax office in nearby Gruningen, Just introduces Fritz to Captain Johann Rudolf von Rockenthien, the stepfather of Sophie von Kuhn. Then (November 17, 1794) and there begins "one of literary history's most poignant love stories" (Kapp). After no more than fifteen minutes, "something" has happened to Fritz: he has fallen head over heels in love with Sophie. This baffles everyone, particularly his brother Erasmus, who cannot help asking: "How can you understand a Maiden in a quarter of an hour?" He cautions Fritz that even if he were to marry Sophie, "satisfaction makes for weariness, and you end up with that you've always so much dreaded, boredom" (70). Fritz, however, is secure that Sophie is his "heart's desire," his wisdom, and his truth. His feelings for her will not "wear off, in the course of nature," as Erasmus suspects, because they transcend nature¹⁶; nor are they mere figments of an intoxicated imagination, since due to them he is receiving "moral grace" (91). So intense are these feelings, that he can only express them in poetry:

*Am I to be kept apart from her for ever?
 Is the hope of being united
 With what we recognised as our own
 But could not quite possess completely
 Is that too to be called intoxication?
 All humanity will be, in time, what Sophie
 Is now for me: human perfection—moral grace—
 Life's highest meaning will then no longer
 Be mistaken for drunken dreams. (91)*

These lines echo the dedication that prefaces *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in which the poet thanks his beloved for having awakened in him the “noble urge” to “gaze into the wide world’s soul and meaning.” She has become “the Muse that pours / Her genius on my songs and fills my heart.” Both sets of lines elevate Sophie onto a higher realm of pure spirit, and both suggest that only in relation to this realm can human beings acquire meaning. As such, they speak to the poet’s determination, reaffirmed two months after her death, to “place everything in relation to his *idea* of her” (JI 34, italics added). Palmer Hilty correctly observes that, “[t]he Sophie who lives in literature—in *Hymns to the Night* and in Mathilda in *Henry of Ofterdingen*—is a creation of the poet’s mind, a veritable transmutation into a beatific vision” (2-3).

As for the flesh and bone Sophie, she was indeed rather ordinary, neither pretty nor bright. In his most detailed description of her, a sketch entitled “Clarisse,” dating from the summer of 1796, Hardenberg notes that she was sensible and generous, devoted to her family, respectful of others, fond of wine and tobacco, not overly fond of poetry, and, perhaps most important, “She wants to become nothing—She is something” (JI 67). In *The Blue Flower*, Fritz attempts to explain to Sophie what he felt when he first saw her standing by the window:

When we catch sight of certain human figures and faces . . . especially certain eyes, expressions, movements—when we hear certain words, when we read certain passages, thoughts take on the meaning of laws . . . a view of life true to itself, without any self-estrangement. And the self is set free, for the moment, from the constant pressure of change. (84)

That “moment,” he wants her to understand, confirmed his belief in a “sense of immortality” which redeems human beings from chance and change, and he is therefore dismayed by Sophie’s admission that “she did not believe in life after death” (83). Her interest in transmigration stems from a desire to be born again so that she can have “fair hair” (84)—an answer that reviewer Tess Lewis finds “at once perfectly apt and woefully inadequate” (2). When Sophie explains that only a miracle could restore her faith, Fritz cries: “Miracles don’t make people believe! [...] It’s the belief that is the miracle” (84). What Fritz finds so attractive in Sophie certainly defies explanation, testifying to the “irrationality of love” (Smelstor), “the ineffability of poetic inspiration,” or, perhaps, “the extreme subjectivity of the romantics and their spiritual quests” (Lewis). By emphasizing Sophie’s vacuity, Fitzgerald highlights a romantic commonplace according to which the quest itself, not its object, takes precedence for those who ardently believe in their powers to transcend the external world of shadows. In *The Blue Flower*, the gap between desire and its object turns out to be insurmountable, but this very gap, Fitzgerald suggests, nourishes and sustains desire.

Fritz seems powerless when confronted with Sophie’s contradictory nature. The more time he spends with Sophie, the less he can “get the measure of her. I love something that I do not understand. She has got me, but she is not at all sure she wants me.” Fritz wishes he could see “one opening, the shadow of an opening,” where he could make himself felt a little (86). What he writes down about her no longer makes sense to Fritz, for, on the one hand, “she cares more about other people and their feelings than about her own,” and on the other, “she is cold through and through” (113). Her cheerfulness is due both to her stepfather’s influence,¹⁷ and to her refusal to think of life in terms of changes occurring in time: she simply wants “to be, and not to have to think about it” (71).

And finally, although Sophie likes listening to stories, she is barely touched by the story of the blue flower that Fritz has contemplated writing. On the day of their secret engagement in March 1795, Fritz offers her, besides the engagement ring, the opening chapter of his work in progress: “It is the introduction to a story that I cannot write as yet. I do not even know what it will be. I have made a list of occupations and professions, and of psychological types. But perhaps after all it will not be a novel. There is much truth, perhaps, in folktales” (110).¹⁸ Again, Sophie’s response reflects, in both its wording and content, her shallowness and lack of imagination: “Why should he care about a flower? Sophie asked. He is not a woman, and he is not a gardener.” Sophie is more interested in the flower’s name than what it stands for. Fritz explains that his character “knew once.” “He was told the name, but he has forgotten it. He would give his life to remember it” (112). Hence, “If a story begins with finding, it must end with searching” (112).

Sophie is not alone in failing to grasp the meaning of the blue flower—this emblem of perpetual longing for spiritual fulfillment, for an absolute ideal that is infinitely deferred. In *Ofterdingen*, the hero catches a glimpse of the blue flower, but finds it in vain to pluck it: “Finally, when he wanted to approach the flower, it all at once began to move and change” (17). The vision has reached into Heinrich’s soul “as into a giant wheel, impelling it onward with a mighty swing” (19). The famous passage conveying the hero’s determination to pursue this unattainable ideal appears in Fitzgerald’s narrative as well: “‘It was not the thought of the treasure which stirred up such unspeakable longings in me’ he said to himself. ‘I have no craving to be rich, but I long to see the blue flower. It lies incessantly at my heart, and I can imagine and think about nothing else’” (62). The first person to read and comment on this excerpt is Fritz’s confidante, Karoline, in whose interpretation the meaning of the blue flower remains elusive:

The young man has to go away from his home to find it. He only wants to see it, he does not want to possess it. It cannot be poetry, he knows what that is already. It can't be happiness, he wouldn't need a stranger to tell him what it is, and as far as I can see he is already happy in his home. (63)

Fritz's relentless pursuit of Sophie puzzles Karoline even more than the blue flower. We begin to realize that her feelings for Fritz go beyond mere friendship, as she suffers in silence from a broken heart. Fritz cannot hide his frustration with her failure to grasp the "one thing, the most important of all," namely, "the nature of desire between a man and a woman." Afraid to lose his confidence, she speaks up: "Not everyone can speak about what they suffer. Some are separated from the only one they love, but are obliged to remain silent" (74). Blinded by his desire for Sophie, Fritz takes this to mean that it is the "obstacles to happiness" that draw them closer together. He even sends her a verse that reads, "Never does a heart sigh in vain," without suspecting that her heart sighs for him, and not for an alleged "absent, secret, frustrated lover"—a figment of her imagination (78, 74).

We have to wonder, then, how well did Novalis grasp the nature of women? His reflections on women are scattered throughout his writings, but the following passage from "Teplitz Fragments" is quite illuminating. Using an analogy that both objectifies and idealizes women, he wonders whether they are not

similar to the infinite in that they cannot be squared, but can only be found through approaching them? And similar to the highest in that they are absolutely close to us and yet always sought—that they are absolutely understandable and yet not understood, that they are absolutely indispensable and yet are mostly dispensed with, and similar to higher beings in that they appear so childlike, so ordinary, so idle, and so playful? (104)

This description betrays an essentialist point of view that denies women the capacity for self-knowledge and intellectual growth: "Women are inert: sometimes idle and helpless like children, sometimes remote and inspiring like higher beings. Like nature, they are present, yet ineluctable,

mysterious yet ordinary” (Stoljar 14). In *The Blue Flower*, the calm and assurance of Sophie’s elder sister, the Frau Leutnant Mandelsloh, indicate to Fritz that, “women have a better grasp on the whole business of life than we men have. We are morally better than they are, but they can reach perfection, we can’t. And that in spite of the fact that they particularize, we generalize” (100). Furthermore, he believes that “all women have what Schlegel finds lacking in so many men, a beautiful soul. But so often it is concealed” (101).

Therein lies the strength of Sophie, whose name is invoked by Novalis as a symbol for womanhood—“Sophie, or on women” (TF 104). Neither Fritz nor the painter hired to draw her portrait can unlock the mystery of Sophie’s “beautiful soul.” Talented as he is, and despite his reputation for painting “from the heart,” Joseph Hoffmann fails to re-create the resemblance that Fritz intuitively finds between his beloved and the self-portrait Raphael painted when he was twenty-five. Hoffman determines to paint Sophie “standing in the sunshine, just at the end of childhood and on the verge of a woman’s joy and fulfillment, and to include in his portrait the Mandelsloh, her sister, the soldier’s wife, likely to be widowed, sitting in the shadow, the victim of woman’s lot” (117). But this task proves impossible due to the very process of becoming that, as much as Sophie resists it, places her at the threshold of female adulthood. How can this volatile spirit be captured on canvas then? Reminding Fritz that “art and nature follow the same laws” (123), Hoffmann presses this point further:

Hardenberg, in every created thing, whether it is alive or whether it is what we usually call inanimate, there is an attempt to communicate, even among the totally silent. There is a question being asked, a different question for every entity, which for the most part will never be put into words, even by those who can speak. (124)

Because he could not hear her “question,” Hoffmann could not draw Sophie’s portrait, a failure that widens the epistemological and interpretive gap opened by the question posed in a chapter title, and around which the entire novel revolves: “What is the meaning?”

Among those who seem to comprehend the significance of the blue flower are Dr. Hofrat Ebhard, who treats Sophie's fatal illness, and Bernhard. Without consulting Brown's *Elementae Medicinae*, Dr. Ebhard trusts that his diagnostic is correct since one in four of his patients have succumbed to consumption: "He had never had the chance to hear the opening of *The Blue Flower*, but if he had done so he could have said immediately what he thought it meant" (138). Unlike Fritz, who wants to believe that Sophie is immortal because of her likeness to nature (181), Dr. Ebhard knows that Sophie's youth will not be on her side. Bernhard supplies yet another key to the symbol's meaning: "He had been struck," in reading the opening chapter, "by one thing in particular: the stranger who had spoken at the dinner table about the Blue Flower had been understood by one person and one person only. This person must have been singled out as distinct from all the rest of the family. It was a matter of recognizing your own fate and greeting it as familiar when it came" (199). In Margaret Smelstor's interpretation, "Fitzgerald leaves readers wondering" as to whether "the Angel in the House is the Angel of Death," and whether "he and the Doctor of Death are the realists who will puncture the balloon of Romanticism." This reading is supported by the events unfolding in the novel's last chapters, particularly by the depiction of Sophie's long agony which forces Fritz to confront the actuality of death. By the same token, Fitzgerald's deft characterization allows us to glimpse the core of common sense in Fritz's poetic and romantic temperament.

Before hearing Dr. Ebhard's diagnostic, Fritz informs Sophie that he will have to apply himself very seriously to studying and working so that they can get married. He delves into the works of Fichte, but because of his professional obligations, he does most of his reading and writing at night. In February 1796, Fritz assumes the post of assistant administrator of the Saxon salt mines under his father. Learning how to run a salt mine, he feels increasingly drawn to the mysteries of geology and mineralogy. Thus, he comes to think of himself as "a natural scientist"

who has stumbled upon “an entirely new land, and dark stars. The mining industry, it seemed to him, was not a science, but an art. Could anyone but an artist, a poet, understand the relationship between the rocks and the constellations?” The first, he reflects, were perhaps no more than traces of the latter, for “What has been, must be again” (150).¹⁹ When Karoline describes the profession Fritz has come to admire so much as “an offence against Nature,” Fritz replies: “The mining industry is not a violation of Nature’s secrets, but a release” of its primal energies (152). As she listens to him talk about his commitment to mining, Karoline “recognized the voice in which he had read to her the opening of chapter of *The Blue Flower*” (152).

To celebrate the one-year anniversary of his engagement to Sophie, Fritz has his ring altered again: “It was to contain a likeness of Sophie,” with “her mixture of darkness and brightness,” and to have engraved the word, “Sophie be my guardian spirit” (154). In June of 1796, having just persuaded the Rockenthiens to accept their engagement, Fritz makes his intentions clear to his parents, asking for their permission to marry a maiden who, although “equal to the nobility,” is “not of ancient lineage” (155). Without doubting the Freiherr’s love for him, Fritz resents his “unjust authority” (157); as he points out, since the French Revolution, “the world is turned upside down, and a father’s necessities no longer weigh with his sons” (165). Permission is finally granted, but, “[t]his feat soon appears small,” in contrast to the “battle for Sophie’s health” (Kapp). Fritz trusts that, despite her waning strength, Sophie’s will to live is indomitable: “What a man wills himself to do, he can do, [and] still more can a woman” (181). On the other hand, his education has taught him to accept chance as “one of the manifestations of God’s will” (98). If, as Fritz maintained earlier, believing in the afterlife represents a “miracle” in itself, then the courage one needs to live through *this* life of pain and suffering can only be a miracle, too: “Courage,” he tells Friederike (the Mandelsloh), “is more than endurance, it is the

power to create your own life in the face of all that man or God can inflict, so that every day and every night is what you imagine it. Courage makes us dreamers, courage makes us poets” (157).

Sophie’s heroic endurance earns her the admiration of Hardenberg’s family and friends, who visit her in Jena, where she has been moved for proper treatment. Her intellectual abilities, however, are called into question by two very special visitors, Friedrich Schlegel and J.W. Goethe, the genius of the period. The first opines that Sophie “tries to make her mind work in the same way that Hardenberg’s does, as one might try to teach a half-tame bird to sing like a human being. She won’t succeed, and the ideas she had before, such as they were, are now in disarray and she hardly knows what to put in their place” (184). When Goethe visits Sophie, he has not yet read Hardenberg’s poetry, but he assures Erasmus that, once restored to health, Sophie will be “a true source of happiness” to the young poet: after all, “it is not her understanding that we love in a young girl. We love her beauty, her innocence, her trust in us, her airs and graces, her God knows—but we don’t love her for her understanding” (189).

Goethe’s cameo appearance is historically accurate and highly significant. From an earlier chapter, we learn that “His Ancient and Divine Majesty,” as the Schlegel women call him, often spent the summers walking in “Paradise,” Jena’s name for its towpath along the Salle (130). Finding Goethe’s presence intimidating and “not aspiring to the attention of so great a man,” Fritz chose not to meet him. “And yet you have plenty to say,” Caroline Schlegel told him. “You could speak to him, as a young man, a coming poet, to one who seems almost indestructible.” Fritz felt, however, that he had “nothing good enough to show him” (130). This statement speaks to Fritz’s anxiety of influence—his need to emulate and at the same time surpass his literary model. Thus he would conceive of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* as true Romantic art, in part to counter Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, which he repudiated as “thoroughly prosaic—and modern. The Romantic quality is destroyed in it—also the nature poetry, the marvelous. He deals with

merely ordinary, human things—nature and mysticism are quite forgotten” (LaF 165). Elsewhere, however, Novalis praised Goethe for his ability and willingness to represent everything, and for the way he connects “small, insignificant incidents with more important events,” the “poetic way” in which he engages the imagination in a “mysterious kind of game” (MO 27). Whatever their differences in style and outlook, both *Wilhelm Meister* and *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* are regarded by present-day scholars as “early manifestations of self-reflective European modernism” (Mahoney xi).

In *Ofterdingen*, Goethe clearly served as a model for Klingsohr, the one who initiates the hero into the nature, limits, means, and purpose of poetry. Klingsohr speaks of poetry as “a rigorous art” that “rests altogether on experience” and that can give voice to those mute feelings of love (HO 110, 115, 116). Henry must learn to guard himself against the excesses of imagination, for “Enthusiasm without intelligence is useless and dangerous, and the poet will be capable of few miracles if he himself is astonished by miracles” (HO 109). Equally important, Novalis modeled Mathilde, Klingsohr’s daughter, after Sophie, describing her as the muse destined to awaken the poetic impulse in Heinrich: “She will be my innermost soul, the vestal priestess of my sacred fire” (104). But Mathilde seems much more eager to learn from Heinrich than Sophie does: “You will reveal many glorious things to me yet, my dearest beloved” (HO 118). The novel’s first part, fittingly entitled, “The Expectation,” culminates with the engagement of Heinrich and Mathilde. However, by the beginning of the second part, “Fulfillment,” Mathilde has died, and Heinrich is roaming the world as a pilgrim yearning for a sign of divine guidance.²⁰

As in Novalis’s own life, the relationship between the two lovers never reaches the stage of fulfillment, the absence of which is also evoked by Fitzgerald. Despite the several operations she undergoes, Sophie’s condition deteriorates, and Fritz can no longer muster the courage that has so far enabled him to poeticize experience. Instead, he now sees himself as “a gambler who

has risked everything on one stake. The wound I must not see” (195). Hence the dark, ominous meaning of his dream in which “he was a student once again in Jena, when he was listening to Fichte’s lecture on the Self,” and it came to him that his place should be at Schloben, where Sophie, a “young girl with dark hair,” welcomed him for a while but then “told him he must not come again” (205). This dream foreshadows Sophie’s death, paralleling the dream Heinrich has after he instantly falls in love with Mathilde. Taking up algebra to deaden his pain, Fritz withdraws to the “kingdom of the mind” (216) and becomes almost unrecognizable to his friends and family: “Through estrangement itself I earn my living from day to day” (217).

He desperately clings to his memories of what were “the truly important moments of my life, even though it ends tomorrow”: when he first went to the Justs’ house, when he first met Sophie, and when he came across the boy lost in contemplation in the churchyard at Weissenfels (216-17). These reminiscences possess a great immediacy for Fritz, sensitizing him to the unity between the visible and the invisible world, between life and death, nature and the human spirit. Like Walter Pater and Virginia Woolf, Novalis endows such moments with an eternal quality, while also maintaining, however, that “this epiphanic consciousness is illusory” (Kuzniar 90). In calling the moment “a dream,” a “beautiful deception” (qtd. in Kuzniar 90), Novalis shows his awareness of the dangers inherent in a flight from consciousness. Similarly, in *The Blue Flower*, Fitzgerald suggests that withdrawing into the realm of pure ideas and glowing imagination can only anaesthetize the wound, not heal it. Hence Fritz’s realization that he too needs help “even more than the sick” (217). Not wanting to lie to Sophie, or to himself any more, and unable to witness her suffering, Fritz stops visiting her and returns home, to Weissenfels: “I could not stay,” he tells Erasmus, and the latter’s welcoming words conclude the narrative of *The Blue Flower*: “Best of brothers” (223).

Far from providing closure, this ending, when set into the larger story of Novalis's life, reads in fact as yet another beginning, for much remains withheld from us, to be only partially revealed in the novel's "Afterword." Here Fitzgerald swiftly notes the events of the four years between Sophie's death in 1797 and Hardenberg's in 1801. Fritz received the terrible news two days after his fiancée's death on March 19, 1797. Two weeks later, he was similarly driven from home because of the imminent consumptive death of his brother Erasmus. The loss of Sophie and Erasmus—the two people who were perhaps closest to him—plunged Fritz into a prolonged period of brooding solitude and melancholy. During his last years, which were astonishingly creative, he achieved the culmination of his brief poetic career. After changing his name to Novalis, he composed the mystical, elegiac *Hymns to the Night*, and continued working on *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. In 1798, he became engaged a second time, but died of tuberculosis before he could marry Julie von Charpentier (225-26).

John Neubauer has interpreted the hero's spiritual rebirth in the second part of *Ofterdingen* as symbolic of the "poetic reconciliation of Novalis's love for Sophie and Julie" (147), which, I would argue, is also a reconciliation of vision and reality, the ideal and actuality. During his peregrinations in the mountains above Ausburg, Heinrich hears Mathilde's voice telling him not to grieve but to sing in her honor so that he can meet Zyane (*kyanos*=blue cornflower) who will provide him with solace on earth. Heinrich sings the requested praise of Mathilde, and Zyane appears, greeting him in a friendly manner (HO 155). In the ensuing dialogue, she reveals to Heinrich the inherent order underlying his chaotic experience. To Heinrich's question, "Where are we going then?" she replies, "Always home" (HO 156). The identification of home as both a place of departure and arrival makes Fitzgerald's tentative resolution seem less arbitrary.

Furthermore, this tentative resolution lends *The Blue Flower* “precisely the sense of endlessness that Novalis felt was essential to the transformation of life into art” (Lewis). Like Novalis, Fitzgerald resists the lure of closure, deferring it through repeated attempts at approximation, as when she has her characters wondering about the meaning of the blue flower, but never spelling it out. Tightly wrought and gently ironic, the narrative proceeds tentatively, working by suggestion rather than explicit statement. Indeed, the most important way in which both writers circumvent closure is by refusing to trap desire within clear conceptual boundaries, for to do so would destroy, so to speak, its very essence. If *Hymns to the Night* celebrates death as an entry into a higher life in the presence of God (and Sophie),²¹ *The Blue Flower* is a hymn to desire itself, to the restlessness of the human heart as the supreme manifestation of life.

Granted, Novalis’s distinctive contributions to both poetics and philosophy, outlined in the first section of this chapter, remain outside the scope of *The Blue Flower*, but to the extent that Fitzgerald manages to capture anew the quest-theme of romance, she emerges as a “true reader,” whom Novalis called “an extension of the author”:

. . . and if the reader were to work through the book according to his [or her] own idea, a second reader would refine it still more, with the result that, since the mass that has been worked through would constantly be poured into fresh vessels, the mass would finally become an essential component—a part of the active spirit. (MO 45)

For those familiar with the assumptions informing reader-response criticism, Novalis’s vision is uncannily pertinent, suggesting that the author, as the originator of a text’s meaning, is born with the text at each reading. Novalis’s faith in a “life beyond life” hinges on the duty to remember the dead, which “is the only way to remain in communion with them. God himself cannot be active among us any other way—than through faith” (MO 29). Novalis belonged to the generation of Romantic poets who died young, whose life seems to have been wedded to death, but who, in a

sense, never died because writers and readers have stayed faithful to him, keeping the memory of his existence—and his dream of the blue flower—alive.

The two novels I examine next, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*, also present us with metaphors for posthumous survival, but in them the focus of interest shifts from the personal and cultural dynamics involved in the creation of a single literary work—i.e. Novalis’s tale of the “blue flower”—to the re-creation of personality as a work of art (Henry Wallis’s pre-Raphaelite portrait of Chatterton), a forged persona (Chatterton’s invention of Thomas Rowley and Wilde’s own self-forgery) or a “textual effect” taking shape in the minds of others. Like Penelope Fitzgerald, Peter Ackroyd engages with, and in the process, reassesses, the philosophical and aesthetic grounds of the Romanticist notion of authorship, from its early manifestation in Thomas Chatterton, the epitome of “neglected genius,” to its decadent counterpart, Oscar Wilde, who found in Chatterton a model for his own self-forgery.

Notes

¹ John Milton’s statement from *Areopagitica* (1644)—“A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life”—serves as a fitting epigraph to Fitzgerald’s critical writings gathered under the title *The Afterlife*.

² In *Athenaeum Fragments*, Schlegel defines Romantic poetry as “a progressive, universal poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature” (qtd. in Beiser 249).

³ In stressing how writers such as Novalis and Schlegel “advocate either a proliferation or a redundancy of structures,” Kuzniar aims to challenge the notion of “organic, unitary form often attributed to them” by the New Critics, most notably René Wellek (4).

⁴An extant earlier version of the text, dating from late 1797, was entitled *Miscellaneous Observations*. This was, unfortunately, significantly changed by the Schlegels, who dispersed the fragments among other aphorisms which were not intended for publication, and even added some of their own. Throughout this chapter I quote from the text translated and edited by Margaret Mahony Stoljar based on the complete manuscript of 125 fragments, as opposed to the 114 entries published under the title *Pollen*.

⁵ Most likely she has in mind M.H. Abrams, whose main argument in his seminal study, *Natural Supernaturalism*, revolves around her definition of “secularization,” “the assimilation, reformulation, and reinterpretation of theological ideas in a nonreligious framework” (9). About Novalis’s “romances” (*The Novices of Sais* (1798-9), *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800), and *Hymns to the Night* (1800)), Abrams writes that they represent the process of human experience as a “fall from self-unity and community into division, and from contentment into longing for redemption, which consists of a recovered unity on a higher level of self-awareness” (246).

⁶ These points, Kuzniar shows, can be “dislocated, so that any moment in the interim can designate another relative or arbitrary beginning” (85-86).

⁷ Another one of Hardenberg’s friends, the physicist J. W. Ritter, reiterates this view when he tells his hostess, Caroline Schlegel, that, “Hardenberg could not be judged by any ordinary standards, not even the ordinary standards of Jena.” Hardenberg is a visionary for whom “there is no barrier between the unseen and the seen. The whole of existence dissolves itself into a myth.” Caroline is more skeptical, as she wryly observes that, Hardenberg “interests himself in the extraction and refinement of salt and brown coal, which can’t be dissolved into a myth, no matter how hard he tries” (129).

⁸ Thus, there is Caroline, August Schlegel’s wife, who is greatly admired by her brother-in-law, Friedrich Schlegel, and who used to be the lover of George Forster, the librarian. Friedrich

Schlegel lived with Dorothea, a woman ten years older than himself who was already married to a banker.

⁹ At the same time, with the other German Romantics, Novalis looked longingly to the Middle Ages as to some kind of lost paradise, a golden age, which he repeatedly invoked in his philosophical treatises and beautifully evoked in his literary creations. This strong concern with the German past—which had been kindled in Novalis’s heart by Schiller’s lectures at the University of Jena—was perhaps also responsible for awakening a love for the fatherland, for a growing national consciousness. As George Steiner maintains, “A thirst for legitimacy of foundation, for empowering ancestry inspires German thought and politics (114).

¹⁰ Keats’s “Ode to Psyche” follows an inward journey that culminates with an imaginative artifact, a subjective creation that is offered as a fit remembrance to psyche, or the human soul embraced by love.

¹¹ Hardenberg’s feelings of inferiority before Schiller led directly to Hardenberg’s first publication, the poem “A Youth’s Lament,” which appeared in April 1791.

¹² As Schiller put it, “Man in his physical state merely suffers the dominion of nature; he emancipates himself from this dominion in the aesthetic state, and he acquires mastery over it in the moral” (qtd. in Abrams 213). Novalis, too, affirmed the need for natural morality so that “[a]ll involuntary acts” might become voluntary (JI 112).

¹³ Fritz and Erasmus had played similar roles in Jena, a place where, according to their sister, the fifteen-year old Sidonie, they “wasted money, caught lice, and listened to nonsense from philosophers” (3).

¹⁴ Ritter, who had never been to school and was almost penniless, “could see the laws of electricity written in cloudy hieroglyphs on the whole surface of the universe, and on the face of the waters, where the Holy Spirit still moved” (45).

¹⁵ Compare with this statement from Novalis's essay, "Monologue," which also stresses the self-referentiality of language: "It is amazing, the absurd error people make of imagining they are speaking for the sake of things; no one knows the essential thing about language, that it is concerned only with itself" (214).

¹⁶ Erasmus's bemusement eventually gives way to his own infatuation with Sophie, whom he asks for a lock of her hair to put in his pocketbook, "close to his heart" (179).

¹⁷ The benevolence, hospitality, and jollity of Herr von Rockenthien stand in sharp contrast to the fierce authoritarianism and "ferocious temper" of the Freiherr (10).

¹⁸ As René Welleck indicates in *Concepts of Criticism*, "the term "Romantik" and "Romantiker" as nouns were apparently inventions of Novalis, in 1798-99. But, with Novalis, the Romantiker is a writer of romances and fairy tales of his own peculiar type" (134), the fullest expression of which is found in his unfinished novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. About the first part of this intricately crafted romance, Novalis remarked to Friedrich Schlegel on April 5, 1800: "I should be pleased if you find the novel and the tale happily mixed, and if the first part foretold of an even closer mixture in the second. The novel should gradually turn into a tale" (qtd. in Neubauer 146).

¹⁹ Similarly, in Hardenberg's unfinished novel, the hermit met by Henry in the course of his journey refers to miners as "almost astrologers in reverse." "To them [astrologers] the sky is the book of the future, while to you the earth reveals monuments of the primeval world" (86).

²⁰ Professional obligations and the onset of tuberculosis in the fall of 1800 prevented Novalis from finishing the second part, of which he wrote only the opening chapter, "The Monastery, or the Court of Entrance" and a few poems and sketches.

²¹ In this cycle of six prose poems interspersed with verse, Novalis looks forward to an eternal loving union with Sophie and with the universe as a whole after his own death.

CHAPTER IV

TESTAMENTARY FICTIONS: REVISITING

PETER ACKROYD'S *THE LAST TESTAMENT OF OSCAR WILDE* AND *CHATTERTON*

“One of the great reasons that the English have produced the finest writers in the world is that the English world has ill-treated them during their lives and foster'd them after their deaths.”

(Keats 346)

No serious foray into the genre of the author-as-character would be complete without taking into account Peter Ackroyd's ingenious contributions to this hybrid and protean discourse that encompasses both fictionalized biographies and pseudo-memoirs. The task is far from easy, given the heterogeneity and complexity of his writing, which justifies labels as diverse as postmodern, neo-Gothic, metaphysical-detective, and historiographic metafictional. A prolific poet, novelist, critical theorist, literary editor, and cultural historian, Peter Ackroyd is best known for his intense preoccupation with the narrative representation, or rather “reconstruction” of the historical and literary past as well as with the provocative nexus between invention and authenticity, tradition and originality. For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to focus on two of his major works, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and *Chatterton* (1987), and to examine the distinct ways in which Ackroyd employs biography, stylistic impersonation, and the form of direct self-revelation to re-write these artists into being—writing along with them but also against them, or rather against the myths they helped create.

As I argue, both works thematize the inextricable link between the topoi of forgery, contemporary neglect, and posthumous fame. More specifically, the “last testament” which Ackroyd invents for Wilde, the equally spurious manuscript he attributes to Thomas Chatterton,

but exposed as an “imitation in a world of imitations” (*Chatterton* 91), and the third-person fictionalized account of Chatterton’s last days—all foreground the intertextual and performative nature of their subjects’ identities, while giving them a special, i.e. posthumous, twist. To the extent that both narratives contemplate the possibility of future, posthumous recognition through the author’s “disappearance” in his writings, they seem to inscribe the paradox that defines the Romantic and post-Romantic act of composition. According to Andrew Bennett, inherent in this projection of one’s self into the future is “the paradox that any attempt to retain the self after the dissolution of death . . . can only be predicated on the loss of self” (*Romantic* 14). Nothing, however, is entirely lost in the fictional worlds inhabited by Wilde and Chatterton, who retain some of their historical specificity as they continue to speak to us through an array of characters and personae. Ackroyd asserts their viability in the present by exploring life writing as a form of palimpsest that dissolves the boundary between historical fact and imagined fact, between the real historical figure and the invented one.

This pairing, so far insufficiently considered by critics, is by no means accidental. For despite striking differences in their cultural and educational backgrounds, Wilde and Chatterton clearly shared similar attitudes toward art, self, and society. In what follows I propose to look closely at these and other elements that enable us to situate *The Last Testament* and *Chatterton* in an enlightening relation to each other. The overt references to Chatterton in the first book, and the sly references to Wilde in the second establish the foundation on which to pursue this comparative analysis. We will seek to understand first, why the nineteenth-century writer found in his predecessor a model for his own self-fashioning, and second, what Ackroyd himself has found in Chatterton and Wilde that drove him to enter their consciousness and imagine their lives.

Ackroyd’s treatment of these figures is conscious both of the literary tradition to which it harks back and of their enduring, albeit ambiguous legacy. Denied during his lifetime, Chatterton’s fame was secured by the Romantic image of the genius misunderstood by his contemporaries and slain by critics, just as Keats was later said to have been “snuff’d out,” in

Byron's words, "by an article." Wilde achieved fame, but only to be destroyed by it; as Ackroyd has him put it, success and fame were "but small staging posts on my grand journey to infamy and, finally, to oblivion" (10), from which *The Last Testament* rescues him, as it were. Like Chatterton, Wilde emerges as an artist standing apart from his contemporaries, "punished merely because he had the misfortune to be born in the wrong age" (*Last* 142). Both Chatterton and Wilde drank ambition to the lees and found themselves at the center of heated cultural debates that launched their postmodern careers. Their kinship of minds and sensibilities is rooted in a penchant for self-dramatization and self-aggrandizement, independence of judgment, openness to contraries, contempt for philistinism, an attraction towards the thrills and dangers of a secret life, a strong sense of being destined for greatness, and an awareness of art's subversive energies. In the figures of Chatterton and Wilde, Ackroyd offers a suggestive description of two artist-forgers who constantly make, unmake, and remake themselves, at the same time that he fashions these artists out of others' interpretations of them.

In *Notes for a New Culture: An Essay on Modernism* (1976), completed while Ackroyd studied as a Mellon Fellow at Yale University, in the heyday of poststructuralism, Ackroyd mounted a trenchant critique of contemporary English culture whose provinciality and parochialism he attributed to the still powerful legacy of humanism and realism. As he put it, the first modernism of the 17th century initiated "experience" and "human nature" as moral categories, and "it is within their significance that we still dwell" (145). Over and against the traditional notions of autonomous subject and transparent language Ackroyd asserted the fluidity of self and the fictionality of literary language—its self-referential potentialities—which aligns him with modernists such as Mallarmé, Nietzsche, and Joyce, in whose works "created form began to interrogate itself" (145). In both *The Last Testament* and *Chatterton* writing opens up a space for the partial, tentative, and temporary creation of selves. More pointedly, in these works, Ackroyd is intent on dismantling the myth of original authorship so as to play up the complex *construction* of subjectivity, its inscription as a transhistorical palimpsest. For all texts, seen as

Ackroyd sees them in a poststructuralist light, are intertexts—discourses built upon existing cultural codes and norms, mosaics of citations, wherein the question of origin loses its importance. By the same token, he conceives of the author-figure—as of any character, for that matter—as a “patchwork figure,” an ever-changing network of differences and relations.

But, as I intend to show, despite their self-conscious echoing of other texts, these testamentary fictions do not simply dissolve substance into form, personality into style, experience into expression, fact into interpretation, biography into fiction, ethics into aesthetics, etc. Ghostwriting can become meaningless without the acute psychological perceptiveness that informs Ackroyd’s portraits of his subjects. Steeped in the worlds and works of Chatterton and Wilde, and attentive to the dominants of their mercurial personalities, Ackroyd approaches both figures with the same imaginative sympathy that, as Wilde insisted, “enables one to see things and people in their real as in their ideal relation” (DP 206). “The artist stands on the man like the statue on a pedestal,” wrote Novalis. But as Wilde believed, “it is a very unimaginative nature that only cares for people on their pedestals. A pedestal may be a very unreal thing. A pillory is a terrific reality” (DP 184). He adds: “It is the feet of clay that make the gold of the image precious” (251-52). Although Wilde had Douglas in mind when he wrote this, the aphorism also applies—as we will see shortly—to Ackroyd’s portrait of Wilde, the artist ennobled by suffering and, implicitly, by the recognition of human fallibility.

Since writing *Notes*, Ackroyd’s position has shifted, in the sense that he no longer seems to regard writing as “merely a device of representation,” but rather a means by which “we may speak of our experiences of our worlds and ourselves” (Gibson and Wolfreys 74). Hence the double drive that prevails in *The Last Testament* and *Chatterton*: a traditional humanist treatment of the author-characters, side by side with the conviction that the characters themselves are verbal constructions, to be fleshed out in the reader’s mind. Whether individually assumed or socially determined, the writing self becomes—*along with*, rather than at the expense of their corporeal

self—the characters' claim for identity and immortality. The physical and metaphysical, the personal and impersonal, coexist in Ackroyd's portrayal of Wilde and Chatterton.

Ackroyd has often declared his attachment to an active and constantly evolving cultural tradition suffused with an innately English, i.e., for him, visionary as well as performative spirit, as opposed to the positivist and mimetic tradition in English writing. In an interview with Anke Schütze, Ackroyd claimed to admire the combination of “farce, pathos, and melodrama” he associated with the Pantomime tradition and the sensibility of the “Cockney visionary” (172). The different imaginative strands defining this sensibility is exemplified by music-hall comedians such as Dan Leno and Charles Matthews, but is also present in the art of London writers such as Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, and William Blake. Not surprisingly, among the “London Luminaries” he identifies as belonging to this tradition is Thomas Chatterton, the poet who invented the medieval period for the early 19th-century Romantics: “in the middle of the eighteenth century that doomed young man was writing *authentic* medieval ballads” (qtd. in Gibson and Wolfreys 73). The word “authentic” is meant to convey “a sense of authenticity of sensibility, rather than mimetic fidelity” to medieval poetry (Gibson and Wolfreys 74). This, for Ackroyd, is the truth-telling aspect of art. For him, as for the Romantic poets who idealized and immortalized Chatterton, the latter is “a visionary who understood the world in terms of myths and legends” (1). Likewise, Wilde once said that, “What is true in a man's life is not what he does, but the legend that grows up around him. . . . You must never destroy legends. Through them we are giving an inkling of the true physiognomy of a man” (qtd. in Ellmann 44). As we are about to see, however, some of these legends made Wilde increasingly uneasy, forcing him to recognize he could no longer control others' interpretations of his life, personality, and art.

Furthermore, both Chatterton and Wilde located their aesthetic ideal in the past—the first in the medieval times, the latter in the classical heritage—and both created, in their own fashion, new forms from the fragments of the past, thus contributing to the construction of cultural inheritance. Ackroyd has placed Chatterton among those artists and writers who “have used a

mixture of historical styles as a form of ludic comprehension of the past” (“Preface” 2). This, Ackroyd is careful to add, “has nothing to do with some ‘postmodern’ examination of narrative,” being “connected, instead, to the enduring consciousness of the nation” (2). Ackroyd, too, has made “style” one of the main themes of his works in which he rewrites the past, the “already written,” to fit his own present moment. Critics have acknowledged his gift for ventriloquism, his “delight in parody and linguistic self-consciousness” (Finney 243), and his playful experimentation with an eclectic mix of styles and conventions, such as those pertaining to the detective and gothic fiction, or to music hall and pantomime. The driving force behind Ackroyd’s own ludic engagement with the styles—and substance—of English history and literature has been rightly identified as regenerative. To quote Gibson and Wolfreys, “Ackroyd literally regenerates the past as he reinvents and performs it through his own creations” (73).¹ According to Aleid Fokkema, the major theme of Ackroyd’s fictional writing is “the idea of recurrence, both in support of a mystic, romantic notion of a spiritual continuity, and manifesting a more postmodern fascination with the circulation of language and the principle of intertextuality” (43). Intertextuality plays a central role in the overall architecture of both *The Last Testament* and *Chatterton*, and so does the notion of reincarnation, according to which a work of art, or a text, like the self it inscribes, continuously gives birth to itself.

Both *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton* raise questions of forgery and authenticity, of reality and fiction, the first in regard to Wilde’s invented journal and the latter in regard not only to Chatterton’s invention of Thomas Rowley and his medieval texts, but also to a painting of a middle-aged Chatterton, and a first person manuscript allegedly by Chatterton. Richard Ellmann, Wilde’s most distinguished biographer, has noted that in Wilde’s life-story, “[b]etween forgery and genuineness, fiction and fact, there hangs only a hair” (Ellmann 297). In his turn, Nick Groom has maintained that, “Wilde manages to make the principle of forgery central to his aesthetic principle, through performance, self-invention and reinvention, his insistence on masks and truth and lies, and during his trial by his refusal to allow any reading of

his letters, poems, or stories, that was not purely aesthetic” (219). Groom’s argument about the role of eighteenth-century forgers in Victorian literary culture bears directly on my analyses in this chapter. In Groom’s account, “Chatterton and Wainewright and indeed Ossian, three very different figures, nevertheless merged in the nineteenth-century into a composite or typological forger that was then deployed in different ways by writers from Charles Dickens to Oscar Wilde” (204). The Romantics “had advocated originality and authenticity in contradiction to literary forgers, but at the same time dematerialized such writers,” most notably Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770), and “heralded them as supernatural agents of inspiration” (203). Even after Chatterton was exposed as a forger,² his tragically short life and apparent neglect made him irresistible to poets, painters, critics and biographers. John Dix, whose life of Chatterton was published in 1837, the year of Victoria’s ascension, was “so eager to prove that the mythological Romantic trinity of genius, madness, and suicide was made flesh in Chatterton that he eventually fabricated new biographical evidence in the shape of an Inquest Report and a desperate suicide note” (204). Ackroyd also fabricates new evidence, but that is because he is intent on dismantling the Romantic “trinity” by suggesting, among other things, that Chatterton’s death was an accident caused by an overdose of anti-venereal medication, rather than suicide.

In Wilde’s time, strict moral codes made forgery a punishable legal misdemeanor rather than a literary practice. As Groom points out, forgery lost the “otherworldly and inspirational quality” it had for Romantic poets (207). Wilde was outraged at the “rough-and-ready manner” in which “the English law” dealt with literary forgery, and implicitly, with the multifarious personality of the artist (“Pen” 193). Wilde’s essay, “Pen, Pencil, and Poison” (1889) offered its author the opportunity to develop the aesthetics of crime he had already proposed in “The Decay of Lying.”³ “A mask tells us more than a face,” Wilde wrote, referring to the several pseudonyms under which Thomas Griffith Wainewright chose to “hide his seriousness or to reveal his levity,” but which in fact only “intensified his personality” (“Pen” 195). The same holds true of Chatterton and Wilde, who both expressed, indeed dispersed, their protean subjectivities in

multiple textual incarnations. Ackroyd's novels about these figures eschews a stable and monolithic presentation of selfhood, while also suggesting that, amidst all the "textual effects" that cluster around their personae lies the materiality of these artists' bodies, with their pain, suffering, and sexuality (Gomel 79).

Equally important, if Chatterton embodied a "trinity of genius, madness, and suicide," Wainwright united a "trinity of writing, lying, and killing" that challenged the "distinction between the aesthetic and the criminal" (Groom 211). According to Alison Hennegan, three categories in particular—and the connections between them—exercised the Victorian psychologists at the fin de siècle: The Criminal, The Genius, and The Invert. It was noted that sexual "inverts frequently possessed abilities considerably above the average and that geniuses and criminals were often curiously alike in temperament" (203). All three categories were perceived as threats to an already precarious social stability, which, to Wilde's mind, rendered them all the more fascinating. A letter from June 1890, addressed to the editor of the *St. James's Gazette* who had attacked *Dorian Gray* on moral grounds, emphasizes Wilde's preference for Romantic art, which, as he points out, "deals with the exception and with the individual." Unlike good and ordinary people, who are dull and "artistically uninteresting," "bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies. They represent color, variety, and strangeness" ("Pen" 107). Undoubtedly, both Chatterton and Wilde belong to this latter category of artists "made for exceptions, not for laws" ("Pen" 154), as demonstrated by the powerful hold they have exerted over the imagination of writers, critics, and biographers. And although Ackroyd, like Wilde, insists on the necessary fictionality of all such interesting characters, which otherwise would not be "worth writing about" (107), in the testamentary fictions scrutinized below, he uncovers a truth that looms "larger than that of biography and history" (*Last* 121). Both novels testify to the truth of Wilde's comment in *De Profundis*, namely, that the "final mystery is oneself," for "Who can calculate the orbit of one's soul?" (180).

Ackroyd's Wilde rearticulates this truth, according to which the only explanation for the "profound and terrible mystery of a human soul" is one that "makes the mystery all the marvelous still" (*Last* 123; DP 123). Hence the tentative "explanations" Ackroyd offers in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and *Chatterton*. These works form a particularly vivid sequence that gives a special poignancy to Ackroyd's distrust of mimetic realism and evinces the characteristic mindset of postmodernism. For Ackroyd, as for Chatterton, George Meredith, and Wilde, the artificial contrivances of the writer's imagination can reveal more truth about the artist's personality than strict adherence to observed reality. Even when constituted by endlessly interwoven layers of fiction, "The invention is always more real" (C 157). Ackroyd breathes imaginative life into his portraits of Wilde and Chatterton, two creative minds representative of not only their respective moments but of our postmodern moment as well. The rest of the chapter elaborates the connections discussed above, examining more closely the psychological underpinnings and posthumous effects of Wilde's and Chatterton's similar conceptualization of identity and originality.

The "Wilde" Effect

"I have discovered the wonderful impersonality of life. I am an 'effect' merely: the meaning of my life exists in the minds of others and no longer in my own."

(Ackroyd *Last* 2)

"Whenever an important cultural figure leaves this life, we try to detect premonitions in his last work."

(Simion 191)

Ackroyd's second novel won the Somerset Maugham Award for its uncanny resurrection of Wilde's personality and for the clever reproduction of his voice, style, and linguistic mannerisms. As the title suggests, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* purports to be a retrospective account of Wilde's life, allegedly written by him between August and November 1900, during which time he lived in self-exile in Paris. In addition to the biographies and collected letters of Oscar Wilde, Ackroyd has drawn extensively on Wilde's writings, among them, "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," "The Decay of Lying," "The Soul of Man under Socialism," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and, last but not least, the posthumously published letter, *De Profundis*. Not only does *The Last Testament* reflect on many of the themes that recur in these works—the seductions and dangers of aestheticism, betrayal and remorse, sin and suffering, the sacrifice that love requires, self-creation and self-destruction, the nature of art and the artist's personality—but in so doing, it complicates them in decidedly postmodern ways.

When Wilde left prison in May 1897 he handed the manuscript of *De Profundis* to his friend and literary executor, Robert Ross, instructing that a copy be made for him to revise and insisting that the letter explained, not defended, a course of conduct that from the outside seemed vain and vulgar: "Some day the truth will have to be known—not necessarily in my lifetime . . . but I'm not prepared to sit in the grotesque gallery they put me into, for all time; for the simple reason that I inherited from my father and mother a name of high distinction in literature and art, and I cannot for eternity allow that name to be degraded" (qtd. in Holland 92). Wilde would not accept that his work as a writer was finished, even though his detractors thought so. He hoped that what he had written in prison would one day be read by posterity as "the message of my soul to the souls of men." Furthermore, he hoped "to live long enough to produce works of such a character that I shall be able at the end of my days to say, 'Yes, this is just where the artistic life leads a man!'" (DP 180). On April 26 1895, Henry James wrote to his brother William that despite Wilde's "hideously tragic" fall, he "may have a 'future'—of a sort—by reaction when he comes out of prison—if he survives the horrible sentence of hard labor that he will probably get" (Edel 129). Later, however,

James confessed to Alphonse Daudet that he “had discerned in Wilde no will to resistance, no faculty for recuperation. If he had this faculty, James added, ‘what masterpieces might he yet produce!’” (qtd. in Edel, HJ4: 130)

James’s prediction was in part correct, for in the years that followed Wilde never returned to the document intended to rehabilitate him and through which he sought “a fresh mode of self-realization” (DP 153). Nor did he write the works he envisaged in prison, which were to center on the “Relation of the Artistic Life to Conduct” and express his vision of Christ as the “supreme romantic type,” for whom “morality was all sympathy” (DP 181). *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was his last attempt to “demonstrate to the world that my suffering has served only to improve me as an artist” (*Last* 11). The successful publication of the ballad had spurred Wilde to return from Naples to Paris, where he took a room at the Hotel de Nice in the rue des Beaux-Arts, the street that would serve as his final address at the Hotel d’Alsace. But the hope he had entertained in prison was killed by the self-destructive conduct of his final years, when the playfulness of his wit and his longing for love hit against the hardness of the world. In Ackroyd’s account, Wilde says that once the pain from which *The Ballad* stemmed was gone, he was left with “nothing to express.” “The intense energy of creation has been kicked out of me,” Wilde wrote to a friend in August 1897 (qtd. in Toibín 75). *The Last Testament* captures the bitter irony of Wilde’s coming to Paris to regain a sense of freedom, only to find himself imprisoned once again in squalid lodgings and solitary life. In prison, he said, he had been “buoyed up by a sense of guilt.” Outside, he was weighed down by a sense of exile, which becomes his “ultimate fall” (Ellmann 557). Throughout this period of acute distress and emotional turmoil, Wilde’s soul was still bound to Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie), whose return to him he both desired and dreaded. In August 1897 Wilde wrote to Douglas: “Do remake my ruined life for me, and then our friendship and love will have a different meaning to the world” (qtd. in Toibín 76).

In an important sense, Ackroyd picks up where Wilde left off, building on *De Profundis* and developing those very subjects through which Wilde would have liked to express himself had

he summoned the necessary creative energy. In another sense, though, “this new life” that Ackroyd has fabricated is, to recall Wilde, “of course, no new life at all, but simply the continuance” of Wilde’s “former life,” as it has been textualized by Wilde himself and contextualized by critics and biographers alike (163). The form of the memoir gives the writer the freedom to articulate the terms on which he will be judged by posterity, but since the journal we are reading is, to a large extent, Ackroyd’s invention, so are the terms on which Wilde’s life is being reconstructed. The fictive Wilde frames his self-representation within the modes of gothic romance, fairy-tale, tragedy, Christian parable, and celebrity autobiography. The title chosen for his confession, “The Modern Woman’s Guide to Oscar Wilde. A Romance” (6), prepares the reader for an account from which the artist emerges as “both the most fortunate and the least fortunate of men” (*Last* 2).

Painstakingly researched⁴ and movingly imagined, the book dramatizes Wilde’s agonized struggle against both physical degradation and social disgrace, and his attempts to maintain his integrity as an artist: “Death itself holds no terrors for those who have known and understood life, but to lose one’s powers as an artist—that is the unendurable punishment (*Last* 11-12). He fears that he will be remembered not as an artist but as a “case history, a psychological study” (112). To a large extent, the journal probes the effects of, on the one hand, Wilde’s cultivation of his personality through art, and, on the other, of his subjection to the public gaze. For Wilde, as for Nietzsche, the artist is born with, and “dwells somewhere within” (*Picture* 121), the work he creates. In Nietzsche’s view, “The ‘work,’ whether of the artist or the philosopher, invents the man who has created it, who is supposed to have created it” (*Beyond* 218). When brought under public scrutiny, however, this work of self-invention is often disguised beyond recognition and the artist recreated as the crowd’s own piece of “wretched fiction” (*Beyond* 218). Reflecting upon how his personality and actions were interpreted, and often misinterpreted, the fictive Wilde discovers that he is “an effect merely: the meaning of my life exists in the minds of others and no longer in my own” (2).

In *The Last Testament*, Wilde sets out to write himself a new life out of the old, only to realize that he cannot escape being scripted by others:

I, who had constructed a philosophy out of the denial of conventional reality, found myself impaled upon it. I had always asserted that an interpretation is more interesting than a fact: I was proved unfortunately to be right. I was destroyed by the sordid interpretations which others gave to my affairs: it is amusing, is it not? (138)

Indeed, from his arrival in London in 1879 until his imprisonment in 1895, Wilde was continually caricatured, photographed, parodied, lampooned and quoted. People “wished to lift the mask from my face and find the one they had placed there” (*Last* 131). Entering the courtroom of the Old Bailey was like “going upon a stage . . . an audience had come to watch me perform and, I suspect, to forget my lines” (137).⁵ Conviction and incarceration took a heavy toll on Wilde, both as an artist and as a human being, causing him to lose that intense energy of creation he had channeled towards achieving the “unique expression” of his “unique temperament” (SM 34). The “price of perfect expression,” the fallen Wilde has come to understand, is that “it ceases to belong to oneself, and belongs instead to the world” (120). In drawing up his “last testament,” this Wilde must confront the fact that his personality has been “stripped from me, piece by piece” (143). Whereas before the trial, he alone decided “the nature of my life” (158), he now regrets having resigned himself to the sensational notoriety clinging to his name:

As soon as one’s personality becomes a matter of public knowledge, and one’s history is recited in the form of an indictment, it is remarkable how little hold one retains upon it. I became visibly what others thought and said of me: I grew tired, and old. . . . In my last role, in the glare of the public gaze, I gave myself up to the hands of others. (144-45)

In this pseudo-memoir the narrator attempts to re-appropriate the public discourse that determines his posthumous career, a project consistent with his belief that “A man should invent his own myth.” Ackroyd builds his portrait of Wilde by moving back and forth between past and present, or, as Wilde would have it, between the “turning points” in his life. The journal purports to

spell out the truth and real meaning of Wilde's life to himself: "I must connect [the past and future] with simple words: I owe that to myself. Now that I have seen my life turn completely in its fiery circle" (3). For, as he reflects, "I have played so many parts. I have lied to so many people—but I have committed the unforgivable sin. I have lied to myself. Now I must try to break the habit of a lifetime" (3). Such a connection—i.e. a relationship to one's past and hence to the self that has grown out of that past—can only be established through narrative, which also inscribes the promise of transcendence. To quote James Olney, in the moment of narrating, "expectation and memory lie on one side and the other of the present" (4). To be alive is to be "within the circle of remembering and narrating" (Olney 26), or, in Wilde's terms, within "life's fiery circle." The journal allows its putative writer to "master the past by giving it the meaning which only now it possesses for me" (75). Wilde summed up this meaning to Chris Healy: "I have probed the depths of most of the experiences in life, and I have come to the conclusion that we are meant to suffer" (qtd. in Ellmann 532-33). Having "pierced the veil of illusion" covering the "makeshift, painted pageant of the world" (*Last* 17), he must now confront the remorseless pressure of the actual.

The Wilde invented by Ackroyd is wary of the temptation to seek refuge in an imaginative dream world. The appeal to imagination, he implies, can only anaesthetize the wound, rather than heal it. Wilde's sense of reality, nursed by difficulties, is stern. "The only beautiful things are the things that do not concern us," Wilde noted flippantly in "The Decay of Lying" (86). But the humiliation and ostracism that followed his public trial put these "beautiful things" in a new perspective, "hurting" him, to paraphrase Auden, "into a new style, direct and confessional, serious and emotional" (Toibín, *Love* 69). His paradoxes, as retooled by Ackroyd, are not so much meant to seduce an audience, as to express his "anguish and shame" (141). Having lost "the innocence of all aspirations towards the beautiful," Wilde must now cope with "the bitterness and weariness of self-knowledge" (68). Hence the moral strain woven throughout *The Last Testament*, which reveals "the relation of artistic life to conduct," the persistent demands of conscience, the Keatsian sense of suffering-as-the-fruit-of-knowledge ("Until we are sick we understand not"), as well as the

redemptive power of suffering. If, as Wilde wrote to Bosie, “a man’s highest moment comes when he kneels in the dust and tells the sins of his life” (DP 109), then his “last testament” re-inscribes this very moment: “[T]he artist is his own bitterest accuser, his own most relentless examiner” (*Last* 137).

Ackroyd borrows extensively from *De Profundis* to portray a Wilde who pays for his sins in remorse, suffering, and consciousness of degradation. In both cases, the protagonist admits to his own complicity and agency in the events that scandalized the Victorian society and that cost him his position, wealth, and good name. And both confessions achieve a balancing act, for although self-indulgent, they elicit sympathy. To those who visited him in his desolate hotel room in Paris, Wilde told stories about himself and the costs of his transgressions. Ellmann recounts one fable told by Wilde to a visiting friend, in which Wilde dreams of confronting a faceless being who turns out to be “the face of [my] soul, and it is horrible” (566). This strange “encounter”—i.e. relentless self-examination—is compellingly depicted in *The Last Testament*, where Wilde represents himself variably as a victim of “strange” gods and as a Dorian Gray come face to face with self-destruction. Without having to disguise the erotic implications of his actions any more, the fictive Wilde catalogues the sins for which he is seeking atonement. His work was “infected by hypocrisy,” his life was “hollow” and his triumphs “fraudulent” (94). “In my plays I had made light of all the things that were dearest to me; in my life I had betrayed all those who were closest to me” (92). Wilde accuses himself of having hurt Constance, and, worse still, for having cut himself off from his children. His hubris was intellectual arrogance: “I realized that I had seen life through my intelligence, and through the pride which springs from intelligence, not through the emotions which now shook me and which I endured willingly for the first time” (156).

Wilde’s new philosophy is firmly grounded in the self-knowledge he has arrived at through suffering: it was his “fate to attain the self-consciousness of an artist at a time when values of all kind have been thrown into doubt” (33). As an artist, he upheld the values of individual personality, but prison life made him

see quite clearly that I had no real values of my own except those which others had bequeathed to me . . . I had not known the world as it really is. I ignored suffering. I chose not to see it. My good nature was a form of complacency and cowardice: I did not want to be moved by any single emotion in case I was overwhelmed by them all. I was afraid of passion—real passion—since I did not know what it might reveal of me, both to myself and to others. (*Last* 153-54)

By bowing his head to everything he has suffered, Wilde hopes to make the past an inevitable part of the evolution of his life and character. His stance in *De Profundis* brings to mind Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*: [I must] absorb into my nature all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without complaint" (155). Like Nietzsche, Wilde knows that neither morality nor organized religion can help him transform what is hideous, painful, and grotesque into a spiritual experience. Only the "supreme emotion" of sorrow can transform his world (DP 184), as it did when his mother died. Losing her, the "dominant note" in his life, made Wilde aware of the depths of human suffering. Sorrow taught him to "sit and look. Pity taught me to understand. Love taught me to forgive" (*Last* 156). After his release he wrote to and tried to help several of his fellow inmates. In a letter to a friend, he explained that, "I used to be utterly reckless of young lives . . . That is what I regret in my past life. Now I feel that if I can really help others it will be a little attempt, however small, at expiation" (qtd. in Toibín, *Love* 74-75).

The memories Wilde "recalls" in *The Last Testament* are linked ingeniously to his art, suggesting how they shaped his creative consciousness. He thus finds it strange how his writings anticipated his own fate: "Everything that has happened to me—even the beautiful spring day when I was released from the winter of prison—is mentioned somewhere in my work" (*Last* 70). As George Bernard Shaw pointed out, what makes Wilde "so good a subject for a biography" is his instinctive knowledge of "the great situation at the end" of his life's "last act but one. It was a well made life in the Scribe sense" (7). Similarly, Elana Gomel has observed that, "The drama of Wilde's trials, incarceration, and premature death has all the elements of a good story, which

somehow suggests its being *scripted*" (79). In *The Last Testament*, we find Wilde looking back on his great work and on his willful construction of self, trying to retain his already tenuous grip on a script that is, and is not, of his own making.

Throughout *The Last Testament* Ackroyd stays close to the Wildean spirit, mixing reality and make-believe and expressing in figurative terms his subject's conflicting attitudes toward art and life, Greece and Rome, paganism and Christianity. Particularly effective is the ingenious weaving of Wilde's own language—lifted judiciously from his works, lectures, and letters—with the author's own aphorisms and tales, which resemble Wilde's own. Among the tales invented by Ackroyd is that of a poet who, like Wilde, used to enchant his people with the "secret things of the world" (62), but when these visions of "terror and beauty" were exposed as mere lies, the people turned against him: "they jeered at him, and some of them picked up stones to hurl at his back as he returned slowly to his own dwelling" (63).⁶ This tale has been rightly described as a "*mis en abyme* of the whole confession" (Onega 34). Ackroyd's novel tells the same tale of the poet who preferred beautiful lies to ugly truth and had tried to turn his own life into a work of art (3), only to discover one day, reading his name in the newspaper, that: "It was as if in that name, Oscar Wilde, there was a void in which I might fall and lose myself" (3). In Susana Onega's words, Wilde's "process of degradation"—from aristocrat and artist to convict and tramp—"entails a process of depersonalization accurately pinpointed by his successive changes of names" (34): the original Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde of his aristocratic boyhood, becomes, first an artist's name, Oscar Wilde, then, a convict's number, C.3.3., and finally Sebastian Melmoth (2), the pseudonym Wilde adopted after his release from prison, which combines the name of his favorite martyr, St. Sebastian, and of the solitary wanderer, Melmoth, the hero of a Gothic tale written by an uncle of his mother, Charles Robert Maturin, in 1820. The assumption of this name suggests yet another connection between Chatterton and Wilde, as it confers on the latter a romantic and tragic aura.⁷ At another point, Wilde sees himself as the character of one of Yeats's stories, "The Crucifixion of an Outcast," about "one who, on the road to his crucifixion, sang and told wonderful stories; yet his

accusers showed him no mercy because of that, but hated him all the more fiercely for awakening forgotten longings in their breasts” (99). This statement bears comparison with Wilde’s own meditation on the same theme in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he attacks the hypocrisy of his detractors, whose “rage was that of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass.”

When the fictive Wilde decides to reveal to Bosie and Frank Harris the existence of the journal, he proudly describes it as “the pearl I had created out of two years of suffering” (160). His friends’ reaction serves as a commentary on Ackroyd’s own re-invention of Wilde’s last months of Wilde’s life:

‘You cannot publish this, Oscar. It is nonsense—and most of it is quite untrue.’
‘What on earth do you mean?’
‘It is invented.’
‘It is my life.’
‘But you have quite obviously changed the facts to suit your own purpose.’
‘I have no purpose, and the facts came quite naturally to me.’

After reading a section of the journal, Frank Harris points out to Wilde lines “stolen from other writers,” which prompts Wilde’s reply: “I did not steal them. I rescued them.” Bosie’s comment drives home the main point of the novel: “It’s full of lies, but of course you are. It is absurd and mean and foolish. But then you are. Of course you must publish it” (*Last* 161). The confession is punctuated by other similar reflexive gestures, as when Ackroyd’s Wilde says of his childhood self that he “fancifully blurred the distinction between what was true and what was false” (24) as part of a game of story-telling.

Wilde’s theory and practice of writing prefigure postmodern notions of creativity and originality. Referring to the poems he published in 1881, Ellmann explains: “Wilde had no hesitation in borrowing what he needed, partly because he usually touched it up.” Ellmann goes on to quote from a review Wilde wrote of Wills’s *Olivia* on May 30, 1885: “It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything” (133). This explains, at least in part, why forgery was “a crime which

perhaps seems closest to Wilde's social presentation of himself" (Ellmann 299). Indeed, the self-representation Wilde constructed in his work took on the lineaments of the 18th century forgers, "Macpherson, Ireland, and Chatterton," whom he mentions at the beginning of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." The narrator insists that Chatterton's

so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation; that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realize one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammeling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetic problem. (1150)

Regardless of the spuriousness of his "medieval" poems, Chatterton's poetic talents were genuine. In *The Last Testament*, Wilde describes Chatterton as a "strange, slight boy who was so prodigal of his genius that he attached the names of others to it" (67). With both George Gregory, Chatterton's eighteenth century biographer, and Robert Browning, Wilde attributed Chatterton's genius to his capacity for imitation.⁸ Not surprisingly, Wilde's last reported lecture, from March 1888, centered on Chatterton, whom he defends as "the pure artist":

Chatterton may not have had the moral conscience which is true to fact—but he had the artistic conscience which is true to Beauty. He had the artist's yearning to represent and if perfect representation seemed to him to demand forgery he needs must forge. Still this forgery came from the desire of artistic self-effacement. (qtd. in Ellmann 285)

A genius of forgery, Chatterton suggested himself to Wilde as an analogue to his own mode of authorial self-fashioning predicated upon the deliberate projection and, implicitly, concealment of personality into the work of art. Much like Chatterton, Wilde recognized that, "If I was to succeed as an artist and find an audience for my art, I would have to proceed by cunning obliquity—by the guile of the creative artist who smiles where others weep and who sheds bitter tears while all those around him are lost in laughter" (*Last* 64).

To the extent that Wilde's writings offer a performance of authorial identity, and not the author himself, they bear out Chatterton's contention that, "A character is now unnecessary; an author carries his character in his pen" ("Letter" 560-61). As Judith Butler explains in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," "the performance constitutes the appearance of a 'subject' as its effect" (315). For Wilde, as for Ackroyd, reality is constructed in and through language: "Mere words! Was there anything so real as words?" (*Picture* 31). "Nothing is quite true," Wilde's Lord Henry says in *Dorian Gray*, signaling a typically postmodern failure of belief in human ability to discover and manipulate the truths underlying language. How one uses or "tunes" language determines one's "effect" upon others, an effect that is necessarily unstable due to the subversive individualism defining art, the artist, and the viewer. As Wilde writes in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," "art is individualism and individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force, for what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit" (36).

Along with other fin de siècle artists, Wilde exalted the particular, the individual, and the idiosyncratic. For Wilde, "personality" tended to be sublimated into style, which, as Roland Barthes affirms, "has its roots in the author's personal and secret mythology" (*Writing* 10). Throughout his work, Wilde struck poses, assumed roles, and played parts—all in the name of "individualism"—in the effort, that is, to shield his innermost self against the false restrictions of late Victorian society. Within Wilde's aesthetic of lying, the self, like the text, or a work of art, continually renews itself. "Every profound spirit needs a mask," Nietzsche wrote, and "even more, around every profound spirit a mask is continually growing, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life that he gives" (BGE 40). Particularly relevant to *The Last Testament* is the concept of insincerity, which for Wilde is "merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities. Such, at any rate, was Dorian Gray's opinion. He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence" (*Picture* 198).

This anti-essentialist view of personality informs authorial self-representation both in *The Last Testament* and, as we will see shortly, in *Chatterton*. Both novels orchestrate several layers of perception, thought and feeling, producing multiple representations of the writing subject. In *The Last Testmaent*, this is shown through the many self-identifications of the hero, who states: “I am positively Whitmanesque. I contain multitudes” (*Last* 8). In resurrecting the myth according to which Wilde “treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction” (DP 151), Ackroyd draws the reader’s attention to the textual production of Wilde’s subjectivity. But the journal eschews radical fictionality, just as Wilde himself was aware of the dangers of aestheticism. His socially oriented aestheticism is apparent at the end of *De Profundis*, where he emphasizes the power of imaginative sympathy, making it the “keynote of romantic art” as well as the “proper basis of actual life” (166). Ellmann has rightly observed that for Wilde, “aestheticism was not a creed, but a problem” (310), as shown by the contradicting messages of the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the novel itself. Wilde saw Lord Henry, Basil Hallward, and Dorian Gray as “refractions of his own image,” but he is “larger than his three characters together: they represent distortions or narrowing of his personality, none of them reproducing his generosity of spirit or his sense of fun or his full creativeness” (Ellmann 320).

Like *Dorian Gray* and other texts upon which it is based, the confession becomes an arena within which the writer asserts, but also probes the limits of, his agency as a continuous series of masks, or identities: the flamboyant dresser, the witty conversationalist, the flaneur, the man of fashion, the poseur, etc. First Wilde compares himself to both Miranda and Prospero (8), a tantalizing mix of innocence and experience. Then he identifies himself with the hero of Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, whose sensations he too experienced when, “trembling upon the abyss of a fiery-colored passion [a recurring phrase in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*], he is no longer certain who he is or who others are” (*Last* 62). Finally, Wilde embodies the Faustian desire to explore the artistic possibilities of his double life—the life of aesthetic contemplation and that of worldly experience—by “perfect[ing]” the techniques of “sin[ning] beautifully.” For “[t]he great mystery of

Faust lies not in the separation between the intellect and the senses, but rather that sensation was for him an actual refinement of the intelligence” (*Last* 108).

Wilde acknowledged a division in himself that he liked to attribute to his parents, “his father an antiquarian, his mother a libertarian, one with a passion for the past, the other for the future” (Ellmann 139). With his mother, who was a friend of Mme. Blavatsky, the cofounder of the Theosophic Society, Wilde believed that his downfall and damnation were predetermined by his sinful conception: “she [Lady White] came to me weeping and told me that she held herself responsible for my fate, and that the punishment I was suffering was for her own sin: that I was not Sir William’s child. I was illegitimate” (29).⁹ He consequently undertook the project of self-fashioning: “The illegitimate are forced to create themselves, to stand upright even when the whirlwind engulfs them” (30). Wilde embarked on this project during his early days at Oxford, a period he described as the first turning point in his life. Magdalen College at Oxford was the place where Wilde built his reputation as a scholar and wit, and where he came under the influences of John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Here Wilde experienced his own “renaissance,” as he journeyed from “the medieval pieties of my native soil to the open thought of Hellenism” (Ellmann 32). At Oxford Wilde “talked fancifully of the future,” in words that echo Chatterton’s: “I’ll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I’ll be famous, and if not famous, notorious” (qtd. in Ellmann 46). As Ellmann wrote, for Wilde, Oxford was to the mind what Paris was to the body (Ellmann 37). In *The Last Testament*, Wilde recalls Paris as a place where he could experience “wild delights”: “In my imagination this city was both Babylon and Parnassus; it was a sea from which some god might rise to claim me, but for a time, I was content to drown in its waters” (68).

Describing his fateful relationship with Douglas, Wilde stresses the decisive role played by his imagination in their sensual pursuit of pleasure: thus whereas Boise believed that “life should run ahead of the imagination, and if possible exhaust it,” Wilde has “always helped the imagination to outstrip life” (125). These words conjure up the vision of London in which Dorian Gray acquires the terrible knowledge of forbidden things: “As we became more frenzied in our pursuit of

pleasure, London itself became an unreal city, a play of brilliant lights and crowds and mad laughter. My boldness infected Bosie . . . He wished to become precisely the portrait of him which I had formed in my imagination and so he became terrible, because my imagination was terrible also (127). London¹⁰ promised to offer Wilde—as it did for Chatterton—the opportunity to carry out the project he had set for himself at Oxford. When he arrived in London for the first time, Wilde was struck by the magic power exuded by the great city, where he “could glimpse dimly then the secret of those sexual rites in which gods and spirits are raised” (108). In his youthful imagination, Wilde saw London as “a vast furnace which might maim or destroy all those that it touched, but which also created light and heat”; here he “tasted every aspect of human corruption” (43); here he sought fame and innocence, but found notoriety instead (43). At this stage, the young artist justified his fascination with sin in aesthetic terms: “I saw squalor and shame but to me they were picturesque only: I was not to discover their real secrets until later” (42). As Wilde further explains, his interest for the poor and outcasts of the world (98) led him to write “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” even though, as he reflects, his interest in poverty continued to remain “aesthetic primarily.” Since then, however, he has come to believe that “we are creating in the poor a society which will wreak a terrible vengeance on our own” (98-99). Again, Wilde’s intuitive perception of the magical power of London and his sympathy with the poor bring to mind Chatterton.

His wit, flamboyance, and charm made Wilde a welcome visitor in some of the grandest houses in London, and over the years he became a symbol of modern society, “both in its rise and in its fall” (*Last* 97). The upper classes accepted him because he “brought their own illusions to brilliant life” and confirmed for them the value of appearances. He became a master of the art of conversation, an “art in which the most important things were left unsaid”; he succeeded in making a philosophy out of insincerity (*Last* 89). In this “theatrical society,” he was able to “take on whatever character that was required and remain apart. I took off one mask only to reveal another” (*Last* 91). In *De Profundis*, Wilde acknowledged the existence of a “wide gulf between his art and the world,” while insisting that there was “none between art and myself” (185). As a result, his

works, particularly *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, were taken as an “extraordinary form of self-revelation” (*Last* 131) and condemned for their corrupting influence.

The relation among art, world, and self makes the object of many of the protagonist’s reflections in Ackroyd’s book. “In that strange complicity between the world and the individual character,” this Wilde considers himself “one in whom the world played the largest part” (92). To both the real and the fictive Wilde, this betrayal of individualism spelled death, for “the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, he ceases to be an artist and becomes a dull or amusing craftsman, an honest or dishonest tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered an artist” (“Soul” 34). Ackroyd’s articulation of this point has the distinct ring of a Wildean paradox: “The artist within me was dying, and had to enter a prison before he could be reborn” (93). To a man of Wilde’s class and background, public humiliation “was a death worse than physical death because I knew I would survive it and be raised as Lazarus was raised—Lazarus who wept continually after his resurrection” (145). Unlike Chatterton, Wilde rules out suicide, for “to die at my own hand is a homage to my enemies which I shall never make” (15).

The possibility of reincarnation, in a textual sense, confirms to Wilde that time and history are cyclical and “the idea of progress an absurdity” (181). Wilde intuits that he is now “borne backwards, as if on a tide (178)—to the beginning of a new life—“I returned to the terrible nakedness of childhood, alone and afraid” (143). As well as an elaborate stage-play, life was for Wilde a maze designed to lead one back to where one started. As Onega points out, “Wilde’s backward movement from man to beggar and then to child can be interpreted both as the cyclical return to the beginning of a new reincarnation, or as a transcendental movement away from Darkness towards the Light of revelation” (39). Pondering his impending death, Wilde wonders whether he will remain alive in the memory of the people—“it is improbable, is it not, that anything I have said or done will survive me?”—or whether his martyrdom, like that of Saint Procopius, will be “wonderfully increased by each succeeding legend.” He concludes that distortion is inevitable, that, as soon as Maurice starts taking dictation from him, “he will invent my

last hours.” This is echoed in *Chatterton*: “The real world is just a succession of interpretations. Everything which is written down immediately becomes a kind of fiction” (40). That is, Wilde is perfectly aware that each successive version of his life will be the subjective misreading of the biographer. However, he is not at all worried by this prospect. On the contrary, he believes that, as happened with Saint Procopius, “it was the legends that worked the miracle, not the bones” (180).

A renewed sense of possibility steals over Ackroyd’s Wilde, as he projects himself into the future, imagining his further transformation in new aesthetic forms. A few years before his death, Wilde remembered the picture of a prince he had seen in the Louvre and wished he could “enter another man’s heart,” for, as he explains, “In that moment of transition, when I was myself and someone else, of my own time and in another’s, the secrets of the universe would stand revealed” (181). Wilde’s wish that he could take up the personality of the man in the picture—as happened in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—speaks to his belief in the superiority of Art to life. But then, Wilde never believed in consistency, and neither does the figure invented by Ackroyd. Thus Art and Life, the artist’s “textual persona” and his physical person, the “legend” and the “bones,” are not so much split, as closely bound together in the image of the artist marked by contingency, ennobled by suffering, and attuned to the sheer existence of things outside himself:

Now I stand still and wonder at the inexhaustible fullness of things which before I tried to master and control . . . Only in the individual, as poor and helpless even as I am, and in the mystery of individual lives, is meaning to be found. Life, the current life, survives everything. It is greater than myself, and yet without me, it would be incomplete: that is the real miracle. (165)

Although he has lost control over the textual identities he constructed for himself, Wilde hopes that his fate will no longer rest with the hypocritical society of his age, but with likeminded artists, whose imagination, once awakened by Wilde, would “create myth and legend around me” (DP 151). As he approaches the hour of his death, Wilde “[l]ongs to enter the noisy thoroughfares and dilapidated courtyards of Balzac’s imagination” (181)¹¹ and he dies laughing with the joy of knowing that “then once more I shall be lord of language and lord of life” (185). The effect of

Wilde's personality has endured just as he predicted it would: Wilde "made personality into a principle, and even though he failed to move his age as far as he had wished, he shook it so hard that we feel the reverberations still" (Hennegan 209). A bow to Wilde's aesthetic principles, *The Last Testament* makes "real," albeit on an imaginative plane, the post-prison future Wilde envisioned in his apologia, rebuilding his stature as an artist and rescuing him for (literary) history.

Of Thomas Chatterton, the protagonist of Ackroyd's other book revisited in this chapter, Ellmann said that he was "a better model" for Wilde than Keats, "because of his criminal propensities, and a better model than the forger Wainewright, because of his artistic power" (Ellmann 285). It is time now to revisit *Chatterton* in light of this statement and trace the origins of this shift from moral character to performative personality established by Wilde. At the end of his lecture on the eighteenth-century poet, Wilde dedicated a poem to his "new hero," who possessed a "wild heart," shared "Hamlet's doubts" and evinced "Satan's pride," defying death and deifying art. His face is described as "unrecorded" for "there are no known portraits" (Ellmann 285). Ackroyd's *Chatterton* fills in this gap, featuring both a fake portrait of Chatterton and an authentic one, painted by Henry Wallis, only to further reinforce the difficulty of pinning its subject down, whether in paint or words.

Palimpsest Lives: The Posthumous Career of Thomas Chatterton

"To live, then die, man was not only made.
There's yet an awful something else remains
Either to lessen or increase our pains."
(Chatterton, "On the Immortality of the Soul")

"He's all written down, *he* is."

(Ackroyd, *Chatterton* 55)

Shortlisted for the Booker Prize, *Chatterton* draws on the tragic career of the eponymous eighteenth century poet and plagiarist, tracing the "sad pilgrimage" of his life and the

repercussions of his untimely death on writers and artists from the Romantic through the postmodern period. Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) haunts the novel's fictional characters, living on as a spectral trace, just as Wilde has become an "effect." In his preface to *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, Ackroyd writes that Chatterton "has survived a variety of literary incarnations from Augustan fraudster to Romantic icon and post-modern avatar" (1). All of these incarnations combine to make up Ackroyd's own multi-layered portrait of Thomas Chatterton and to render the "truth" about the latter even more elusive: the 'real' Chatterton, who appears as a character in his own right in the last part of the novel, the Chatterton invented by his publisher (himself Ackroyd's invention), the middle-aged Chatterton of a fake portrait, the Chatterton of Henry Wallis's painting, and a modern variation of Chatterton in Charles Wychwood. Ultimately, "no 'authentic' or 'original' Chatterton is ever available any more than had been Oscar Wilde" (Gibson and Wolfreys 129-30). As in Wilde's case, the myth Chatterton invented for himself has been revived, and in the process transformed, by others. Both figures emerge as inventions of literary and cultural history, products of "various official, institutional, aesthetic, and historical discourses, commentaries and narratives," but also, equally the products of hearsay, gossip, and speculation (130). Chatterton was to posthumously become Wordsworth's "marvelous boy," Oscar Wilde's "pure artist," and last, but not least, Ackroyd's "one true great genius of historical restoration and renewal in this country" ("Preface" 2).

In *Chatterton*, Ackroyd sets up a dialogic interplay between three different historical periods. The first is that of Thomas Chatterton's own brief and rather obscure life (1752-1770). The second is set around the year 1856, when Henry Wallis completed his portrait of a dead Chatterton lying in his garret, with the young poet George Meredith posing as a model, just before the latter's wife, Mary Ellen, left him for Wallis. The third section, set in the twentieth century, centers on the discovery by another poet manqué, Charles Wychwood, of a second portrait, in this case, a fake representation of Chatterton in his fifties. Each of these stories is simultaneously undercut and reflected by the other ones, and all point to the "centrality" of

Chatterton, in the same way that “everything [in Wallis’s portrait] moved towards the center, towards Thomas Chatterton” (164). Charles’s life and writings radically affect the subsequent lives and works of Wallis, Meredith, Charles, and his circle of acquaintances: Philip Slack, a failed novelist committed to a romantic vision of authorship, Harriet Scrope, an anxiety-ridden novelist who plagiarizes the novels of an obscure Victorian writer; a postmodern novelist and biographer of no other than Meredith; and art critic Sarah Tilt, who is working on “a study of the images of death in English painting,” so fittingly, entitled “The Art of Death” (33). One of her subjects is, of course, Wallis’s ‘Chatterton.’ The novel as a whole reveals the connections between the posthumous, which “gives a form of freedom from history,” (Tambling 71) and forgery, which invents history, as Chatterton invented that of his native town, Bristol.

Ackroyd prefaces the novel with a brief summary of his subject’s life and career, emphasizing the “antiquarian passion” that propelled Chatterton’s dream of poetic fame. The dream was to be realized posthumously, first by the Romantics, who made Chatterton the soul of their movement, and then by Henry Wallis, whose fanciful representation of the poet “fixed” him for posterity (1). The prologue contains four telling excerpts from the novel, introducing the protagonists and forecasting the themes that will be developed. In the first excerpt, we see Chatterton holding a book in his hand and talking with a girl. Then he is gazing at the tower of St. Mary Redcliffe and uttering the words of a poem that reverberate throughout the novel, encapsulating the trope of the posthumous: “Tomorrow, perhaps, the wanderer will appear— / His eye will search for me round every spot, / And will, —and will not find me” (2). The second fragment, taken from an imagined conversation between George Meredith and Henry Wallis, raises the question of reality and its representation in art. Meredith considers himself “a model poet” because he is “pretending to be someone else” (2). Ackroyd leaves us wondering whether the picture represents Meredith or Chatterton (3), but later he has Meredith tell Wallis that the portrait “will always be remembered as the true death of Chatterton” (157). The third exchange, between the novelist Harriet Scrope and her friend, Sarah Tilt, prepares us for the misquotations¹²

that punctuate the novel and foreground the themes of plagiarism, originality, and imitation. The fourth excerpt refers to Charles Wychwood's "climatic encounter" with the ghost of Chatterton at the end of chapter 4, thus prefiguring the end of his quest for illumination (Omega 60).

Ackroyd's treatment of Chatterton incorporates elements of the early literary and artistic responses to the poet, but only to transcend them towards a more inclusive and dynamic portrait that encompasses what David Fairer has described as satiric, lyric (or contemplative), and dramatic modes of representation. The best-known tribute to Chatterton is the image of the delicate, vulnerable boy that Wordsworth immortalized in his poem. This image has become inextricably attached to the version of Chatterton in the lyrical mode, as can be seen from the works about or inspired by the poet in the early part of the nineteenth century. Chatterton's tragic fate, invoked by Wordsworth in "Resolution and Independence," provided the subject for an early monody by Coleridge and led Keats to dedicate *Endymion* to him, while Shelley included him among the parade of illustrious mourners in *Adonais*, calling him one of the "inheritors of unfulfilled renown." An overview of these texts, however, gives us only "scant indication of what it was about his poetry that made him so great." In order to produce this "nostalgized" Chatterton, the later poets "had to ignore" his "relentless desire to turn a profit" and stress instead his status as an outsider, a victim of poverty, ostracism, and neglect (Keegan 212). This tragic scenario appealed to the Romantic poets, who could thus identify with his "youthful poetic aspirations, high hopes for changing the world, a feeling of estrangement from family and home," and his "refusal to surrender to the establishment" (Fairer 230, 236).

Coexisting with this image, and closer to the truth, was his representation in the dramatic and satiric strains, as "a mature (even prematurely aged), disturbing, satiric, and questioning presence" (Fairer 248). The image of Chatterton as the public defender of liberty, found in the earliest elegies on him, dating from 1770 and written by his friend Thomas Cary, was based on his virulent political satires ("Kew Gardens," "Resignations," and "The Whore of Babylon"), which display his quirky intelligence and his vigorous humor, along with his rebellious,

freethinking attitudes. Cary's elegies, Horace Walpole's pamphlet, *Letter to the Editor of the Miscellanies* (1779), Sir Herbert Croft's *Love and Madness*, and George Gregory's *Life of Chatterton* (1789) –all present a “satirically inclined and politically aware poet, and each links this to his maturity and manliness” (234). Such an image presents Chatterton as more socially engaged than Romantic myth made him.

In *Chatterton*, Ackroyd exposes the Romantic ‘forgery’ of the life of the great forger by bringing into focus Chatterton's material ambitions, along with his more manly side. The novel pays an eloquent and moving tribute to Chatterton, even as it confirms, rather than dispels, the rumors of counterfeiting, plagiarism, forgery, insanity, profligacy, and physical disease that began to attach themselves to the poet's memory after his death. During the early days of the Rowley controversy, “the image of a dreadful libertine, a syphilis-ridden profligate and forger had become synonymous with the name Chatterton” (Kaplan 191). At the other end of the spectrum, Chatterton's idealizing biographers used a “range of rationalizations and denials” to replace “the unlikely portrait of syphilis-ridden profligacy with an equally fanciful picture of total and marvelous innocence” (196). Ackroyd's fictional representation of Chatterton falls somewhere between these extremes; instead of “rationalizations and denials,” Ackroyd resorts to spurious manuscripts and fictitious details to add another layer to Chatterton's portrait, a layer that has been suppressed by previous Chatterton biographers. With the exception of E.H. Meyerstein “who went further, but never far enough,” these biographers “barely touch on the sexual atmosphere of eighteenth-century England, even though Chatterton's sexuality is a specter that haunts each volume” (Kaplan 202). Not only does Ackroyd eschew moral delicacy to unearth this layer, but in so doing, he also captures the ambiguities of Chatterton's character, juxtaposing, if not reconciling, “the nobility of Rowley's moral sentiments with the obvious sexual vigor of young Chatterton” (Kaplan 203).

Both the recognition and construction of Chatterton's poetic persona can be traced back to the controversy over the poems he produced between 1768 and 1770, and which he attributed

to the fifteenth century priest, Sir Thomas Rowley. With Novalis, Chatterton “believed that the past, and the language of the past, might be made to live again” (Ackroyd, “Preface” 1). In calling up the spirit of William Canynge, the rebuildler and benefactor of St. Mary’s Church, he projected an idealized version of medieval Bristol. According to David Fairer, the controversy made it “seem that this lad could be anything you wanted him to be. Fact and fiction, life and art, creator and created, had become so intertwined” (229). A “certain basic perversity about his character” (Lindop 10) has been adduced as an explanation as to why Chatterton turned forger. So ignorant proved Bristol’s civic dignitaries that even when Chatterton admitted he had written the poems, no one would believe him. The Chatterton of the fake manuscript in Ackroyd’s novel explains that, because of his obscure origins and “imperfect Education,” his works “would have been despised and neglected” by the “sordid Bristolians” (87, 88). The problem of forgery soon became a paradox when those who came to Chatterton’s defense were incapable of appreciating his talent to write those medieval masterpieces, so that “recognition of his genius actually depended on the exposure of forgery” (Rawson 16). In other words, “Chatterton could be a Romantic icon only if he was a faker” (Wood 260). Kaplan also points out the irony implicit in the controversy surrounding the authenticity of Chatterton’s writings: “Those writings for which Chatterton earned the labels ‘counterfeiter’ and ‘forger’ were in fact masterpieces of invention and imagination, while the journal articles he later wrote under his own name or acknowledged pseudonyms were borrowings, sometimes outright plagiarisms from the literary figures of his day” (99). For a postmodern writer like Ackroyd, however, the authenticity of *any* text becomes problematic, complicating, rather than resolving the ambiguities of Chatterton’s authorial identity.

Chatterton himself showed he was aware of the thin line separating forgery and fiction when, smarting from Horace Walpole’s rebuff of his medieval creations, threw back at him the example of his own pseudo-antique *The Castle of Otranto*: “thou mayst call me Cheat—Say, didst thou ne’er indulge in such Deceit / Who wrote *Otranto*?”¹³ The poem, written sometime in

late July or early August 1769, but first published in Dix's *Life* (1837), concludes with Chatterton pledging his everlasting loyalty to Rowley:

Had I the Gifts of Wealth and Lux'ry shar'd
Not poor and Mean—Walpole! Thou hadst not dared
Thus to insult, But I shall live and Stand
By Rowley's side—when Thou art dead and damned. (SP 27, ll. 14-17).

Read in light of Chatterton's untimely death, these lines reinforce the Romantic image of neglected genius whose creative potential was tragically cut short by mean-spirited critics.

The Rowley controversy has been interpreted as “largely a contest over the history of English poetry” (Lolla 163). Chatterton declared that his main motive in inventing Rowley was to produce the evidence needed to prove that “good Poetry” might have been written in “the dark days of Superstition as well as in these more inlightened Ages” (qtd. in Grazia 161; see the note to “Bristowe Tragedie.”). The fabricated manuscripts, then, were intended to authenticate the medieval world and thus change his contemporaries' disparaging view of the literary past. But Chatterton's forgeries also stemmed from a psychological necessity, the need to “experience his own self as real and whole” (Kaplan 99). His “quest for poetic nobility” was thus inextricably linked with his personal history, for in Sir William Canynge, the adolescent Chatterton created “an ideal father who used his fine appreciation of the arts to ennoble the city of Bristol” (24). Through the benevolent fifteenth-century merchant prince, “Chatterton could fill in the gaps of his own identity” (101) and be reunited with the nourishing presence of his father. As we will see, this is particularly evident in Ackroyd's novel, whose motif structure highlights the centrality of father-son relationships, including their significance from a Bloomian perspective.

After the loss of Rowley and Carnynge, Chatterton found new role models in John Wilkes, the leading freethinker of eighteenth century England, and his friend Charles Churchill, “two champions of liberty who often mistook license for liberty” (Kaplan 120). Chatterton embraced their iconoclastic creed, did not shy away from their hedonistic pursuits, and learned

quickly how to make political satire pay off. Chatterton's pen became a weapon he wielded to his advantage by putting on the "cloak" of "flattery" ("Intrest thou universal God of Men"). As he wrote his mother, "A character is now unnecessary; an author carries his character in his pen" (qtd. in Kaplan 142). "But he is poor writer," Chatterton said in another letter, "who cannot write on both sides" (qtd. in Wood 259). "In context," Wood explains, "he means writing both for and against the government of the day," but we cannot help noticing the connection with Wilde, whose mastery of paradoxes presupposes the ability to speak on both sides of an issue. Unlike Wilde, Chatterton lacked the aura of high birth, material wealth, or sensational public stance. Furthermore, he left no such prominent autobiographical record as Wilde's *De Profundis*. Ackroyd makes up for this significant absence by inventing Chatterton's "memoir." For Ackroyd, in fact, this absence of an avowedly autobiographical document is not a limitation, but rather a provocation to supply readers with what Chatterton never got around to writing: "These are circumstances that concern my conscience only but I, Thomas Chatterton, known as Tom Goose-Quill, Tom-all-Alone, or Poor Tom, do give them here in place of wills, Depositions, Deeds of Gift and Sundry other legal devices" (C 81).

The first-person manuscript and the "Portrait of an Unknown Man" (43) picked up by Charles Wychood from an antiques dealer, a certain Mr. Leno¹⁴ leads Charles to believe that Chatterton faked his own death at the suggestion of his publisher, Samuel Joynson—himself Ackroyd's invention—in order to carry on writing in the name of other Romantics. Chatterton both mirrors and is mirrored by Charles. When the latter sees the picture, "He had the faintest and briefest sensation of being looked at, so he turned his head to one side—and caught the eyes of a middle-aged man who was looking at him" (11). It was a portrait of a mysterious seated figure, manuscripts in his lap, wearing a costume that "might have seemed too Byronic, too young, for a man who had clearly entered middle age." At the end of *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, the dying Wilde recalls the portrait of a prince he had seen at the Louvre and wishes he could "return to that past to enter another man's heart" (181). Likewise, Charles, intrigued by "something

familiar” in the “unknown man’s” face (11), becomes increasingly possessed by the visionary poet and obsessed with solving his “secret” (60). Although Charles’s own vision of beauty and wholeness is cut short by a brain tumor from which he eventually dies, it is made incarnate in the book that his best friend Philip decides to write after all (possibly, a novel called *Chatterton*).

Philip, who accompanies Charles on his trip to Bristol, visits the Parish Church where Chatterton worshipped as a boy.¹⁵ As he gazes at the “glowing blues, reds and yellows of the East Window,” he thinks he is “seeing again” what Chatterton himself once saw as a child (54). On one of the walls is a metal plaque in memory of the poet, inscribing the lines:

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.

“He’s all written down, *he is*,” an old Bristol resident tells Philip, offering him a pamphlet with the title *Thomas Chatterton: Son of Bristol*. “No one knows where he’s gone and buried himself. He’s a mystery” (55).¹⁶ The leaflet tells of the Rowley poems that “heralded the Romantic Movement in England” and “established the foundations of his everlasting fame” (57). The final sentence is a verbatim quotation from George Gregory’s biography of the eighteenth century poet: “Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before” (58).

In addition to the double epigraphs taken from Chatterton’s poems and preceding the three parts of the novel, the narrative is replete with other lines from Chatterton, as well as with sly references to Ackroyd’s own works. Characters become entangled in a maze of literary appropriations and cross-references, evident from the similarities of the plots and titles of their works. Thus, when Philip searches in the library archives for any references to Chatterton, suspecting that “in old books some forgotten truth might be recovered” (68), he comes across an obscure novel, titled *The Last Testament*, by the nineteenth-century novelist, Harrison Bentley.

Perusing the novel, he is struck by the realization that Harriet Scrope had plagiarized it in her novel *Stage Fire*, whose title alludes to yet another one of Ackroyd's novels, *The Great Fire of London*. Bentley's novel concerned a poet—referred to as K—who “believed himself to be possessed by the spirits of dead writers but who, nevertheless, had been acclaimed as the most original poet of his age” (69). As his biographer later discovered, K's eternal fame rested on poems written by his devoted wife, in the same way that Chatterton's recreation of medieval poetry established that of Thomas Rowley.¹⁷

The reliability of Chatterton's pseudo-memoir is further undermined by his insistence that this account “could not be given by any other Man: for who was present at my Birth but my own self, tho' it may be that this was one of the few Occasions when my Mother had a better conception than my Mother-wit” (81). Chatterton's father, who died shortly before his birth, had been a chorister at St. Mary Redcliffe, the local church opposite their house in Pile Street. Since his father died three months before his son's birth, Chatterton believes he “must have heard his singing while I was yet in my mother's Womb: hence my own love of Musick” (81). In addition to music, the father “so loved his Church he might have built it with his own Hands.” His “Virtues and Qualities” make him a model to emulate by the son. The church became a sanctuary the son entered

with bowed head; being a fantastic, forlorn, and fickle little Fellow it seemed to me that I was entering my father's own house (that in no Pious sense), and to my Fancy all the funerary monuments there became Images of him straitened in the death from which I wish'd to pluck him. (82)

Much like Novalis, Chatterton showed no promising beginnings; according to his biographers, he was regarded as “little better than an idiot until he was about six and a half years old, because he would learn nothing, refused to play with the children, and spent most of his time brooding in silence” (Lindop 7). But Chatterton is said to have undergone a considerable transformation in his seventh year, when he found his mother tearing up some old music folios

which his father had brought home from the church for use as waste paper and book-bindings. His mother, who taught him to read with the aid of the manuscript, later recalled that, “He fell in love with the illuminated capitals.”¹⁸ In Ackroyd’s account, this “treasure” kindled his imagination (83) and filled him with faith in the possibility of reviving the past. The verger of the church, Mr. Crowe, who knew the boy “in every respect” to be his father’s son, thought Tom was wasting his time: “There is nothing there but Dust and old Ragged things, Tom.” “Nothing for a Boy.” Tom’s insistence that Parchments like the one which had been lodged in his father’s Singing-book may be found in the church storeroom forces the verger to reconsider his judgment of the “Boy”: “Thomas Chatterton,” said he, “you have an old Head on young Shoulders” (84). Tom’s retort shows his penchant for paradox: “If I am a Fool then pray humor my Folly. For they say that a Man out of his Wits is close to being Wise” (84).

His imagination “on Fire,” Chatterton embarked on a process of self-education, foreseeing a future for himself as the poetic voice of his age: “It is said that there comes an Instant when any Man may see his whole Fate stretching in front of him, as it were in a Vision” (84). Chatterton’s dream of becoming a writer was conceived amidst circumstances that gave him no choice but to fend for himself and create himself on the imaginative plane. At the age of 8 Chatterton entered the dismal environment at Colston’s Hospital School, where his precocious literary talents could not easily thrive. As he himself put it, “he could not learn so much at school as he could at home, for they had no books there” (qtd. in Lindop 8). Books were Chatterton’s main companions, providing a modicum of sustenance for his youthful dreams. Favorite among them were the “hundred dusty Volumes” his father had purchased and that he now read “with as much Reverence as if they had been written in his own Hand” (C 82-83). His readings ranged widely, from “heraldry, English antiquities, metaphysical disquisitions, mathematicall researches, music, astronomy, physic and the like,” to “Historicall works” (C 83). Worth mentioning is that, unlike Wilde, Chatterton “knew virtually nothing of the classics” (Lindop 17). He spent a great deal of time locked in the attic, reading, writing, or dreaming away. These hours of solitary

musings far from the paltry Bristolian milieu stimulated the boy's imagination. When he began to transcribe the scraps of old manuscripts in his own hand, "it seemed even then that the Dead were speaking to me, face to face." He "ceased to be a meer Boy" when he resolved to "shore up these ancient Fragments with my own Genius: thus the Living and the Dead were reunited" (85).¹⁹ And so were personal history and local history, for in reinventing the past, Chatterton was also reinventing himself: first, by giving himself "as good a Lineage as any Gentleman in Bristol," and second, by inventing himself as "a monk of the fifteenth century, Thomas Rowley; I dressed him in Raggs, I made him blind, and then I made him Sing" (87). The life of William Canynge "as wroten by Thomas Rowley" spoke to Chatterton's wish to escape his lowly status and claim a more noble status. The pedigrees he invented in the fantasy, *Craishes Heraldry*, were designed to link his family name with the family name of Canynge and further back to the conquering Normans and the battle of Hastings (Kaplan 82-83).

The papers found by Chartles describe in detail the "Method" by which Chatterton constructed *The Trew Histories* of Bristol and of St. Mary's Church, a method that is typical of Ackroyd's own practice: interweaving texts that "in Unison" became "quite a new Account" punctuated by the writer's own "speculations in physic, drama, and philosophy" (85). Through Chatterton, Ackroyd articulates a postmodern insight: "I reproduc'd the Past and filled it with such Details that it was as I were observing it in front of me: so the Language of Ancient Dayes awoke the Reality itself, for tho' I knew that it was I who composed these Histories, I knew also that they were true ones" (85). Chatterton's pastiche constructs history by "soar[ing] 'bove the trouthe of hystorie" (Aella) and by effortlessly—and almost flawlessly—imitating the "language of *auntient Dayes*" (85), which "speedily became the very Token of my own Feelings" (87). A tool of invention, style becomes intimately bound up with substance, for as the fictive Chatterton recalls, he "understood" the "Passions" of the writers he imitated, as soon as he appropriated their styles (93). Then, aware of the emphasis his fellow townspeople placed on "outward Show," Chatterton found it necessary to "give my own Papers the semblance of Antiquity." Confident in

his newly assumed role, Chatterton easily persuaded his mother that his discovery would “delight our sweet Gentry at the same time as it will satisfy our Purse” (86). Although suspecting the truth, Joynson, the bookseller, purchased Chatterton’s verse “without so much as a remote Allusion to its Origin” because he recognized the boy’s genius: “He knew what a bright Spark I was, and what a Soul I had for Learning” (87).

Missing from the papers being now read by Charles but nevertheless relevant to our understanding of Chatterton is the reference to the poet’s apprenticeship to attorney John Lambert. Bored by the drudgery of copying legal documents, Chatterton sought to obtain release from his indentures. On 14 April 1770 Lambert found on his desk Chatterton’s “Last Will and Testament,” a document in which Chatterton threatened to commit suicide by the following evening if Lambert would not cancel his indentures. With a pungent, Wildean irony, he remarked that, “the most perfect masters of human nature in Bristol distinguish me by the title of the Mad Genius; therefore, if I do a mad action, it is conformable to every action of my life, which all savored of insanity” (SP 95). He went on say that he possessed “an unlucky way of raillery, and when the strong fit of satire is upon me, I spare neither friend nor foe” (SP 95-96). His wry and sparkling wit can be most clearly seen when he insists on leaving “the young ladies all the letters they have had from me, assuring them that they need be under no apprehensions from the appearance of my ghost, for I die for none of them” (SP 96). Whether it was a real threat or a hoax, Chatterton’s suicide note proved to be his ticket to freedom, as the alarmed lawyer set him free at last. While Ackroyd makes no mention of this incident, he does allude—as we will see shortly—to other writings by Chatterton, which show that suicide was on the poet’s mind.

After the exposure of his forgeries, Chatterton sought to escape the narrow provinciality of Bristol, in which everything (art included) was judged by its monetary value. As he recognized, “The Muses have no Credit here; and fame, / Confines itself to the mercantile name.” Unable to carve out a place for himself in his native town, which he repeatedly calls a “Shit-hole,” “Whorehouse,” and “Ship of Fools,” he pinned his hopes on London where “my Genius

might blaze and consume all those who saw it" (C 88). At the end of April 1770, Chatterton boarded the One-Day Express to London, looking forward to a successful career as a political journalist. Here he readily agreed to compose "Satires against all Parties," "meer Squibs," which publishers "took up gladly" without suspecting the "true Range of my Shot," and a series of dramatic monologues that made effective use of his "Skill in the Art of Impersonation" (89). Looking back on these promising times, the alleged author of the papers recently found by Charles invokes the "weeping Muse" that causes him to change the register from spirited to melancholy: "there were so many Barbs to my Pride, and Hindrances to my Progress, that I was like to be overwhelm'd and to sink under them" (89). Wilde's career, as already shown, would follow a similar trajectory, and in both cases, unrelenting pride pulls these artists through the worst.

Ackroyd has his invented Chatterton admit to his "imperious and wayward Disposition" on account of which he could not bring himself to entreat booksellers and newspapers to publish his work, to show his poverty, or accept another's charity. But since "these were the Verses of indigence, compos'd in Inconvenience and Disquietude," they gained him nothing (89). In this account, Chatterton, while in London, continued to fabricate poems he attributed to Thomas Rowley, and his literary voyage was cut short when Joynson alerted him to the imminent exposure of his forgeries: "There are some who say that he [Roweley] is an Imposture" (90). In his defense, Chatterton insisted that, "He is as real as I am," a statement that Ackroyd's novel confirms and undercuts at the same time. Chatterton would give up the pretense, but he would not abandon writing, which was indispensable for his sustenance (90). What Joynson had in mind, however, would involve yet another form of impersonation: "I have no doubt," the bookseller tells Chatterton, "that there are other Authors within you" (90). To make the most of his genius for imitation, Chatterton would have to "hide in Obscurity for a while" and "vanish like a Specter" by forging his own death (92). A comment made by Elana Gomel in her essay on Oscar

Wilde is particularly appropriate here: “The dead man writing from beyond the grave gives an uncannily literal meaning to the catchphrase ‘the death of the author’” (74).

Charles’s theory of a resurrected Chatterton hinges on the latter’s belief, also endorsed by Charles, that “he could explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation and forgery, and so sure was he of his own genius that he allowed it to flourish under other names” (127). Here Ackroyd is plagiarizing himself twice: the first half of the sentence has been lifted verbatim from the catalogue of the exhibition of Art Brut at Cumberland and Maitland’s gallery (109-10), while the second half sends us back to *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, in which he has Wilde describe Chatterton as a “strange, slight boy who was so prodigal of his genius that he attached the names of others to it” (67). The manuscript supposedly written by the mature Chatterton leads Charles to conclude that, “our whole understanding of eighteenth century poetry will have to be revised.” Initially irritated by the myriad discrepancies and contradictions in the biographies of Chatterton, Charles soon feels exhilarated by the impossibility of certainty, “for it meant that anything became possible. If there were no truths, everything was true” (150). This realization prompts him to write his own version of Chatterton’s memoirs. He starts writing in a frenzied state, comparable to a visionary fit of automatic writing: “All at once he saw the entire pattern of Chatterton’s life, and with redoubled pressure he wrote it down with his empty pen” (127). Just as Chatterton felt, on his trip to London, that he was approaching fame, so Charles is “convinced this [the papers he had shown to Philip] will make us rich” (95). Ackroyd renders Chatterton’s presence vivid and immediate by representing his spiritual re-embodiment in Charles. While reading a copy of Meyerstein’s *Life of Chatterton*, Charles notices a “patch of darkness on the left hand page, as if someone were standing over him and casting a shadow across the words” (125). Passing through an exhibition of portraits at the Tate Gallery, Charles “could see in each face the life and the history; he did not want to leave the world in which his own face was their companion” (131). Before long, he too “will join th’unhonoured Dead” and close his eyes to “Fate’s unjust decree.” Quoting from Wordsworth, the priest who delivers the

sermon at Charles's funeral, substitutes "young man" for "boy," thus establishing a parallel between the two poets: "Thou marvelous young man, / With your sleepless soul never perishing in pride" (179). Both emerge as poets who have "seen a Flower ynn Sommer Tyme / Trodd down and broke and wider ynn ytts pryme" ("The Story of Wyllyam Canynge").

As it turns out, Chatterton's memoir is a forgery committed by his Bristol publisher out of revengeful spite for slanders against him in Chatterton's works. So the papers that corroborate the version of Chatterton's survival until old age represent a bookseller's attempt to "fake the work of a faker" (221). For "what better weapon to use against a forger than another forgery?" (221). Joynson conceived of the manuscript as a joke, one that would "blacken Chatterton's name," or, as Phillip thinks, to "confuse the memory of Chatterton," for "he would no longer be the poet who died young and glorious, but a middle-aged hack who continued a sordid trade with his partner." Phillip further learns that the painting displayed in Cumberland's gallery "was part of the joke," too, having been painted by Joynson's own son (222).

In the second part of the novel, Henry Wallis' famous—and, this time, authentic—painting of the dead Chatterton becomes the focus of the debate between the painter and his model, George Meredith, over whether the artistic process is mimetic or creative, imitative or original. Chatterton is brought to life for posterity by Wallis's realistic depiction of Meredith lying down upon a bed with one arm trailing upon the floor.²⁰ Working on realist assumptions, Wallis consults Catcott's account of Chatterton's death, from which he learns that pieces of torn manuscripts were found beside the body. His determination to make the scene "real" leads his model to suspect that "the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery" (139). For Meredith, "There is nothing more real than words" (157). He claims that, "the invention is always more real" than empirical reality, just as the monk Rowley, whom Chatterton created "out of thin air" has "more life in him than any medieval priest who actually existed." "But," he adds, "Chatterton did not create an individual simply. He invented an entire period and made its imagination his own: no one had properly understood the medieval world until Chatterton summoned it into

existence. The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it. And that is why he is feared” (157).

Whereas Wallis insists upon a mimetic theory of art—“After all, I can only paint what I see”—Meredith espouses what Wilde would make his credo, namely, that life imitates art: “When Molière created *Tartuffe*, the French nation suddenly found him beside every domestic hearth. When Shakespeare invented *Romeo and Juliet*, the whole world discovered how to love” (133).²¹ The reality that Wallis would depict is the reality of visible things, which for Meredith are “stage props, mere machinery.” Although the prospect of being “immortalized” delights Meredith, he cannot help wondering whether the body on the canvas represents him or Chatterton. He is right to predict that the “effect of that painting will be quite different from anything” either he or Wallis can understand, and that “the same is true with a poem or novel” (162).

Wallis’s vision of his subject as “a final union of light and shadow,” of cooler and warmer colors, brings to mind the insight arrived at by Lily Briscoe upon finishing her painting in Woolf’s novel, *To the Lighthouse*. Wallis fears that the complete work “could never be as perfect upon the canvas as it now was in his understanding” (164).²² But because the painting is “infused with the soul of Chatterton—a soul not trapped but joyful at its commemoration” (170),” Wallis believes this to be his “true creation,” in which both he and Chatterton are immortalized. In the same way, Woolf’s artist figure views her work as testimony to the triumph (timelessness) of art over life’s transience and contingencies: “Yes, it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of a picture like that it was true [...] that it ‘remained forever’” (TTL 267). By the end of *Chatterton*, Lily’s typically modernist insight—“nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint” (267)—changes to the distinctly postmodern credo embraced by Ackroyd: “nothing stays; all changes, even words or paint.”

The novel’s third section switches to the eighteenth century, and is, for the most part, an account of Chatterton’s last days, beginning on the morning of 23 August, 1770, when Chatterton “wakes feeling unusually merry” (191). Whereas most biographical accounts of Chatterton’s last

days depict him in a distraught state of mind, Ackroyd portrays a Chatterton emboldened and cheered by the prospect of a new life awaiting him in London. From his attic room in Brooke Street, he writes to his mother, proclaiming his “*high spirits*. I am *elevated* beyond expression, and have lofty thoughts of my approaching *eminence*” (191). Each day, since he settled here five weeks before, he has felt the “same exhilaration, waking above the city and then descending into it” (191). Not even the recent death of Alderman Lee, who was “set fair to become one of his patrons” (192), can change his good mood. The loss of his patron provides Chatterton with the occasion to show that he can write “on both sides of an issue,” just as the historical Chatterton boasted to his sister and as Ackroyd has Chatterton tell his friend, Daniel Hanway (214). Chatterton’s ambivalent reactions to the death of Alderman Lee serve to remind us of Chatterton’s clever maneuvers to distinguish himself as a political journalist who could write as well on the Patriot side as on the ministerial side, depending on which one proved more profitable at the moment. In Ackroyd’s novel, we see Chatterton jot down what he stands to lose and gain as a result of Lee’s death. The “gains” include elegies for Lee, on the one hand, and satires against him, on the other.²³ Before breakfast, Chatterton completes the “elegy in praise of Alderman Lee” ordered by *The Town and Country*, and writes a satire against the same subject, for the *London Gazette*. As he later explains to Daniel, both his praise and condemnation of Lee are “true” because “this is an age of poetry,” and “poetry cannot lie” (214). Chatterton assures himself that certain booksellers, who find him very reliable, are “already prepared to pay him small sums in advance for his finished work” (192). His letters continue to exude optimism: “Dearest Mama, my *rise* through life proceeds apace. I am *exalted* in London and will no doubt soon reach the pitch of sublimity” (192).

Chatterton’s negotiations with the publishers were mainly motivated by the need to finance his literary ambitions. But in trying to master the literary styles of his day and tailor them to the literary marketplace, Chatterton came closer to the “tradesman” Wilde feared becoming than to the disinterested artist he admired so much: to quote again from “The Soul of Man under

Socialism,” “the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, he ceases to be an artist and becomes a dull or amusing craftsman, an honest or dishonest tradesman” (17). Forced to abandon the fiction of Thomas Rowley, Chatterton began writing in his own name or under one or another of his several pseudonyms, among them, “Probus,” “Decimus,” “Astrea Brokage,” “A Hunter of Oddities,” “Harry Wildefire,” as well as D.B., or “Dunhelmus Brisoliensis.” Contrary to his elated statements above, Chatterton’s endeavors to support himself by writing brought only a meager harvest financially. Indeed, payments were small and irregular, and the work exhausting. The struggling poet was entirely alone and could not bring himself to return to Bristol a failure. His sufferings were aggravated by a dose of gonorrhea—the “issue” referred to in Ackroyd’s account.

If losing one patron leaves the fictive Chatterton unruffled, losing his virginity makes him “stand in perplexity,” worried over “some issue” he has got from his encounter with the “fair mistress of the house, Mrs. Angell” (194). His friend Daniel recommends that he take “arsenic and opium mixed together,” also known as “the London kill-or-cure.” This, Dan assures him, is “the speediest removal in the world” (194). Little does Chatterton suspect that he, and not the “clap,” will be soon removed from the world. A later exchange—“Your servant, sir,” “And yours, sir”—punctuated by Chatterton’s bowing to Mr. Cross, the apothecary from whom he procures arsenic and opium, also foreshadows Chatterton’s death (197). These reminders of mortality are the more poignant because of the poet’s vulnerable condition. Even his *joie de vivre* can be understood in the light of the imminent threat of dying. Dressed like a “gentleman of substance” and filled with a “fierce energy,” the young poet goes out to buy “enough” of the drugs recommended by Daniel to give him relief from stomach cramps (195). The druggist, modeled on the actual person with the same fitting name, Thomas Cross, warns the young man about the “curious combination” made by the two substances—one enhancing life’s flame, the other burning it slowly (196).²⁴ Asked if he knows of the Prussian gentleman “seven doors from here” who died of “arsenic convulsions,” Chatterton laughs off his concern: I have no such intentions as

the gentleman you speak of . . . I am at war with the grave, and have no desire to be vanquished by it. Not yet. I am just beginning, you see” (197). The druggist’s question—“But to take one’s own life, is it not irrational?”—elicits the same response that Chatterton put forth in a short prose piece, “The Unfortunate Fathers,” published in January 1770. In it, the hero, before taking his life, leaves a note for his father insisting on the legitimacy of suicide in spite of religious beliefs:

There is a principle in man . . . which constitutes him in the image of God. [...] if a man acts according to this regulator, he is right, if contrary to it, he is wrong. As I can reconcile suicide with this principle, with me it is consequently no crime. Suicide is sometimes a noble insanity of the soul: and often the result of a mature and deliberate approbation of the soul. If ever a crime, it is only so to society: there indeed it always appears an irrational emotion: but when our being becomes dissocial, when we neither assist nor are assisted by society, we do not injure it by laying down our load of life. (CW1: 445-446)

Similarly, in Ackroyd’s account, Chatterton refers to suicide as “a noble insanity of the soul. The soul is released by death, after all, and takes its proper shape.” Echoing the last words in the passage quoted above, Chatterton tells Mr. Cross: “When we neither assist nor are assisted by society, we do not injure it by laying down our own load of life” (197). Suicide was also the subject of an earlier short poem, “Sentiment,” Chatterton wrote the same year, a poem whose last lines Ackroyd uses as epigraph to this section: “Tho’ varied is the Cause the Effect’s the same / All to one common Dissolution tends.” Interestingly enough, “[n]early all of Chatterton’s suicidal writings associate that act with his father’s death and to a lesser extent with the death of his brother.” His Will, written on 14 April, the date of Giles’s death, instructs that his own body ‘be interred in the Tomb of my Fathers’” (Kaplan 229).²⁵

Chatterton’s interaction with a “cadaverous pale man” he meets on his way to the office of *The Town and County* foregrounds the constructedness of the self and reality, their discursive and performative nature. The man is standing on one leg with a sign propped up beside him that reads, “The Posture Master. Extraordinary Exhibitions of Postures and Feats of Strength” (202). By turns, he assumes the postures showing the letters making up the word “you.” Pointing at

Chatterton, the trickster lets out a rhetorical question: “And what do these human symbols form but YOU, sir! You! You!” Although laughing at this, Chatterton “for some reason is afraid” (203). He proceeds to imitate the trickster, who then says in a low voice, “You are a mad boy indeed” (203). But, as already seen, Chatterton “does not like to be called a boy,” nor does he think of himself as “so mad” to be pitied by one such as the posture master. He would much rather be called a “proud one,” “as proud as Lucifer,” for that means he will be remembered (203).

Equally rich in implications is Chatterton’s identification with an idiot boy he sees in one of the rundown houses along Great Wild Street. Recalling the stories he has heard of deformed children abandoned by their parents, Chatterton wonders whether the children did not “become like the city itself—brooding, secret, invulnerable” (210). For a moment, the boy, who appears “undefended against this harsh world,” awakens Chatterton to the painful truth of his own situation as the inhabitant of a world filled with misery and suffering: “When I first came to London I thought I had entered a new age of miracles, but these stinking alleys and close packed tenements seem to breed only monsters. Monsters of our own making . . .” (211). This dark realization is fleeting, however, for by this point, Chatterton has persuaded himself that he has “a different world to win”: the world of fame, which he will acquire by writing verses that “shall kill or cure” (205). Everything in Chatterton’s life has gravitated towards the moment of his “bright” vision: “My syllables, the remnants of antiquity / Will come back as shadows for posterity” (216).

The words “posterity” and “antiquity” are ringing in Chatterton’s head as he stumbles home from the Tothill-Pleasure Gardens, where Ackroyd shows him spending the evening drinking to his future. Back in his tiny garret, Chatterton toasts first Dan Hanway, “the first witness of my genius and first prophet of my fame,” then Mrs. Angell for “ridding him of a shameful virginity,” and last the posture master, “for showing me an emblem of the world” (223). He then remembers to take his “kill or cure,” but in his drunken state, he has forgotten the measures prescribed by the druggist. His body is found the next day severely convulsed, the floor

littered with fragments of manuscript. The rendition of Chatterton's final moments signals a return to the lyrical mode of representation, as vividly illustrated by the images of flight and descent. In his "opium dream," Chatterton is "flying into the church and seeing for the first time its vast spaces," along with his monk, Thomas Rowley, "raising his hands to greet him; they stare at each other across the vast distance, and in the eternity of that look the light between them burns and decays" (233). In the next paragraph, Chatterton is shown "falling, into the nave of the church where distant figures"—the idiot boy, the posture-master, the Tothill whore, the pot-boy of Shoe Lane, and the druggist are all "bearing gifts" and reaching out to him, while "he waits with his arms outstretched" (233). He salutes each one in turn before calling to them "across the infinite abyss": "We poets in our youth, begin in gladness, but thereof come in the end despondency and madness" (233). His last thought is that he "will not wholly die." The next morning, Chatterton is found "still smiling" (234).

The novel enacts Chatterton's death scene thrice: first as reconstructed by Wallis in his famous Pre-Raphaelite painting; second, as replicated by Charles at the moment of his death, which finds him stretched out in beatific repose, just as in Wallis's painting; and finally as reimagined by Ackroyd, who replaces the historical account of Chatterton's suicide²⁶ with a tragic story of youthful naiveté and death by accidental drug overdose. Amy J. Elias has referred to this section as a "postmodern updating of Dorian Gray," in which Ackroyd puns on the "poststructuralist redefinition of 'self' as 'subject' (in this case, self as the subject of art) and the old poststructuralist claim about the 'death of the author'" (140). Here death serves as a promise of cultural resurrection, for the dead Chatterton lives on in the art object. He "literally becomes a text (a picture and a story)" (140). In the world of Ackroyd's fiction, Chatterton is dying "not with the grimace produced by the effects of the arsenic, but with the smile that both Wallis and *now Ackroyd bestow* on him. He has entered the free play of art, the web of language" (Finney 261).

After Charles's death, Harriet takes the "Portrait of the Unknown Man" to Cumberland and Maitland's art gallery, where she finds out that it is a fake. As Stewart Merk, the expert Seymour faker, begins to reconstruct it, he realizes that the painting merely disguises other pictures behind it. He tries to remove the successive layers of paint, with the result that the whole portrait melts but not before revealing a whole gallery of faces in a way that recalls the effect produced by the picture of Dorian Gray: "The face of the sitter dissolved, becoming two faces, one old and one young . . . until after a few moments they had entirely disappeared" (228). The artist has survived in his work: "Within a few minutes nothing remained: except, curiously enough, certain letters from the titles of the books which now hovered in an indeterminate space" (228). As Ackroyd suggests, this painting too was "infused" with the spirit of Chatterton, a spirit that came to possess Charles's spirit. In Onega's reading, Chatterton's "true" portrait can only be one made up of the "combined faces of the strong poets of the past whose identity he has helped to create in the same way that they have helped to create him, thus revealing its condition of transhistorical palimpsest" (72). This is the vision Charles has on his visit to the Tate Gallery when, looking at the Wallis portrait of Meredith posing as Chatterton, he feels himself to be Chatterton, lying on his garret bed (132).

Charles also lives on, as Edward understands when he revisits Wallis's painting in the Tate Gallery, and in Chatterton's place on the garret bed sees his dead father instead, his hand reaching for him, beckoning him into the past (229). Then Edward realizes "he was staring at the reflection of his own face in the glass, just in the place where his father's face had been" (230).²⁷ Furthermore, Charles's death and the exposure of the forgery of Chatterton's papers bring home to Philip the importance of "what Charles imagined," and of imagination in general. "The imagination never dies" (232). The force of this quasi-Wildean slogan permeates both *The Last Testament* and *Chatterton*—two novels that enshrine the "supreme reality" of art whose "truth" lies outside time and place, even as they render "both problematic and provisional any such desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination" (Hutcheon, *Postmodern* 31).

In a postmodern sense, then, “there is no truth to tell,” as Ackroyd made clear when, discussing his massive biography of Charles Dickens (1991), he said that, “because Dickens was such a large figure, such an amorphous figure, he takes whatever shape you want him to take” (McGrath 46). The “shape” Dickens takes in Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*—the novel I turn to next—is in part the result of Carey’s sustained interrogation of the cultural and political underpinnings of Dickens’s realist practice, especially with regard to his portrayal of Abel Magwitch in *Great Expectations*. The allegory of exploitation implicit in the relationship between Tobias Oates (Dickens’s textual double) and the eponymous hero of his work in progress “The Death of Jack Maggs,” raises unsettling questions about the morality and sincerity of the novelist. As such, *Jack Maggs* takes its place among postmodern author fictions that provocatively engage with issues of language and identity, history and memory, power and representation.

Notes

¹ After *Hawksmoor*, *The Last Testament*, and *Chatterton*, Ackroyd’s characteristic blending of genres and voices, styles and registers has continued in his other novels, particularly *English Music* (1992), *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993), and *Milton in America* (1996), carrying over into his non-fiction works, which include *Ezra Pound and His World* and biographies of T.S. Eliot, Charles Dickens, William Blake, and, more recently, William Shakespeare.

² Joseph Cottle conclusively established—in the Southey-Cottle edition of 1803 and later in Malvern Hills, 1829—that Thomas Rowley was Chatterton’s invention.

³ In the latter, Wilde held that, “Lying and poetry are arts—art, as Plato, saw, not unconnected with each other—and they require the most careful study” (972).

⁴ Ackroyd is reported to have said that he prepared to write *The Last Testament* by immersing himself in Wilde’s writings and reading “books and newspapers of the period” (Leivick). The fictional journal also includes newspaper cuttings from Wilde’s lecture tour of the United States

(95-96) and a reproduction of his deathbed talk, taken down by Maurice Gilbert (184-185) from 26 November 1900 until his death on 30 November 1900.

⁵ Alison Hennegan develops this theatrical metaphor further: “Wilde, in the theater, had ‘tried’ and frequently found guilty a society which he longed to conquer, yet basically despised. Wilde, in court, was tried and found guilty by that same society which had for fifteen years found him both fascinating and fearful” (188).

⁶ Wilde’s greatest public humiliation occurred, as he recounted in *De Profundis*, on a railway station where he was jeered by a crowd while being taken from one prison to another (183).

⁷ Wilde’s adversities echo the curse on the Biblical outcast. “Wilde saw himself as a romantic and a damned tragic hero,” a Wanderer (or also Wandering Jew) whose punishment is “to wander forever, accursed and rejected by all” (Onega 35).

⁸ According to George Gregory, Chatterton “knew that original genius consists of forming new and happy combinations rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which never had occurred before” (lxxii). Browning’s “Essay on Chatterton” reinforces this point: “Genius almost invariably begins to develop itself by imitation. It has, in the short-sightedness of infancy, faith in the world: and its object is to compete with, or prove superior to, the world’s already recognized idols, at their own performances and by their own methods” (111).

⁹ Before his marriage to Jane Elgee, Sir William Wilde had fathered three illegitimate children, a son and two daughters. Richard Ellmann attributes Oscar Wilde’s concern with “foundlings, orphans, and mysteries of birth” in his works to his experience of his father’s extended family and argues that, “discovering who they really are is the pursuit of most of Wilde’s characters” (13).

¹⁰ London figures prominently in all of Ackroyd’s novels except *First Light* (1989), both as a physical location (especially in its seamy side) and as an imaginative arena of, or for, the past (Leivick). The city receives a powerful tribute in *London: The Biography* (2000).

¹¹ In “The Decay of Lying,” Vivien praises Balzac for having created life, instead of copying it. “His characters,” she says, “have a kind of fervent fiery-colored existence” (65).

¹² As Onega has noted, Harriet characteristically misquotes the Chorus’s Epilogue in Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* and Sarah corrects her, but instead of admitting her mistake, the novelist retorts with another misquotation, this time, the last two lines in stanza seven from Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence” (1807), where Chatterton is referred to as the “the marvelous boy” (60).

¹³ Chatterton suffered a fate very different from that of his fellow literary impostors, Horace Walpole, among them. Walpole was the first to detect and condemn Chatterton’s forgeries in April 1769, although he himself was, in a sense, guilty of the same charge. Five years earlier he had published his Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*, which he claimed was a translation from an old Italian manuscript. Given the novelty of this work, in both form and content, Walpole chose to conceal his authorship so as to guard against possible criticism and ridicule. The same had held true of James MacPherson, who had published *Fragments of Poetry Translated from the Gaelic and Erse Languages* (1760). For similar reasons, and “with some of the disinterest of the true artist” (Lindop 12), Chatterton claimed to be merely the discoverer and editor of a medieval monk.

¹⁴ This grotesque, Dickensian character has been identified as a direct descendent of Dan Leno, the great pantomime dame, comic, and music-hall star, who died in London on 31 October 1904 (Onega 63).

¹⁵ As a child, Wilde too was “fascinated by solitude” (18); the object of his solitary quest was St. Patrick’s Cathedral—his “first intimation of the terrible consolations of the religious life” (Ellmann 18).

¹⁶ The picture’s title alludes to another one of the mysteries of Chatterton’s life and death. When no family member appeared to identify his body, it was taken to the Shoe Lane Workhouse and placed in a pauper’s grave.

¹⁷ This is similar to the discovery within the novel that the painter Seymour's assistant, Merk, has painted all of Seymour's last pictures. As already indicated, Chatterton's own posthumous fame hinges on the Romantic poets' idealization of him well as on Henry Wallis's portrait.

¹⁸ Chatterton's alleged memoir alludes to the close relationship he developed with his mother, who lived by keeping a 'dame-school' and taking in sewing: "In the evenings, I would sit with her, and twine my Arms around her neck, as she told me old stories by the Fire" (82).

¹⁹ Brian Finney has pointed out the anachronistic reference to the fourth line from the end of *The Waste Land*: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins"—employed by Ackroyd to "underscore the difference between the Romantic cult of 'Genius' and the modernist sense of a self in ruins" (254).

²⁰ Art and life become necessarily entangled with one another, and "Wallis's representation of Meredith as dead carries a prophetic force that leads to the real death of his marriage to Mary" (Finney 258).

²¹ In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," Wilde praises Meredith for his "large," "varied," and "imaginatively true" view of life (45).

²² This bears comparison with Lily's reflections on the inadequacy of language to convey thought: "The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low" (TTL 178).

²³ Compare this with his "professed love for Wilkes, whom he so easily labels a treasonous Pretender Patriot, or his adoration of Beckford . . . and yet whose death makes the poet gladder by three pounds, thirteen shillings" (Kaplan 179).

²⁴ Thomas Cross was said to have cautioned Chatterton against "the too free use" of calomel and vitriol (qtd. in Kaplan 193). These drugs, however, were not typically suggested for an uncomplicated gonorrhoea. Rather, they were "among the more drastic remedies" for syphilis, "an infection which was far more likely to provoke thoughts of suicide, especially in a proud man like

Chatterton” (Kaplan 209). Whether Chatterton contracted the commonplace gonorrhea or the dread disease syphilis remains open to question.

²⁵ This has led Kaplan to argue that Chatterton’s suicide was triggered by the melancholia to which his life as a fatherless boy predisposed him (229).

²⁶ Hunger, poverty, loneliness, and failure to realize his dreams of fame have so far been deemed “abundant motive for the poet’s fate,” without the “gonorrhea theory” (Meyerstein 442). For “the most popular legend,” according to which Chatterton was driven to suicide for lack of actual nourishment, see Kaplan 222-23.

²⁷ From a Bloomian perspective, these visions suggest that Charles “has succeeded in adding his face and name to the composite portrait of strong poets in the English literary tradition” (Onega 72).

CHAPTER V
THE “CROOKED BUSINESS” OF STORYTELLING:
AUTHORSHIP AND CULTURAL REVISIONISM IN PETER CAREY’S *JACK MAGGS*

“Migod, there is no one more dangerous than the storyteller.”

(Doctorow 65)

Peter Carey’s engagement with Charles Dickens and *Great Expectations* in *Jack Maggs* (1997) bespeaks a contemporary sensibility, postmodern and postcolonial alike, that aligns it with recent revisionings of canonical European texts by writers from the former British colonies in the period since 1945. One such text that comes immediately to mind is Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which retells *Jane Eyre* from the postcolonial perspective of the madwoman in the attic, thus drawing attention to the ways in which Charlotte Brontë’s novel inscribes the discourse of empire. In composing *Jack Maggs*, Carey was motivated by a similar goal: to supply the suppressed point of view of Abel Magwitch, the transported convict and secret benefactor of Pip from Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. As the Australian writer maintained in an interview with Ramona Koval, Dickens’s classic text encourages you to “take the British point of view. And with that view, you love Pip, he’s your person, and so suddenly Magwitch is this dark terrible Other” (2). By shifting the focus from the Eurocentric to the antipodean perspective, from Pip (here Henry Phipps) to Magwitch (here Maggs), Carey allows for the colonized other to take control of his story, even as he is subject to the tales and inventions of others. The result is a profoundly sympathetic portrayal of a man who endures many hardships, first in England and then in the penal

colony, at the hands of the British Crown, but manages to retain his humanity and regain a sense of belonging.

More than that, in *Jack Maggs* Carey takes the rewriting process one step further, for not only is he re-imagining Dickens's fictional creation, but he also converts its author into a character, Tobias Oates, who is and is not Dickens. The story of Tobias Oates invites intriguing parallels with the documented biography of Dickens, which, as indicated in a note prefacing the novel, Carey takes the liberty to transform "to suit his own fictional ends." Carey confessed that because Dickens "knew the truth but distorted it," it took him "a long time to complicate that character and to stop being hard on him and to love him a little" (2). But what is "the truth" that Carey is after, and exactly how did Dickens distort it? This question bears further scrutiny, especially in light of the author's disclaimer quoted above and of the postmodern suspicion of truth, history, and objectivity.

As much as it harks back to Dickens and the carnivalesque world of his fiction, with its urban realism and interpenetration of competing discourses, *Jack Maggs* tells a distinctly Aussie story: for, as Carey put it, "it is such an Aussie story that this person who has been brutalized by the British ruling class should then wish to have as his son an English gentleman, and that no matter what pains he has, what torture he has suffered, that would be what he would want." While hoping that this story reflects "the Australia of the past, not the Australia of the future," Carey also concedes the impossibility of fully knowing the past. His Dickensian pastiche feels to Carey like "a science fiction of the past in a way. None of us has been there. We have a lot of received opinion and it's intimidating to write because there are all these experts, but we don't really know" ("Interview" 2).

To be sure, *Jack Maggs* attests to the unflagging desire for knowledge of the past that informs a late 20th century category of fiction known as the metahistorical novel, or to use a term

coined by Amy J. Elias, the “metahistorical romance,” in which the “virtuality” of the past accounts for the difficulty of recreating the emotional and psychological reality of another time. The conflation of personal memory and cultural consciousness forces readers to reconsider the meaning and significance of history, which, as Elias explains, for the postmodern, post-traumatic, metahistorical imagination, is “something we know we can’t learn, something we can only desire” (xviii).¹ Although stylistically more conventional than other postmodern metahistorical texts, such as Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*, or Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*, *Jack Maggs* shares with these a treatment of the past as a textual construct under constant revision, scrutiny, and interrogation. Carey’s latest novel, *The History of Kelly Gang*, also about a convict in 19th century Australia, takes its epigraph from William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is not dead. It is not even past.” This notion of the continuity between past and present operates in *Jack Maggs*, where the narrative moves backward and forward in time, forcing us to examine the present in light of the remembered past, and that past in light of the present. Writing out of an antipodean consciousness, Carey insists that man can neither disavow the past nor evade the present, which carries within it not only the inescapable burden of the past but also the possibilities and responsibilities of the future.

Jack Maggs makes the reader acutely aware not only of the “constructedness” of the past, but of creativity as well, since the novel thematizes appropriation as its chief *modus operandi*.² Within the novel’s intertextual framework, neither Dickens’s version of the convict’s story, nor Maggs’s own account of his experience of exile, nor certain biographical facts about Dickens himself can escape fictionalization. Both intertextuality and metafiction figure heavily in *Jack Maggs*, creating a narrative hybrid in which art spills over into life, fiction into history, to the point where they become almost indistinguishable, calling into question what ultimately comprises history. Like Dickens, Carey is a highly self-conscious, experimental writer who is stretching the

range and power of the novel form to explore the increasingly complex sense of the self within Victorian society.

In what follows, I start from the premise that Carey's dramatization of the workings of human consciousness and memory cannot be conceived apart from his inquiry into the practice and values of fiction making.³ As I argue, Carey's revisionist undertaking in *Jack Maggs* exposes the political and cultural stakes of an ideology of authorship that operated selectively, in complicity with the imperial ideology of his time, and in the service of both the "material interests and cultural capital of writers" (Deane 50). In order to explore the tensions inherent in Dickens's realist practice and in the construction of the authorial self, I have found it useful to divide my essay into three sections, although these tend to overlap and merge into one another. First I take up a series of critical arguments that reconsider the traditional description of the realist novel as the chief agent of the moral imagination and implicitly the view of Dickens as a "sympathetic friend" (Deane xiii) to characters and readers alike. In Carey's novel, as we will see, Dickens's textual double comes across as a detached, almost scientific compiler of facts about Jack Maggs, whom he regards as a case study, rather than a friend. Looking at Maggs, Oates reflects that he himself "would be the archeologist of this mystery; he would be the surgeon of his soul" (54). His anxious fascination with penetrating the "Criminal Mind" through mesmeric experiments is exposed as a bid for power instead of a means to make the other "less other," so to speak, by acknowledging his loss and suffering. Then I turn to Maggs's personal history, which Carey intends for us to see as both the embodiment of the truth suppressed by Dickens's narrative and yet another interpretation of a traumatic past. Finally, I will probe the intersections between Oates and Dickens's life stories, and tease out the ethical and psychological ramifications of the "crooked business" in which Oates is embroiling Maggs.

Dickens, Carey, and the Ethics of Storytelling

“Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and beginning of morality.”

(Ian McEwan)

From his early short stories to *My Life as a Fake*, Carey has demonstrated the power of words to name reality, but also transfigure it; to alter consciousness, but also imprison it in the house of fiction. This interest in the deceptive as well as liberating power of storytelling Carey maintains throughout *Jack Maggs*, which can be read as a reflection upon the creative process itself and upon the rights and moral responsibilities of writers. Margaret Atwood confides that being a writer “is not always a particularly blissful or fortunate role to find yourself saddled with, and it comes with a price; though, like many roles, it can lend a certain kind of power to those who assume the costume” (5). But, she adds, “the costume varies,” determined as it is by “other people’s biases” about, or expectations of, writers. Dickens’s wide popular appeal, however, seems to justify Nicola Bradbury’s assertion that:

By accident and by design, Dickens effectively determined the shape, pace, structure, and texture of his own novel form, and developed both professional expectations of the writer and reader in the production and reception of his work. He made the novel what it was for the Victorians, creating and managing an appetite for fictions that would in turn make both imaginative and social demands. (152)

Dickens regarded literature as a noble and serious endeavor—“a perpetual struggle after an expression of the Truth, which is at once the pleasure and the pain in the lives of us workers of the arts” (qtd. in Lettis 95-96). What counts as truth for Dickens is not so much what is historically verifiable, but rather “what takes shape in the mind”—the use that the imagination makes of real-

life experiences (Lettis 194). A remark that Dickens made about a prisoner entering jail, and that applies to Maggs too, suggests that reality, for the mind, is always in flux: “His [the prisoner’s] confinement is a hideous vision; and his old life a reality.” But as time passes, “the world without has come to be the vision, and this solitary life, the sad reality” (194). And so it is not the experience of the convict, but rather “the story about him,” that creates truth for Dickens.⁴ By the same token, an accurate expression of this truth depends on one’s willingness to “de-center,” to enter other stories, however terrifying, and assume their perspectives. The question arises, was Dickens able to fully live up to this ideal, and, if not, what might account for his (partial) failure? Dickens was indeed able to create an enormous variety of characters, many of them very different from himself, and to give a plausible account of their consciousness. Since a closer examination of Dickens’s actual method of creating characters will be offered in the next section of my essay, here I will dwell on Dickens’s characterization of Abel Magwitch and Carey’s response to it.

Within Dickens’s fiction we sense the driving force of a passionate, life-affirming energy, compounded equally of mind and body, of feeling and thought. John Bowen defines this ethical dimension of Dickens’s writing in terms of an “opening to difference and to the other” that is not limited to compassion, that “does not eschew or fear emotion—no, not tears or rage, or anything” (30). Along the same lines, Grahame Smith claims that Dickens “could only have created Magwitch out of a love that enabled him to enter systematically into a life completely foreign to his own, at which he may just have glimpsed during the worst moments of the blacking factory episode” (6). The well-known “Autobiographical Fragment” written for John Forster in 1847 recounts Dickens’s one-year (or nearly so) stint at Warren Blacking Factory, a shoe-polish warehouse, in 1824. This painful, humiliating episode had a lasting impact on Dickens’s life and art, serving to explain the harsh view of parents that permeates his fiction and that was not lost on Carey. “As with other aspects of his personal experience,” the episode is “objectified and

transformed by Dickens into a comprehensive artistic vision of a parentless, above all, a fatherless, world” (6-7).

One of Dickens’s famous statements concerning the blacking factory experience helps to explain his preoccupation with the themes of alienation and betrayal: “I do not write resentfully or angrily: for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am: but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back” (Forster I. 2). In Carey’s novel, these themes resonate throughout Maggs’s account of his childhood: the foster mother who criminalizes Maggs bears the name Ma Britten, an unmistakable variation on Mother Britain, the country that brutalizes and ultimately rejects Maggs as a delinquent other. As Maggs’s employer, Percy Buckle, tells Oates in relation to his own sister who was also transported to Australia, “God help us all, that Mother England would do such a thing to one of her own” (89). Carey’s novel makes irresponsible parenting symbolic of the lack of sustenance offered by the “mother country” to its dependencies.

Like Dickens, Carey has invested his quirky, inventive fiction with an urgent moral purpose: “I have made a whole career out of making my anxieties get up and walk around, not only in my own mind but in the minds of readers” (qtd. in Pierce 181-82). Carey also believes that a writer’s responsibility is “to imagine what it is to be others. It’s an act of empathy, and it’s not only what we do, it’s a socially useful act to imagine oneself to be other than one is” (qtd. in Koval). Hence, his passion for stating the case of the marginalized, which he does so compellingly in *Jack Maggs*, without lapsing into sentimentality.

Dickens’s humane concern with the fate of the downtrodden cannot be questioned. His philanthropic activity, polemic journalism, speeches, and fiction, testify to his genuine interest in their suffering and to his “great desire,” which “was not merely to communicate but to commune with his readers” (Lettis 141). Both the serialization of his work and the public readings late in his

career kept Dickens closer to his readers, whom he addressed for more than just profit. “No one thinks first of Mr. Dickens as writer,” explained a critic in the *North American Review*. “He is at once, through his books, a friend” (qtd. in Deane 28). Dickens’s strong impact as a reader of his works has been compared to the influence exerted by the mesmeric operator on his subjects. Reaching out to his audiences, Fred Kaplan writes, Dickens was “like a mass mesmerizer, exploring and expanding himself through imposing himself and his own vision on others” (118). “Imposing” is a key word here, alerting us to the manipulative aspect of the writer’s communicative process. If communication is one-sided, the desired communion with the audience would seem impossible to achieve.

Dickens’s relationship to his audience was in fact as complicated as that to his characters and, more generally, to the society he lived in. As a man of his time, Dickens neither fought openly against society’s conventions nor allowed himself to be mastered by them. Smith marshals convincing evidence suggesting that, “Dickens came to see himself as peripheral” to the society whose abuses he relentlessly criticized, “although he continued to regard himself as of the center in relation to the ever increasing popular, if not always critical, appeal of his work.” Wealth and fame aligned Dickens with the power structures, whereas his refusal to buy land apparently excluded him from these. His role as “an insider-outsider” to the economy of the empire links Dickens, on the one hand, with Pip, the London gentleman, and, on the other, with Magwitch, the “black slave” of the English class system. More precisely, “the link between Magwitch and Dickens is clear, not only in their self-created riches, but in their ownership, the one of a “brought-up” gentleman, the other of a fictional character (Smith 51). Carey, we will see later, uses the trope of “ownership” to foreground the possession of secrets, in addition to wealth, as a determining factor in the power dynamics between the writer figure and the eponymous hero.

For Carey, as for other writers and critics, Dickens's interrogation of Englishness was undermined by his middle-class position. Without denying that "more than his predecessors and contemporaries in the English novel," Dickens strove "to give voice to the silent oppressed," Brian Cheadle observes that Dickens "was anything but a radical reformer, and in standing up for fellow-feeling and common humanity he looked to promote social change very much on middle-class terms" (103). Dickens's perception of colonial Australia reinforces this claim. Robert Hughes's impressive account of Australia's felon origins, and the "long" history of their "sublimation," purports to show that

The idea of the 'convict stain' dominated all arguments about Australian selfhood by the 1840s and was the main rhetorical figure used in the movement to abolish transportation. Its leaders called for abolition, not in the name of an independent territory, but as Britons who felt their decency impugned by the survival of convictry. (xi-xii)

Dickens was among the reformers who opposed transportation on both moral and economic grounds. Along with journalist Samuel Sidney, philanthropist Caroline Chisholm, and writers Harriet Martineau and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, he shared the belief that Australia could become a "pastoral Arcadia" by way of yeoman emigration. This idealized view of life in the colonies ignored, however, the harsher realities of "drought, fire, and flood" that often confronted the farmers (Hughes 557-58). It also masked "the distaste verging on dread with which some middle-class Englishmen [Dickens included] viewed the transported convict 'making good' in exile" (585). Both these perceptions informed Dickens's ambivalent portrayal of Magwitch as a demonic figure bent on revenge, "capable of redemption" as long as he never returned to England. Suffering "warped" Magwitch—as it did other convicts—into a "permanent" outsider (586). Along the same lines, John Bayley, sees the terror the returned Magwitch unleashes in Pip as deriving from the fear of being possessed by another, and calls this "the direst threat Dickens's unconscious

knows” (93). This certainly seems to be the case with Tobias Oates, whose fascination with the other’s “Criminal Mind” turns gradually into fear and ultimately into repulsion.

It can be argued, of course, that such a warped view of the other, as well as the anxiety attendant upon it, was inescapable within the emerging capitalist system of Victorian England. Nor could it be resisted, except partially, given that “the racist inequities of the colonial periphery were inaccessible to metropolitan experience” (Cheadle 103). The reality of these contemporary ills looms large in Maggs’s chronicle of his victimization, resurfacing during the hypnotic sessions orchestrated by Oates. To the extent that Carey’s narrative is concerned with foregrounding this grim reality, with seeking out and articulating the hidden/the repressed, its aim is to restore the truth, or at least test it through imaginative methods. As the arguments reviewed above indicate, this was a truth that Dickens may or may not have fully known, but that he too pursued. To put it in Elias’s terms, the meta-historical consciousness in Carey’s novel aligns itself with the consciousness of the Other, confronting the Self with the nightmare of history in which the Self too is implicated. At one point in the narrative, Maggs admits to a “strange thing”: the “Phantom” that has been haunting his dreams was planted inside him by no one but Oates himself, who had claimed the power to be the “surgeon” of the convict’s soul. A metaphor for the otherness embedded in the English psyche, the “Phantom” remains—for both Oates and Maggs—a terrifying presence up until the latter decides to leave England and return to New South Wales for good.

Speaking of phantoms, in telling the story of a story—the writing of *Great Expectations*—Carey too is conjuring up ghosts—of the author, of his literary artifact, and of his characters—all made strange even as they seem familiar. In his will, Dickens implored—the actual verb he used is the archaic “conjure”—his friends “on no account to make me the subject of any monument, memorial, or testimonial whatever” (qtd. in Bowen 30). Writing is granted as “a free gift,” for which remembrance is the only form of “repayment.” This injunction, Bowen correctly remarks,

places readers in “a double bind,” as these are expected “both to memorialize and not to memorialize Dickens’s writing and name” (31). *Jack Maggs* registers the force and significance of Dickens’s name and writing—Carey’s indebtedness to Dickens—at the same time that it makes the latter responsible for a “debt” implicit in his distortion of the truth about Magwitch.

The Purloined Story

“Look back, and the past becomes a story. The fixed shadowy shapes begin to move again, and make new patterns in the memory, some familiar, some strange.”

(Richard Holmes 3).

Jack Maggs is most impressive for its creative energy, which issues forth in the proliferation and interaction of story lines, modes, tones, styles, rhythms, and voices—all able to inscribe as well as challenge and destabilize different ideological positions. James Bradley has described the text’s multi-layered structure as a “kind of fictional double gambit,” in which “the story-telling process is twice internalized, by the novelist, Tobias Oates, and the narrator of the novel (or more accurately meta-novel)” (2). Among the novel’s stories within stories, the most obvious are Maggs’s own account of his victimization and Oates’s drafts of his planned novel. In *Jack Maggs* Carey imagines the sources for novelist Tobias Oates’s creation of his 1860 novel, *The Death of Jack Maggs*, which he abandons in 1837—the year when *Oliver Twist* was published—to take it up again in 1859. The fictive date of publication corresponds to that of Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (serialized between 1860 and 1861 in *All the Year Round*).

Carey furnishes readers with a context drawn from Dickens's personal life as well as from early Victorian England—both intimately informing Dickens's work and art. London comes alive with the specificity of Dickens's own graphic evocation of the smells, textures, tastes, sounds, and feel of the metropolis, from its stylish houses to its back lanes and snuggeries. Carey's novel is more explicit, however, in its presentation of gritty details, of squalor and sexuality, than Dickens's. The narrative opens in April 1837, when Maggs, who had been deported as a criminal at an early age, returns to London in secret and at great risk, to seek out the son he surreptitiously adopted many years before. Like Magwitch, Maggs has devoted his life to raising a simple "orphan" out of poverty and into the life of a gentleman. Unlike Dickens, who leaves the source of Magwitch's fortune ambiguous, Carey makes it clear that Maggs's wealth was hard-won (the result of brick making). Finding Phipps's house empty, he takes employment next door in the household of Percy Buckle, a former grocer turned gentleman. During his first day as a footman, he is struck by an excruciating attack of pain, which one of the dinner guests, Tobias Oates, claims he can treat through animal magnetism.

In the person of Oates, Carey is giving us a glimpse of Dickens's younger self, as he is rising in his literary profession. Having earned a degree of fame as the inventor of "Captain Crumley" (a variation on Mr. Pickwick) and "Mrs. Morefallen," Oates channels his ambitions into a new project, a study of the Criminal Mind. Once introduced to Maggs, the novelist feels drawn to his mysterious mind, in which he suspects lies hidden a "world as rich as London itself. What a puzzle of life exists in the dark little lane-ways of this wretched soul, what stolen gold lies hidden in the vaults beneath his filthy streets" (90). Oates persuades Maggs to allow himself to be hypnotized by offering him a deal: if the writer can, through magnetism, "sketch the beast" within Maggs, he promises to introduce Maggs to the notorious "Thief-taker," who in turn can help him

find his long lost son. From this point on, the relationship between these two “writer figures”—so different in their cultural position, yet so similar in other respects—takes center stage.

The background Carey gives Maggs is strikingly similar to that of many Dickensian protagonists: orphanhood, poverty, dreadful labor, abandonment, betrayal, social humiliation, and oppression. Lonely and vulnerable, but defiant and resilient, Maggs immediately wins our sympathy: “I am an old dog . . . who has been treated bad, and has learned all sort of tricks he wishes he never had to know” (72-73). Maggs’s self-characterization brings to mind Grahame Smith’s point about Dickens’s radicalism in his social and personal life. Much like Dickens, Maggs comes across as a man who, “rightly or wrongly, felt himself driven to desperate measures by desperate times” (Smith 15). Brutish and violent, Maggs is determined to put his life in order and record his own story, which he does by writing it backward in invisible ink. This peculiar method suggests his eagerness to simultaneously reveal and conceal his troubled past, just as he is torn between the compulsion to speak out and keep silent. “Even the lowest type of renegade,” says Oates, “has an inner need to give up the truth. [...] It is what our fathers called ‘conscience.’ We all have it. For the criminal, it is like a passion to throw himself off a high place” (28). We will see that although driven by the same need, Oates is in fact hiding the truth about his private life under a respectable camouflage, and sees nothing wrong with twisting the truth that Maggs “gives up” during the mesmeric sessions.

Maggs’s “high hope” is that the story he is so painstakingly transcribing will strike a sympathetic chord in Phipps, who will then accept Maggs for who he has become after his Australian sojourn: “I cannot bear him to think me a common criminal,” he tells Oates (228). The letters fail, however, to move the young gentleman, who instead perceives them as “harbingers of destruction,” a threat to his comfortable life. As it soon becomes clear, Phipps has no wish to meet Maggs, except to murder him in order to secure the house in Great Queen Street the latter

provisioned from afar. Weak, callous, and snobbish, Phipps eludes his benefactor's pursuit, just as the latter's dream of an idealized England becomes more and more elusive.

Jack Maggs is on many levels a novel of confinement, in which prison figures as an abusive enforcer of the law, as well as a complex metaphor for social relations and psychological life. The prison in New South Wales adds to other images of imprisonment that we encounter in the course of the novel, images that point, on the one hand, to Maggs' alienation from society and, on the other, to his struggle with himself. Maggs recalls that in his penitentiary, Silas had more freedom than he and Sophina did, continuing to "control much of our activity and to take, according to Tom, the lion's share of the profits" (213, 208). Maggs' and Sophina's confinement in the house of Ma Britten did not shelter them against dubious practices, for the rooms they were supposed to clean were those where Ma Britten performed abortions. While providing escape from such drudgery, the burglary expeditions only reinforced their imprisonment in the criminal life.

As the events unfold, it becomes less and less clear whether Maggs's criminality is inherent or the product of his environment. The question that the Judge asks of Sophina at the trial as imagined by Oates applies to Maggs too: "Do you mean that you are a thief by nature or a thief as evidenced by these charges?" (276). The criminal justice system uses these charges to demonize, dispossess, and dislocate Maggs, abandoning him to a strange land whose otherness Maggs comes to embody. This otherness is extremely unsettling, as it carries with it the memories and legacies of imperialism. Upon his return from the colony, the outcast brings with him the searing image of his brutal lashing by an officer of the Crown as well as two dark locks of hair belonging to the two sons of "Australian race."

Maggs's story presents a moving account of the convict's experience of exile in which he went with a soul steeped in history—personal and national—bearing in it many intertwined threads. For Maggs is imprisoned not merely in the harsh reality of class and colonial exploitation,

but also in a roseate fantasy of England. We sense that, as for the wanderer in Blake's poem "London," the manacles that are "mind-forged" can be far stronger than those that are externally imposed. Carey's metaphor for the human mind is the "tin box" in which Oates locks his characters' dark secrets that he extracts with his magnets and where Maggs keeps alive the memory of "England's green and pleasant land" (229, 231). Despite the losses he sustained before his deportation, when he saw his 'brother' Tom betray Silas Smith and his childhood sweetheart sentenced to be hanged, Maggs is yearning for an England that is as much remembered as it is romanticized. All of Maggs's references to his native country have an elegiac tone associated with loss, distance, and nostalgia for vanishing beauty and innocence. Underneath "the scalding sun" at Morton Bay, he used to imagine "the long mellow light of English summer" (322), his mind,

always, constructing piece by piece the place wherein his eyes had first opened, the home to which he would one day return, not the mudflats of the Thames, nor Mary Britten's meat-rich room at Pepper Alley Stairs, but rather a house in Kensington whose kind and beautiful interior he had entered by tumbling down a chimney, like a babe falling from the outer darkness into light. Clearing the soot from his eyes he had seen that which he later knew was meant by authors when they wrote of England, and of Englishmen. (322).

Maggs's dream of England, together with the vividly recalled memories of his childhood and his youthful love for Sophina Smith, have sustained him in exile, offering solace to his traumatized consciousness. He passionately identifies himself with the country that expelled him and denies any ties with those of "that race," the "Australian race," as well as the freedom awaiting him there: "I'd rather be a bad smell here than a frigging rose in New South Wells" (230).

Because Phipps is a part of the English "family" to which he feels emotionally attached, Maggs persists in his love for his foster son at the expense of his own children back in Australia. He says that he determined to "weave [Phipps] a nest so strong that no one would ever hurt his goodness" (264). He carries with him the framed portrait of the four-year old boy who has kept him alive for the past twenty-five years. Through Phipps, Maggs lives out a compensatory and

empowering dream on which he will not give up: “I am his da. He is my son. I will not abandon him” (264). This moving speech points, albeit obliquely, to the “Australian anxiety” that Peter Pierce explores in his book *The Country of Lost Children*, where he puts forth the “shocking” notion that “Australia is the place where the innocent young are most especially in jeopardy. Standing for boys and girls of European origin who strayed into the Australian bush, the lost child is an arresting figure in the history and the folklore of colonial Australia” (xi). Granted, Phipps has never been to Australia, but, as Pierce contends, the abiding force of the figure of the lost child has “deeper and darker origins and implications,” standing for the generation of its parents, representing the anxieties of European settlers because of the ties with home which they have severed upon their arrival in Australia (x).

Such protection as Maggs wants for his son is ultimately impossible because of Phipps’s own implication in the machinery of corruption. The London to which Maggs returns is no different from the London he grew up in—a hellish place that breeds crime even in the innocent.⁵ As Oates recognizes, the miniature Phipps sent to Maggs is a portrait of King George IV; interestingly enough, the Phantom haunting Maggs’s dreams also appears dressed as a soldier (Captain Logan) of the 57th Regiment who flogged Jack when he was a convict at Morton Bay. It is no coincidence then that Phipps has joined the same regiment. At one point, Maggs tells Mercy that he was flogged by a “soldier of the King,” to which the maid replies, “Then it were the King who lashed you” (318). This insight is both devastating and liberating for Maggs, who finds his dreams shattered, yet his dignity and peace of mind restored.

As Anthony Hassall points out, the recognition also releases Phipps from the “the script” his benefactor had “written for him into his own life and his preferred sexuality” (4). For years, he has been living a lie, perpetrated by his replies to Maggs’s letters:

He had known this time would come ever since that day sixteen years ago when Victor Littlehales, his beloved tutor, had rescued him from his orphanage. Now this privileged tenure was ended and he must leave his house, his silver, his rugs, his paintings. He must be a soldier. (Carey 4)

Thus, the final confrontation between the soldier and his benefactor suggests that neither “can escape without violence from the fictions which have structured their lives” (Hassall 5).

Implicit in the false ideal Maggs constructs for Phipps is the desire for revenge on the genteel society that ostracized and vilified Maggs. As in Magwitch’s case, Maggs’s generosity to Phipps is meant to show that respectability is for sale—merely another fiction. Echoing Hughes, Bradley notes that in Phipps, Maggs “has created a gentleman of his own, a living [Hughes calls it “black”] joke at the expense of the country and class that has ruined him” (3). But Maggs cannot escape fictionalization either, for not only does he become a subject of stories circulated in both the Oates household and the house in Great Queen Street where he passes himself off as a footman, but his life story is being appropriated by Oates as raw material for one of his novels. With the exception of Mercy, all the other characters stereotype Maggs in terms that reflect what Hughes refers to as the myth of the “geographical unconscious”; ironically, the same spatial metaphor figures in Oates’s own comparison of the Criminal Mind to London itself. “So,” Hughes concludes, “there was a deep ironic resonance in the way the British, having brought the Pacific at last into the realm of English consciousness, having explored and mapped it, promptly demonized Australia once more by chaining the criminals on its innocent dry coast. It was to become the continent of sin” (44).

It is this notion of the convict as a bearer of sin that Dickens apparently emphasized, and that Carey sets out to revise by presenting Maggs as more sinned against than sinning—a brutalized man, yet “full of love.” For the trials and tribulations that the convict had to suffer did not end after he had expiated his crime; indeed, the cruelties inflicted by the English have left physical as well as

psychological scars that cannot and should not be ignored: “It would not have been lost on [Oates] that Mercy Larkin’s wedding finger was blown away, and that when Jack Maggs came to her side, the pair were finally matched in deformity” (327). The twin deformities imply that Maggs’s sense of identity is intimately bound up with both England and Australia, though he finally embraces the more tolerant and hospitable culture of the latter. In the tersely narrated climax, Mercy alerts Maggs to the danger of deluding himself into thinking that Phipps is a “better class of son” (318), by which he would do to his own children what England did to him. Having awakened Maggs from his somnambulistic dream, helped him overcome alienation, and even risked her own life to save his, Mercy earns the right to become his wife and the guardian of his legacy. Together Mercy and Maggs return to the New South Wales colony, where Maggs lives a long and prosperous life, respected by the community and loved by his family.

The ending that novelist Tobias Oates has in store for Maggs is different, however, than the one envisaged by Carey. When filtered through Oates’s hungry, but largely unsympathetic imagination, Maggs’s life story follows a much darker course, as suggested by the title of his planned novel, *The Death of Maggs*. In Tobias Oates, Carey offers readers an intimate, far from flattering, portrait of Dickens as a young man and as the creator of Abel Magwitch. It is to this fictional portrait that I will turn my attention next. In revisiting some of the issues explored in the first section of my essay, I will argue that Carey’s dramatization of the novelist’s “crooked business” poignantly sets forth the moral implications of the process by which novelists create characters and use their imagination to enhance, if not reshape reality. In the context of Carey’s own recreation of one of Dickens’s fictional characters, the word reality should, of course, be enclosed within quotation marks. But even though as a postmodernist Carey questions the possibility of any solid reality behind the discourse of representation, as a postcolonial writer, he

never questions the emotional impact, the felt truth, of stories such as Magg's in which great expectations—in this case, self-definition and self-assertion—are finally realized.

The Storyteller and His “Crooked Business”

“There were, as in all crooked businesses, two sets of books, and had Jack Maggs seen the second set he might have recognized scenes (or fragments) more familiar to him: a corner of a house by London Bridge, a trampled body in a penal colony. But even here the scenes were never clear. For the writer was stumbling through the dark of the convict's past, groping in the shadows, describing what was often a mirror held up to his own turbulent and fearful soul.”

(Carey 91)

A complex tribute to England's great novelist, Carey's meta-narrative bears out the truth of John O. Jordan's statement, according to which Dickens is “also a living and ever-changing text, as important to late twentieth-century writers in the Anglophone Diaspora as he has always been for those closer to the metropolitan centers” (249). Jordan's essay focuses both on postcolonial works that feature intertextual references to Dickens, such as V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), and on more extended instances of Dickensian intertextuality, like David Allen's play, *Modest Expectations* (1990), Frederick Busch's novel *The Mutual Friend* (1978), and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Versions of Dickens that emerge from these works resurface in *Jack Maggs*, most notably, “Dickens the magical realist, haunted by scenes of violence and grotesque comedy” and “Dickens the verbal fantasist, creating the world out of language” (242). What really captivated Carey's imagination, however, was “the notion of the writer raiding, burgling the soul of his subject” (“Interview” 3). And since Jack Maggs is telling his story himself, the image of the writer as thief is juxtaposed with that of “the thief as writer.” As their stories unfold against London's dismal background, these characters' destinies intertwine, generating the

tension that provides the novel's compelling dramatic structure and enriching its tapestry of fact and fiction.

Jack Maggs is not really a novel about Tobias Oates, or even about its eponymous hero, so much as it is a novel in which these characters reveal themselves to us in all their complexity through flashbacks, action, and interaction. The novel relies on the readers' familiarity with both Dickens's *Great Expectations* and some key events from his biography that illuminate the novelist's particular sensibility. This intricate tangle of references and cross-references aligns *Jack Maggs* with other postmodern interrogations of the relationship between fact and fiction, life and work, memory and imagination. More specifically, as I demonstrate below, the "crooked business" in which Tobias Oates embroils Jack Maggs sends a cautionary message about the lengths to which writers can go in their attempt to carve out a name for themselves. Atwood's warning, that writers "can be accused of appropriating the voices of others," of exploiting the misery and misfortune of the downtrodden for [their] own gain" (119), bears directly on Oates's method of character making in *Jack Maggs*. The novel invites us to consider the question of an author's "dominion over and answerability to the personae he has called into being" (Steiner 42). "Is that dominion," George Steiner asks, "boundless or do the 'creatures' have certain rights in respect of their creator?" (42). Seen in this light, Carey's project is to restore Magwitch's claim to his inviolate inwardness, his right as a "creature" whose past, present, and future, are on a symbolic level, entangled with the history of Carey's own country. He thus indirectly holds Dickens accountable for having trampled on this particular character's freedom. At the same time, Carey reminds us that "theft"—in the sense of textual and cultural appropriation—plays an inevitable part in the creative and transformative process.

Part of Dickens's appeal for Carey concerns, on the one hand, with his social, financial, and emotional insecurities, and, on the other, with his restless energy and ambition—his eager

determination to succeed: “Having come from no proper family himself, or none that he could remember without great bitterness, he [Oates] had for all his short, determined life carried with him a mighty passion to create that safe warm world he had been denied” (36). Carey intentionally stresses Oates’s resemblance to his literary forebear—and to Jack Maggs as well—by delineating his humble beginnings and trying personal circumstances. Oates recalls how he was “forced to make his own way” in the world, “to find his feet in a city that would as soon trampled him into the mud.” An autodidact, Oates “had made himself, by will, a sorcerer of that great city”(184). Like Dickens, Oates makes his living from writing character sketches and little vignettes of London life for the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Observer*. His first achievement as a professional novelist was the tale of Captain Crumley, which parallels the launching of Dickens’s own career with the successful serialization of *The Pickwick Papers* (1837).

The emotional deprivations of his childhood—the feelings of neglect and abandonment—left indelible scars on Dickens’s consciousness and fueled an irrepressible desire to be loved. Tobias Oates also fears that “he would not be loved enough, not ever” (37). He assures Maggs that it is not hard for him to understand his feelings, for he too has a son upon whom he dotes, “as his father had never doted on him.” And because he would not have his son grow up in dreariness, or darkness,” Oates has built a relatively safe haven for him, filling his house with “books and laughter,” with “colorful rugs” and mirrors, “these last being desired for their light” (37) as well as, we suspect, for their distorting effect. This overprotective impulse, we recall, was equally strong in Maggs, who would keep Phipps, as he remembered him from years before, out of harm’s way.

Where both Maggs and Oates are concerned, emotional dysfunction stems primarily from a lack of proper father images. Oates suffers the same stigmas that Dickens felt in relation to his father, whose financial difficulties led to his imprisonment for debt.⁶ Oates tells Mary, his wife: “My father will tell any untruth to get his hands on money” (117). But he should plead guilty to the

same charge, for the deal he has cut with Maggs entails just that: telling “untruths” so that he can pay his own debts. He is in fact very confident that “[m]oney will come of it” (118). The fact that Oates sells the copyright of *The Death of Maggs* even before he has written the novel brings into focus the mercantile motif which governs both the economic and social worlds of the novel. As evidenced by the calculations in the margins of his manuscripts, “[m]oney was a subject always on his mind” (129). In only “five minutes,” Oates writes his father a “painful letter” disclaiming further responsibility for his debts, but then it takes him almost half an hour “composing a more cautious public announcement to the same effect” (177).

Oates’s deeply ambivalent attitude toward his father, while subtly mirroring that of Carey towards Dickens (his literary father), serves to explain why Oates felt compelled to turn his energy from private to public life, and from actuality to fiction. His “strongest impulse was to go where he most feared the deluge would sweep him” (197). When Oates was five years old, his father was charged with killing a man in a tavern brawl, for which he was tried at Old Bailey and condemned to death by hanging. “Toby’s earliest memories of London were still locked in that fetid little death cell, where his father sat writing, day and night, getting up petitions for his pardon” (196). From his father, Oates “inherited his habit of confronting what he feared,” a habit that fed into his writing: “He feared poverty; he wrote passionately about the poor. He had nightmares about hanging; he sought out executions, reporting them with a magistrate’s detachment.” Although Oates prides himself on his detachment, he has difficulty maintaining it. For direct exposure to the desperate conditions the writer has reported on has only “magnified” his fear of eventually drowning himself and his family into “such purgatory” (198).

Dickens’s domestic misery finds its way, much disguised, into the main subplot of Oates’s ill-fated marriage to Mary and his self-indulgent love for her sister, Lizzie Wariner. Unlike Mary, who “had little patience for either science or literature” and did not value her husband’s genius

highly (82), Lizzie looks up to Oates and understands his intellectual aspirations, even as she sees through all the tricks of his “trade” (art). Their liaison has disastrous consequences—the wasting of Lizzie’s young life and the poisoning of his marriage—that Oates realizes only too late. The date of Lizzie’s death (May 7, 1837) corresponds to the date on which Dickens’s sister-in-law Mary Hogarth died in his arms, a loss that affected him deeply and colored his fictional representations of young women. It has been speculated that Dickens felt a paternal love for Mary Hogarth, in whom he saw a symbol of all the innocent qualities he loved about childhood. He cut off a lock of her hair, took a ring from her finger, and kept all her clothes. He even requested that he be buried next to her when he died (Ackroyd 115-7).⁷ Dickens did become involved in a liaison with actress Ellen Ternan, for whom he eventually left his wife, in 1858. The rumors caused by the failure of his marriage troubled Dickens who, in the public mind, had until then been associated with family values.

In *Jack Maggs*, Oates also feels a tug of guilt and shame for the betrayal he has committed and ponders the dreadful consequences of public disclosure: “Yet once it was known that he had betrayed his wife and ruined her young sister, who would ever wish to touch a book with his name upon its spine?” (198). Hiding his doubts and unfulfilled longing beneath a veneer of popular success, the young novelist “invented a respectable life for himself: a wife, a babe, a household” (182). This precarious respectability, we will see shortly, makes Oates as vulnerable to life’s blows as Maggs. To the latter’s mind the writer did not seem “to warrant any of the excitement his name had stirred in Mercy Larkin’s imagination” (26). To Lizzie, Oates had always appeared “as fierce and fatherly, but now she saw how the mantel was too tall for him, and how he stretched to accommodate to its demands. It was a vision most profoundly discouraging, and one she wished to God she had not seen” (196). In cutting Oates down to human dimensions, Carey underscores his likeness to others and suggests that learning to accept one’s humanity may be as valuable as one’s

art. Oates has yet to learn what Dickens learnt, namely, that a mature artistic vision entails a compassionate understanding of fellow humans.

So far I have touched on two aspects of Dickens's appeal to Carey—his wrestling with personal demons and his craving for love—as they carry over into the subplot about Tobias Oates's domestic life. In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on Oates as both an embodiment of the artistic temperament in general, committed to an understanding of fiction as the artificial shaping of life, and as the practitioner of an art whose nature is exposed as morally questionable, or “crooked,” and therefore dangerous.

In his interview with Ramona Koval, Carey mentions that he discovered in his reading about Dickens that the latter was a passionate mesmerist who treated a woman called Madame Emile de la Rue for her condition called *tic douloureux*, an acute pain in the face. Indeed, widely read and self-taught in various subjects, Dickens followed with much interest the emergence of mesmerism, physiognomy and phrenology, all new sciences that offered different forms of investigating the hidden mind and cures for plagues of the nervous system.⁸ A close friend of John Elliotson, who founded the *Zoist: A Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism*, Dickens attended, in 1838, Elliotson's mesmeric demonstrations and learned how to perform such experiments himself. Mesmerism nurtured Dickens's novelistic imagination by providing him with a vehicle for exploring the human self, the origins and nature of evil, the nature and influence of power relationships between people, the uses of energy and will, reality and dreams, etc. His major experience as a mesmerist, which was strongly to influence his life and his fiction, took place in 1843, in Italy, where he met Madame de la Rue.

Several biographers—among them Johnson (541-42), Ackroyd (449-52), and Kaplan record that Madame de la Rue believed she was pursued by a phantom, a “bad spirit,” which Dickens perceived as “intimately connected with the hidden pains and anxieties of her being”

(Kaplan 86). As Kaplan observes, Dickens's speculations on the origins of the Phantom—the notion that his patient's nervous disease was "itself attacked by the inexplicable agony of the magnetism"—demonstrate "the psychological perceptiveness of Dickens the novelist, who frequently used some symbolic projection of the inner life and the imagination to represent a central illness of the spirit" (85-86). In his determination to "imprison or destroy the evil force," Dickens himself "became a surrogate for the patient, internalized her struggles, and took the Phantom as his personal enemy." Dickens feared that the power of the Phantom might reassert itself and take "horrible revenge" not only upon Madame de la Rue but on him as well "unless she gave up the mesmeric treatments" (qtd. in Kaplan 87-88). Even more remarkably, he developed an anxiety concerning her being "somehow a part of me," implying that his "patient" and her Phantom were "extensions of him" (qtd. in Kaplan 89-90). Hence the possibility that Dickens "recognized" his own "strange afflictions" in Madame de la Rue's (159).

I have dwelled on Kaplan's account of Dickens's involvement with Madame de la Rue's case because similar transferences occur between the mesmerist and his patient during their sessions together in *Jack Maggs*. To dramatize the parasitic relationship between the two, Carey draws heavily on the language and imagery of mesmerism that Dickens himself used both in his journal and fiction. Thus not only does he have Maggs suffer from the same physical pain as Madame de la Rue, but he also shows Oates attempting to cure this condition—along with its mental cause (the psychic trauma)—through what he calls "magnetic somnambulism" (27). Maggs exemplifies for Oates the mystery of psychological forces whose attraction the young novelist, much like Dickens, finds irresistible: "When he entered the soul of Jack Maggs, it was as if he had entered the guts of a huge and haunted engine. He might not yet know where he was, or what he knew, but he felt the power of that troubled mind like a great wind rushing through a broken window pane" (58). "He cannot help himself," one of Oates's servants tells Jack, explaining:

He saw your livery, and thought: There's a chap with dirty livery. Just what you would think or I would think, but Mr. Oates, he can't stop there—he's thinking, how did that fatty-spot get on his shoulder? He's wondering, in what circumstances were the stockings torn? He's looking at you like a blessed butterfly he has to pin down on his board. It is not that he hasn't got a heart. But he is an author, as I'm sure you don't need telling, and he must know your whole life story or he will die of it. (42)

These quotations vividly set forth the illuminating connection between the concerns about the workings of the hidden mind raised by mesmerism and the fascination with the process of creating character, a process driven by intuition as much as it is by conscious intent.

Oates's imaginative insight into criminal psychology, his versatile journalism, and his familiarity with court proceedings—all bring to mind Dickens and his peculiar method of collecting characters based on real-life criminals. Lizzie reflects that “Toby had always had a great affection for Characters,” i.e. “dustmen, jugglers, costers, pick-pockets,” whose histories he writes down in his chapbook. From the narrator, we learn that Oates has “much of the scientist” about him. His study is as methodically ordered as a laboratory, with everything neatly categorized and labeled. In its corners Oates “stored not only his Evidence, but also experiments, sketches, notes, his workings-up of the characters who he hoped would one day make his name, not just as the author of comic adventures, but as a novelist who might topple Thackeray himself” (44). Relishing his role as the “first cartographer” of the Criminal Mind (90), Oates “blithely” likens himself to Thackeray, whose success he is eager to emulate (91).⁹

In *Jack Maggs*, however, the writer laughing at the foibles of others becomes himself a target of satire because of the scientific pretensions underpinning his method of creating characters. As indifferent to her husband's artistic pursuits as Mary might be, she cannot help wondering why, in approaching his new subject (Maggs), he is no longer solely relying on his imagination: “You never needed magnets before. You used an ink and pen. You made it up, Toby. Lord, look at the people you made. Mrs. Morefallen. Did you need magnets to dream her up?” (118) But for Oates,

as for Dickens, mesmerism was “an example of the inventive process of the imagination” (Kaplan 90). Unlike Dickens, however, according to whom “most writers of fiction write partly from their experience, and partly from their imagination,” (qtd. in Lettis 187), Oates maintains that his business is “to imagine everything” (88). So inflamed does his imagination become with the possibilities of peering into Maggs’s soul that it preempts the subject’s lived experiences.

By deliberately neglecting the demands of verisimilitude, Oates is highlighting certain aspects of Maggs’s personal history, while obscuring others. Trapped as he is inside his own mind, in the mental chains of snobbery and pretentiousness, the writer fails, or simply refuses to see, that this history takes deep roots in both the culture of the colonized and that of the colonizer. His presumption of omniscience—“I got the rascal” (86), he triumphantly announces to Buckle—is thus deeply suspect once we realize that “everything” he ends up writing about Maggs he has “dreamed up.” Consequently, after reading the drafts of the novel which is supposedly about him, Maggs confronts the author with the fact that he actually understands “nothing” about him: “You can hoodwink me into taking off my shirt, but you don’t know a rat’s fart about me . . . You steal my Fluid but you can’t imagine who I am, you little fribble” (252).

The novel can then be read as a cautionary tale about the limitations of imaginative life, with Maggs embodying a mystery that, because it cannot be imaginatively fathomed, stands outside representation. This mystery, Carey seems to imply, can only be approached with the heart, not with the mind; in the absence of absolute truths, the only truth worth searching for is compassion. Maggs, we have seen, finds it thanks to Mercy, the young Englishwoman with a great capacity to heal and love. But Oates, who is writing about Maggs and pretending to know his innermost thoughts and feelings, must also be willing to respond to him with the fullest extent of his humanity. As Richard Holmes so wonderfully puts it, “To find your subject, you must in some sense lose yourself along the way, [you must] stray into the geography of the human heart” (iv).

In the first section of my chapter, I showed that Dickens possessed this capacity for interacting, even identifying with, rather than simply reacting to his subject matter. His preface to *A Tale of Two Cities* ensures his readers that, “I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it myself” (7). Here Dickens suggests that his work does equal justice to external and internal reality, to the world the author inhabits and to his experience of that world. We are also led to believe that his characters and situations evolved out of the depths of his consciousness, although he typically began with his experience of real people and then brought his creative imagination to bear on it.¹⁰ Describing Dickens’s essentially dramatic method of creating characters, Lettis has argued that the novelist “did not care for psychological fiction: it was the secret processes not of the mind but of the heart that he thought fiction should seek out” (61). But the first part of this statement overlooks Dickens’s interest in “the multi-layered psychological and ideological complexities” of mesmerism, the extent to which it is enmeshed in issues of power, energy, and will—three concerns that pose moral questions in that they are “potentially both destructive and constructive” (Kaplan 9, 19).

In *Jack Maggs*, Oates’s engagement in such an exercise of power and will shows little regard for moral considerations. Although claiming that “no mesmeric act on earth will have anyone perform an act against their moral temper,” and pretending to liberate Maggs from his “Phantom,” Oates is in fact itching to purloin his subject’s story for a groundbreaking study of the Criminal Mind. His true motives are commercial and his commitment self-serving. From the very beginning, the relationship between mesmerist and patient takes the form of a clash of wills, with Oates seeking to impose his mesmeric force on Maggs and the latter resisting a forfeiture of will. With each session of hypnotism, their relationship grows increasingly deceptive and exploitative. One of the first things Maggs notices about Oates is his drive to dominate: “He was edgy, almost

pugnacious, with eyes and hands everywhere about him as if he were constantly confirming his position in the world, a navigator measuring his distance from the chair, the wall, the table” (26).

Hands, and the imagery associated with them, play an important role throughout *Jack Maggs*, as they do in *Great Expectations* (chapter 83). We learn for instance that when he set out to write about Maggs, Oates

first produced a short essay on his hands, pondering . . . their history: what other hands they had caressed, what lives they had taken in anger. He began by picturing the newborn hand resting briefly on its mother’s breast, and then he sketched, in the space of four pages, the whole long story leading towards and away from that ‘hideously misshapen claw.’” (303)

Thus, by contrast with Oates’s hands, which figure as a visual correlative of manipulative power, Maggs’s “hideously misshapen claw” is an index of his marginal status as an eccentric, or colonized subject.

Taking great pride in the essay referred to above, Oates “hoarded it like a clock-maker” and set it aside for “its small part in his grand machine” (303). These words clearly reveal Oates’s problematic approach to his subject. According to Kaplan, Dickens was also “used to controlling and manipulating people, just as he was used to creating and manipulating characters in fiction” (72). But whereas he used his immense power of will “for what he assumed were beneficial and therapeutic ends” (237), Oates, while professing the same ends, is in effect misusing this power. For one thing, he is turning mesmerism into a stage show, an “Exhibition,” to which he invites his wife, his sister-in-law, Buckle, Constable, actor Henry Hawthorne, etc., who subject Maggs to intense scrutiny. Earlier, after the dinner at Buckle’s house, when Maggs pressed Constable to describe what the guests had seen and heard, Constable replied: “You were a great turn, Mr. Maggs. You were a great thrill for the gentlemen” (31). Pinned by their gaze, Maggs becomes an object of curiosity and entertainment. Lizzie, on the other hand, is genuinely moved by the

indelible marks of suffering written all over Maggs's body: "As Lizzie Warriner raised her eyes, she gasped at the sea of pain etched upon the footman's back, a brooding sea of scars, of ripped and tortured skin" (86).

"[P]ushing into the musty corridors of the Criminal Mind" at first gives Oates an exhilarating sense of discovery (91). The mesmerist believes he is in the possession of "a memory" that, like a "treasure house," he can "enter, and leave. Leave, and then return to." Oates's notion of memory reminds one of a passage from *The Confessions*, where Augustine puts forth what James Olney calls an "archeological model for memory": "When I am in this treasure house," Augustine writes, "I ask for whatever I like to be brought out to me, and then some things are produced at once, some things take longer, and have, as it were, to be fetched from a more remote part of the store" (qtd. in Olney 19-20). Oates, too, sees himself as an "archeologist" of Maggs's mind, digging down through layer after layer of memories to unlock his mystery. "You can hear the cant in his talk," he tells Buckle. "He has it cloaked in livery but he wears the hallmarks of New South Wales." Buckle, however, feels that this sweeping characterization is unjustified: "We do ourselves no credit in judging him" (87). Instead of empathizing with Maggs and his plight, Oates insists that Maggs is "a scoundrel" (87), or, to quote Bradley, "a symbol of demonic energy, of colonial wickedness, and perfidy. In this, Oates's attitudes to the real-world Maggs are similar to Dickens's fictional intentions for Magwitch" (3). To the extent that he sees what he wants to see, projecting his own fears and anxiety upon Maggs, Oates appears to be locked in the same ideological position vis-à-vis Australian convicts as Dickens.

As Maggs initially perceives him, Oates is "like a botanist" battling the demons that swim in his [Maggs's] "Mesmeric Fluid" and then describing them in his journal. Maggs is haunted not only by memories of an aborted child and a dying lover, but also by a vicious "Phantom," a nightmare self that, as Oates in the end reluctantly admits, "was his own invention, a

personification of pain that he had planted in the other” (203). Indeed, through mesmerism, Oates partly revives and partly inflicts the terror of the past. That wretched past has become a living part of the present, freighted with gruesome revelations of whippings with the “double-cat,” the brutality of the military guards, and the distrust between prisoners. When Oates rather condescendingly informs Maggs about the method he used to cue his memories, Maggs protests that, “Whatever it is called, it is a terrible thing, Sir, for a man to feel his insides all exposed to public view” (46). By the end of the novel, Oates, who has been desperately hiding secrets of his own, comes himself to fear that “he had done something against the natural order, had unleashed demons he had no understanding of, disturbed some dark and dreadful nest of vermin” (203).

In both Oates and Maggs, the fear of exposure creates the necessity for performance. “A fierce gent about his reputation,” as Buckle describes him, Oates plays up his role of a faithful husband, responsible father, and dutiful reporter. But Oates is also a “fine actor” in that he demonstrates “a great talent for all kinds of dialects and voices, tricks, conjuring, disappearing cards, pantomime performances” (83). Both Maggs and Oates resort to disguises to further their ends, the first passing himself off as a footman, the latter as a physician who has come to quarantine Buckle’s house because there is “contagion” in it (145). To Maggs, “this doctor” cuts an “incredible, ridiculous” figure, “with his twisted red mouth and wild bright eyes,” and yet he exists “given life by some violent magic in his creator’s heart” (146). Oates’s threats and talk of “Mesmeric Fluid” cause the death of Mr. Spinks, Buckle’s butler. The unfortunate incident functions as a reality check for Oates, whose life now begins to unravel (182). Having gained a measure of self-perspective, he reflects that his “fun and games had killed a man” (184). But by the end of the novel, Oates is, at least indirectly, responsible for three other deaths: the Thief-taker’s, Lizzie’s, and, in the final pages of his own novel, that of Maggs.

By arranging the convict's meeting with Wilfred Partridge, the Thief-taker who turns out to be a ruthless charlatan, Oates is unwittingly driving Maggs to commit murder. Once Maggs's violent tendencies are unleashed, the balance of power tips in his favor, causing his companion to become "almost neurasthenically aware of his force, his heat, his potential for further violence" (257). Fear overtakes the writer, as he realizes the compromising situation he put himself in:

If Jack were guilty of murder, Toby was guilty of being his accessory; if Jack were a bolter, it was Toby who had knowingly, criminally, harbored him. Of course he was a man of letters but he had been a Fleet Street hack himself and knew that, once he was in the dock, the Press would feast no less greedily on one of their own. He did not need to consider the explosive secrets Jack Maggs might add to this conflagration. (257)

This passage brings into focus what James Eli Adams has called "the Victorian obsession with secrecy" and, implicitly, the "acute Victorian unease with strangers" (13). Both Maggs's outward appearance and his interiority, because they seem to defy, or subvert, traditional economic and social norms, arouse in the other characters (Buckle and Oates, in particular) suspicion of hidden designs. Carey follows Dickens and Carlyle in suggesting that, "secrecy is not merely a social strategy but an ontological condition" (Adams 58). Secrecy is generated by, and in turn, sustains, a pervasive dynamic of surveillance. Twice in the narrative, Maggs insists on exchanging secrets, first with Edward Constable, and later with Oates. As he explains to his fellow footman, the value of secrets resides in the balance of power they establish between those who exchange them. This is the lesson he learned in the penal settlements of the New South Wales:

There a man might be killed on account of knowing another man's secrets . . . every man would be a spy on every other man. It was how they kept us down. If you and I were lads together in that place, then you must give me a secret of yours, should you chance to stumble over one of mine. That way we were in balance. (169)

Because the compromising secrets that Oates wrested from Maggs under false pretenses have upset the balance, Oates has to reveal a “very bad secret” of his own—his love affair with Lizzie and the pregnancy that threatens to expose them (233).

The novelist makes no secret of his obsession with others’ lives, but he himself is terrified that others might ruffle the paradise of fulfillment he has so carefully constructed for himself and his family. At the same time, though, as Nicholas Jose has remarked, “In satisfying his craving for money, love and recognition,” Oates “unravels himself too—as the writer of fiction spins invention from his own guts.” Indeed, the intensity of Oates’s relationship with Maggs threatens to disturb the equilibrium of the writer’s self in the present, marking as “crucial” a step in “the process of self-discovery” as Dickens’s experience with Madame de la Rue apparently did (Kaplan 106). Like Dickens, Oates fights out his own emotional battles by way of the struggles of his patient/character, but refuses to take a step further, as it were, and reach out to Maggs in real life.¹¹ The extent of his sympathy for Maggs does not go beyond an unfulfilled promise:

I wrote down what you told me in your sleep, Jack. One day you will read every word of it. Every dream and memory in your head, I’ll give them to you, I promise. You have had a hard life, my friend, and more than your fair share of woe. I would never make light of your misfortune. (265)

Maggs, however, comes to doubt the writer’s intentions, particularly after he discovers that the latter has fabricated the transcriptions of their meetings in order to “hide the true nature of his exploration” (91). One of the most intriguing scenes about writing occurs in the coach to Gloucester, in chapter 62, where Oates takes out his portmanteau and begins to compose the first chapter of his planned novel. When Maggs asks to see his notes, Oates reads out loud a sketch about “The Canary Woman,” an old eccentric famous for amusing “the family of the King and Queen” (226). Oates, whose heart is “beating very fast,” insists that this “comic figure” is not Maggs, but then, since “To the Gods we are all comic figures,” he adds: “If you could look on my

life from on high, you would split your sides to see the muddle I am making of it” (227). In making this confession, Oates hopes to pacify Maggs and elicit his sympathy for flaws and limitations that he, the writer, arguably shares with all of his characters. Apart from revealing the writer’s penchant for self-dramatization, the statement also brings to mind Dickens’s letter to Foster in which he mentions the “grotesque tragic-comic conception” that first encouraged him to write *Great Expectations* (734). In *Jack Maggs*, the tragic lies beneath the comic surface, and sometimes breaks through, but, in light of the tender ending that Carey has prepared for Maggs, the novel foregrounds adaptability and vitality as prime conditions for the survival of man as a civilized animal.

Maggs’s tale of survival falls on deaf ears, as it were, provoking anger mixed with envy in Oates: “To think this criminal should own a lease while he should be forced to waste his time on Comic Romps and Brighton fires” (228). Throughout *Jack Maggs*, ownership—the ownership of property, of one’s past, and, implicitly, of one’s identity—emerges as an important motif, linked suggestively to the image of the writer as burglar, who sees his character as a commodity, a “treasure house” to plunder at will. “You are a thief,” Maggs reproaches Oates; “You have cheated me, Toby, as bad as I was ever cheated” (279, 281). Infuriated by the novelist’s deceptive practice, Maggs forces the “transgressor” to burn the early drafts and the chapbook. This episode takes on a special significance once we learn that a short time before he began to write *Great Expectations*, Dickens made two bonfires of his personal letters and also re-read *David Copperfield*, perhaps the most overtly autobiographical of all of his novels. Smith has interpreted the episode as a “central suppression” motivated by Dickens’s stated need to conceal details of his private life “with which he had become dissatisfied” (“Suppressing” 44). According to Lettis, “Dickens greatly disliked the pursuit of literature through study of the lives of its authors,” and therefore burned the letters “to cut off any such indirect study of his work” (4). His message was that a writer’s life is personal property, irrelevant to an understanding of his work.

Much like Dickens/Oates, Maggs regards his own life as personal property, relevant insofar as he tells its story himself. Although we do not actually see Oates destroy any personal correspondence, the close relationship he develops with his subject, as well as his method of creating characters through imaginative transposition, suggests that the manuscripts he burns do carry a strong, albeit suppressed, personal meaning. The writer's task is somewhat eased by the fact that, having experienced the power—physical and mental—that Maggs possesses, he “lost interest in his subject: the Criminal Mind had become repulsive to his own imagination” (303). If later Oates “mourned the manuscripts he then so readily destroyed” it is because he “forgot how badly he had wanted Maggs gone from his life” (304).

Grief-stricken at the loss of Lizzie, his dream of love dispelled, Oates cannot resist heaping up “all his blame” upon Maggs: “It was now . . . in the darkest night of his life, that Jack Maggs began to take the form the world would later know. This Jack Maggs was, of course, a fiction” (326). On this fictional level, Oates succeeds where Henry Phipps fails, for the apocalyptic scene he envisions as the climax to his novel portrays Maggs as a demoniacal figure consumed by flames, “flowering, threatening, poisoning,” and hopping “like a devil” (326). As already seen, on yet another fictional level, the ending that Carey gives Maggs affords the consolation of romance, with Maggs marrying the woman who helped him recognize the claims of his Australian sons “to have a father kiss them good night.” “There is no character like Mercy in *The Death of Maggs*,” the narrator tells us. Whereas the first ending projects the violence and deep anxiety that attend colonization, the second “manages to reverse cathartically” this process, “the colony in a very real sense reclaiming its history from its imperial master” (Bradley 4).

Stephen Greenblatt once famously remarked that his new historicism “began with a desire to talk with the dead” (1). Bespeaking the same desire, Carey's postcolonial revisioning of *Great Expectations* rises successfully to the challenge and heights of Dickens's major work of the 1850s

and 1860s. Their common feature is a poignant criticism of Victorian society, which goes deep enough to be a universal criticism of human nature. Written with wit, style, and deep feeling, the novel bears out Carey's mastery as a storyteller acutely sensitive to the fragility of truth and the unreliability of memory. This is because our vision of the "real" world often hinges on what bring to it not only from past "reality" but also from the world of fiction or imagination. For Dickens, too, art is a distillation of the actual, just as memory is a distillation of the past, of those "saving spots of time" which nourish one's imaginative capacities. As Lettis put it, "Dickens looks at reality like a modern painter: what he sees is not just what is there, but [...] something more, something seen when one mixes memory and desire..." (190).¹² It is important to stress that Dickens did not see such an effort as a distortion of reality, but as an interpretation of it.

The inventive energy of language and situation in *Jack Maggs* masks, but does not displace, the anxiety about the hazards of imaginative life, more specifically, about the role of narratives in understanding and conveying trauma. By turns comic, sad, and nightmarish, *Jack Maggs* follows its protagonist's dramatic journey in search of a place he can call home; through the "mutually reflexive acts of narrative and memory" (Olney xiv), home is redefined as both a point of departure and a point of return. The trajectory of Maggs's life intersects with that of novelist Tobias Oates, another strong-willed figure whose "crooked business," and the mind behind it, Carey investigates in an attempt to explain the birth of a book (*Great Expectations*) and the death of a character (Abel Magwitch).

Doubtless, the novel offers no conventional portrait of the artist as a young man. Since the author makes no claim to a "real life" basis for representation, Oates's portrait surprises, amuses, and provokes. As a self-reflexive exercise in invention, *Jack Maggs* develops a great number of definitions for the writer: a storyteller, an archeologist of the mind, a mesmerist, magician, craftsman, and last, but not least, a "thief." To be a writer, Carey implies, is to have one's feet in

both worlds—the public and the private, the actual and the imaginary, the material and the intellectual. Oates’s professional life in the marketplace shapes his daily creative labors, which in turn reflect his desire to simultaneously confront and escape life’s harsh realities.

Oates is, like Maggs, a restless soul hungry for love, but ultimately incapable of committing himself with heart and soul to anyone. He therefore reserves little sympathy for Maggs, who interests him more as a case study, than as a human being who embodies the dual capacities of man for good and evil. The “truth” Oates fails or refuses to acknowledge is similar to the disturbing insight that Marlow gains from his encounter with Kurtz in Conrad’s novella, *Heart of Darkness*: namely, that Maggs’s “demons” originate not in the penal colonies, but in the very heart of the empire, which is London. Oates’s excursion into the depths of Maggs’s psyche leads him to proclaim “the horror” of the other, rather than the “saving illusion” of tolerance and compassion. Carey’s novel brings out what Henry James, reviewing Flaubert’s letters, referred to as “the whole question of the rights and duties, the decencies and discretions of the insurmountable desire to *know*.” While such a desire is deemed “good,” or “at any rate, supremely natural,” by James, he also hastens to add that, “[s]ome day or other surely we shall all agree that everything is relative, that facts themselves are often falsifying, and that we pay more for some kinds of knowledge than those particular kinds are worth” (LC2: 297).

Furthermore, the charges Carey levels at Dickens bring to mind James’s scathing review of *Our Mutual Friend* in 1865. There James attacked Dickens, to whom he was otherwise immensely indebted, for emphasizing the “deformed, unhealthy, and unnatural” in his characters, as well as for his inability to “see beneath the surface of things” (qtd. in Crunden 63). Yet one of the most poignant scenes in James’s autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others*, was his being sent to bed even though the family was about to read the first installment of *David Copperfield*. He pretended to obey, but in fact hid himself behind a screen, holding his breath. His sobs of sympathy for the

protagonist's plight at the hands of the Murdstones gave him away. This scene is incorporated in *The Master*, the novel I discuss next, and whose protagonist is no other than Henry James himself.

While James would depart from the sentimental realism he associated with Dickens, he shared the latter's fascination with the spectacle of life in which he remained, however, an observer, rather than a participant. "The great thing," he wrote to his brother William in 1888, "is to be *saturated* with something—that is, in one way or another, with life." And although James wrote extensively about sometimes cruelly neglected children, who often did not understand what they saw or heard, his modernist notion of characterization was rather elitist, as illustrated by his contemplation of a self-proclaimed artist in *The Princess Casamassima*: "We care, our curiosity and sympathy care, comparatively little for what happens to the stupid, the course, and the blind; care for it, and for the effects of it, at the most as helping to precipitate what happens to the more deeply wondering, to the really sentient" (qtd. in Crunden 71). James turned from Dickens's model of sympathetic authorship toward Flaubert's notion of the invisible deity reigning over the meaning of his fictional world. His authorial performance helped redefine Dickens's notion of "sympathy," becoming "a tool of cultural discrimination" rather than a means of erasing distinctions and thus "imagining universal cohesion" (Deane 105). Toibín shows the magisterial writer engaged in an exercise of memory and perception, but most of all power. The ingenious recreation of James's life provides a dynamic image of James the master and the man. The novel is a sustained meditation on life, art, and love—or rather, the lack of it—in a "dark time." It affirms the sovereignty of his aesthetic vision.

Notes

¹ Distinguishing between postmodern and postcolonial metahistory, Elias points out that while the first offers "an insider's reevaluation of Western history and cultural politics," the latter

“announces itself as a critique of the West from outside its political, epistemological, economic, or cultural borders” (xiv).

² Christian Moraru draws on Foucault’s theoretical framework to argue that postmodern authorial practices of appropriation—which include deliberate theft of literary property—are predicated upon the postmodern “technology” of the self: “And this is the ‘essence’ of Foucault’s ‘technology’ of authorship: the others are always, already inscribed, written into the fabric of the self” (71).

³ For an extensive discussion of the symbiotic relationship between memory and narrative, see James Olney’s influential study, *Memory and Narrative. The Weave of Life-Writing*, which traces the changes that the “twin powers of memory and narrative” have undergone, in both theory and practice, from Augustine to Samuel Beckett. According to Olney, “the twin powers of memory and narrative” constitute the “dual defining conditions of our being human”; “memory,” he writes, “enables and vitalizes narrative; in return, narrative provides form for memory, supplements it, and sometimes displaces it” (417).

⁴ Carey, while he too believes that “Writers always live in their heads” (qtd. in Koval), nevertheless gives his protagonist the freedom to tell his own story and, implicitly, the freedom to talk back to his creator.

⁵ In both Carey’s and Dickens’s London, the child comes not, as in Wordsworth, “trailing clouds of glory” from his divine home, but like the Blakean innocent, he inherits a ‘prison-house’ of limitations and prohibitions—weighing down on his sense of self.

⁶ Dickens gave full imaginative treatment to his fear of debt and debtor’s prison in *Little Dorritt* (1855-7).

⁷ Later another of Catherine Hogarth’s sisters, Georgina, moved in with the Dickenses, and their close relationships prompted rumors of an affair (Ackroyd 812-15).

⁸ A psychotherapeutic method introduced by German physician Antonio Mesmer (1734-1815) in 1779, mesmerism was a forerunner to the modern practice of hypnotism, which in turn opened the way into the unconscious. According to Mesmer and his followers, mesmerism posited a special correlation between mind and matter, between mental forces within and cosmic forces without. For a full discussion of both mesmerism and its influence on Dickens's fiction, see Kaplan's *Dickens and Mesmerism. The Hidden Springs of Fiction*.

⁹ In the context of Dickens's rivalry with Thackeray, the name of the pompous lawyer Makepeace, who talks Phipps into murdering Maggs, is therefore particularly telling.

¹⁰ As Lettis astutely observed, the line between "fictional and actual humanity" was for Dickens "thin indeed, at times almost nonexistent: the creations of his own stories and those of others had for him as powerful a force of conviction, of emotional involvement, as any in the real world" (140).

¹¹ Kaplan argues that Dickens was sometimes face to face with that "awful likeness of himself" (a phrase from the opening to *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, 1848), yet "he was more likely to evade the confrontation in his life than in his fiction" (111). In other words, "'Charles' saw what he wanted to see and often he did not want to see 'Charles'" (112).

¹² Along the same lines, Kaplan notes that, "For Dickens, art is such a mirror on which the real can be condensed and intensified; the artist is like the mesmeric operator, staring into the mirror, seeing within it heightened truths and powers, and transmitting them to his subjects, his audience" (113).

CHAPTER V
THE “CROOKED BUSINESS” OF STORYTELLING:
AUTHORSHIP AND CULTURAL REVISIONISM IN PETER CAREY’S *JACK MAGGS*

“Migod, there is no one more dangerous than the storyteller.”

(Doctorow 65)

Peter Carey’s engagement with Charles Dickens and *Great Expectations* in *Jack Maggs* (1997) bespeaks a contemporary sensibility, postmodern and postcolonial alike, that aligns it with recent revisionings of canonical European texts by writers from the former British colonies in the period since 1945. One such text that comes immediately to mind is Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which retells *Jane Eyre* from the postcolonial perspective of the madwoman in the attic, thus drawing attention to the ways in which Charlotte Brontë’s novel inscribes the discourse of empire. In composing *Jack Maggs*, Carey was motivated by a similar goal: to supply the suppressed point of view of Abel Magwitch, the transported convict and secret benefactor of Pip from Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. As the Australian writer maintained in an interview with Ramona Koval, Dickens’s classic text encourages you to “take the British point of view. And with that view, you love Pip, he’s your person, and so suddenly Magwitch is this dark terrible Other” (2). By shifting the focus from the Eurocentric to the antipodean perspective, from Pip (here Henry Phipps) to Magwitch (here Maggs), Carey allows for the colonized other to take control of his story, even as he is subject to the tales and inventions of others. The result is a profoundly sympathetic portrayal of a man who endures many hardships, first in England and then in the penal

colony, at the hands of the British Crown, but manages to retain his humanity and regain a sense of belonging.

More than that, in *Jack Maggs* Carey takes the rewriting process one step further, for not only is he re-imagining Dickens's fictional creation, but he also converts its author into a character, Tobias Oates, who is and is not Dickens. The story of Tobias Oates invites intriguing parallels with the documented biography of Dickens, which, as indicated in a note prefacing the novel, Carey takes the liberty to transform "to suit his own fictional ends." Carey confessed that because Dickens "knew the truth but distorted it," it took him "a long time to complicate that character and to stop being hard on him and to love him a little" (2). But what is "the truth" that Carey is after, and exactly how did Dickens distort it? This question bears further scrutiny, especially in light of the author's disclaimer quoted above and of the postmodern suspicion of truth, history, and objectivity.

As much as it harks back to Dickens and the carnivalesque world of his fiction, with its urban realism and interpenetration of competing discourses, *Jack Maggs* tells a distinctly Aussie story: for, as Carey put it, "it is such an Aussie story that this person who has been brutalized by the British ruling class should then wish to have as his son an English gentleman, and that no matter what pains he has, what torture he has suffered, that would be what he would want." While hoping that this story reflects "the Australia of the past, not the Australia of the future," Carey also concedes the impossibility of fully knowing the past. His Dickensian pastiche feels to Carey like "a science fiction of the past in a way. None of us has been there. We have a lot of received opinion and it's intimidating to write because there are all these experts, but we don't really know" ("Interview" 2).

To be sure, *Jack Maggs* attests to the unflagging desire for knowledge of the past that informs a late 20th century category of fiction known as the metahistorical novel, or to use a term

coined by Amy J. Elias, the “metahistorical romance,” in which the “virtuality” of the past accounts for the difficulty of recreating the emotional and psychological reality of another time. The conflation of personal memory and cultural consciousness forces readers to reconsider the meaning and significance of history, which, as Elias explains, for the postmodern, post-traumatic, metahistorical imagination, is “something we know we can’t learn, something we can only desire” (xviii).¹ Although stylistically more conventional than other postmodern metahistorical texts, such as Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*, or Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*, *Jack Maggs* shares with these a treatment of the past as a textual construct under constant revision, scrutiny, and interrogation. Carey’s latest novel, *The History of Kelly Gang*, also about a convict in 19th century Australia, takes its epigraph from William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is not dead. It is not even past.” This notion of the continuity between past and present operates in *Jack Maggs*, where the narrative moves backward and forward in time, forcing us to examine the present in light of the remembered past, and that past in light of the present. Writing out of an antipodean consciousness, Carey insists that man can neither disavow the past nor evade the present, which carries within it not only the inescapable burden of the past but also the possibilities and responsibilities of the future.

Jack Maggs makes the reader acutely aware not only of the “constructedness” of the past, but of creativity as well, since the novel thematizes appropriation as its chief *modus operandi*.² Within the novel’s intertextual framework, neither Dickens’s version of the convict’s story, nor Maggs’s own account of his experience of exile, nor certain biographical facts about Dickens himself can escape fictionalization. Both intertextuality and metafiction figure heavily in *Jack Maggs*, creating a narrative hybrid in which art spills over into life, fiction into history, to the point where they become almost indistinguishable, calling into question what ultimately comprises history. Like Dickens, Carey is a highly self-conscious, experimental writer who is stretching the

range and power of the novel form to explore the increasingly complex sense of the self within Victorian society.

In what follows, I start from the premise that Carey's dramatization of the workings of human consciousness and memory cannot be conceived apart from his inquiry into the practice and values of fiction making.³ As I argue, Carey's revisionist undertaking in *Jack Maggs* exposes the political and cultural stakes of an ideology of authorship that operated selectively, in complicity with the imperial ideology of his time, and in the service of both the "material interests and cultural capital of writers" (Deane 50). In order to explore the tensions inherent in Dickens's realist practice and in the construction of the authorial self, I have found it useful to divide my essay into three sections, although these tend to overlap and merge into one another. First I take up a series of critical arguments that reconsider the traditional description of the realist novel as the chief agent of the moral imagination and implicitly the view of Dickens as a "sympathetic friend" (Deane xiii) to characters and readers alike. In Carey's novel, as we will see, Dickens's textual double comes across as a detached, almost scientific compiler of facts about Jack Maggs, whom he regards as a case study, rather than a friend. Looking at Maggs, Oates reflects that he himself "would be the archeologist of this mystery; he would be the surgeon of his soul" (54). His anxious fascination with penetrating the "Criminal Mind" through mesmeric experiments is exposed as a bid for power instead of a means to make the other "less other," so to speak, by acknowledging his loss and suffering. Then I turn to Maggs's personal history, which Carey intends for us to see as both the embodiment of the truth suppressed by Dickens's narrative and yet another interpretation of a traumatic past. Finally, I will probe the intersections between Oates and Dickens's life stories, and tease out the ethical and psychological ramifications of the "crooked business" in which Oates is embroiling Maggs.

Dickens, Carey, and the Ethics of Storytelling

“Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion and beginning of morality.”

(Ian McEwan)

From his early short stories to *My Life as a Fake*, Carey has demonstrated the power of words to name reality, but also transfigure it; to alter consciousness, but also imprison it in the house of fiction. This interest in the deceptive as well as liberating power of storytelling Carey maintains throughout *Jack Maggs*, which can be read as a reflection upon the creative process itself and upon the rights and moral responsibilities of writers. Margaret Atwood confides that being a writer “is not always a particularly blissful or fortunate role to find yourself saddled with, and it comes with a price; though, like many roles, it can lend a certain kind of power to those who assume the costume” (5). But, she adds, “the costume varies,” determined as it is by “other people’s biases” about, or expectations of, writers. Dickens’s wide popular appeal, however, seems to justify Nicola Bradbury’s assertion that:

By accident and by design, Dickens effectively determined the shape, pace, structure, and texture of his own novel form, and developed both professional expectations of the writer and reader in the production and reception of his work. He made the novel what it was for the Victorians, creating and managing an appetite for fictions that would in turn make both imaginative and social demands. (152)

Dickens regarded literature as a noble and serious endeavor—“a perpetual struggle after an expression of the Truth, which is at once the pleasure and the pain in the lives of us workers of the arts” (qtd. in Lettis 95-96). What counts as truth for Dickens is not so much what is historically verifiable, but rather “what takes shape in the mind”—the use that the imagination makes of real-

life experiences (Lettis 194). A remark that Dickens made about a prisoner entering jail, and that applies to Maggs too, suggests that reality, for the mind, is always in flux: “His [the prisoner’s] confinement is a hideous vision; and his old life a reality.” But as time passes, “the world without has come to be the vision, and this solitary life, the sad reality” (194). And so it is not the experience of the convict, but rather “the story about him,” that creates truth for Dickens.⁴ By the same token, an accurate expression of this truth depends on one’s willingness to “de-center,” to enter other stories, however terrifying, and assume their perspectives. The question arises, was Dickens able to fully live up to this ideal, and, if not, what might account for his (partial) failure? Dickens was indeed able to create an enormous variety of characters, many of them very different from himself, and to give a plausible account of their consciousness. Since a closer examination of Dickens’s actual method of creating characters will be offered in the next section of my essay, here I will dwell on Dickens’s characterization of Abel Magwitch and Carey’s response to it.

Within Dickens’s fiction we sense the driving force of a passionate, life-affirming energy, compounded equally of mind and body, of feeling and thought. John Bowen defines this ethical dimension of Dickens’s writing in terms of an “opening to difference and to the other” that is not limited to compassion, that “does not eschew or fear emotion—no, not tears or rage, or anything” (30). Along the same lines, Grahame Smith claims that Dickens “could only have created Magwitch out of a love that enabled him to enter systematically into a life completely foreign to his own, at which he may just have glimpsed during the worst moments of the blacking factory episode” (6). The well-known “Autobiographical Fragment” written for John Forster in 1847 recounts Dickens’s one-year (or nearly so) stint at Warren Blacking Factory, a shoe-polish warehouse, in 1824. This painful, humiliating episode had a lasting impact on Dickens’s life and art, serving to explain the harsh view of parents that permeates his fiction and that was not lost on Carey. “As with other aspects of his personal experience,” the episode is “objectified and

transformed by Dickens into a comprehensive artistic vision of a parentless, above all, a fatherless, world” (6-7).

One of Dickens’s famous statements concerning the blacking factory experience helps to explain his preoccupation with the themes of alienation and betrayal: “I do not write resentfully or angrily: for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am: but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back” (Forster I. 2). In Carey’s novel, these themes resonate throughout Maggs’s account of his childhood: the foster mother who criminalizes Maggs bears the name Ma Britten, an unmistakable variation on Mother Britain, the country that brutalizes and ultimately rejects Maggs as a delinquent other. As Maggs’s employer, Percy Buckle, tells Oates in relation to his own sister who was also transported to Australia, “God help us all, that Mother England would do such a thing to one of her own” (89). Carey’s novel makes irresponsible parenting symbolic of the lack of sustenance offered by the “mother country” to its dependencies.

Like Dickens, Carey has invested his quirky, inventive fiction with an urgent moral purpose: “I have made a whole career out of making my anxieties get up and walk around, not only in my own mind but in the minds of readers” (qtd. in Pierce 181-82). Carey also believes that a writer’s responsibility is “to imagine what it is to be others. It’s an act of empathy, and it’s not only what we do, it’s a socially useful act to imagine oneself to be other than one is” (qtd. in Koval). Hence, his passion for stating the case of the marginalized, which he does so compellingly in *Jack Maggs*, without lapsing into sentimentality.

Dickens’s humane concern with the fate of the downtrodden cannot be questioned. His philanthropic activity, polemic journalism, speeches, and fiction, testify to his genuine interest in their suffering and to his “great desire,” which “was not merely to communicate but to commune with his readers” (Lettis 141). Both the serialization of his work and the public readings late in his

career kept Dickens closer to his readers, whom he addressed for more than just profit. “No one thinks first of Mr. Dickens as writer,” explained a critic in the *North American Review*. “He is at once, through his books, a friend” (qtd. in Deane 28). Dickens’s strong impact as a reader of his works has been compared to the influence exerted by the mesmeric operator on his subjects. Reaching out to his audiences, Fred Kaplan writes, Dickens was “like a mass mesmerizer, exploring and expanding himself through imposing himself and his own vision on others” (118). “Imposing” is a key word here, alerting us to the manipulative aspect of the writer’s communicative process. If communication is one-sided, the desired communion with the audience would seem impossible to achieve.

Dickens’s relationship to his audience was in fact as complicated as that to his characters and, more generally, to the society he lived in. As a man of his time, Dickens neither fought openly against society’s conventions nor allowed himself to be mastered by them. Smith marshals convincing evidence suggesting that, “Dickens came to see himself as peripheral” to the society whose abuses he relentlessly criticized, “although he continued to regard himself as of the center in relation to the ever increasing popular, if not always critical, appeal of his work.” Wealth and fame aligned Dickens with the power structures, whereas his refusal to buy land apparently excluded him from these. His role as “an insider-outsider” to the economy of the empire links Dickens, on the one hand, with Pip, the London gentleman, and, on the other, with Magwitch, the “black slave” of the English class system. More precisely, “the link between Magwitch and Dickens is clear, not only in their self-created riches, but in their ownership, the one of a “brought-up” gentleman, the other of a fictional character (Smith 51). Carey, we will see later, uses the trope of “ownership” to foreground the possession of secrets, in addition to wealth, as a determining factor in the power dynamics between the writer figure and the eponymous hero.

For Carey, as for other writers and critics, Dickens's interrogation of Englishness was undermined by his middle-class position. Without denying that "more than his predecessors and contemporaries in the English novel," Dickens strove "to give voice to the silent oppressed," Brian Cheadle observes that Dickens "was anything but a radical reformer, and in standing up for fellow-feeling and common humanity he looked to promote social change very much on middle-class terms" (103). Dickens's perception of colonial Australia reinforces this claim. Robert Hughes's impressive account of Australia's felon origins, and the "long" history of their "sublimation," purports to show that

The idea of the 'convict stain' dominated all arguments about Australian selfhood by the 1840s and was the main rhetorical figure used in the movement to abolish transportation. Its leaders called for abolition, not in the name of an independent territory, but as Britons who felt their decency impugned by the survival of convictry. (xi-xii)

Dickens was among the reformers who opposed transportation on both moral and economic grounds. Along with journalist Samuel Sidney, philanthropist Caroline Chisholm, and writers Harriet Martineau and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, he shared the belief that Australia could become a "pastoral Arcadia" by way of yeoman emigration. This idealized view of life in the colonies ignored, however, the harsher realities of "drought, fire, and flood" that often confronted the farmers (Hughes 557-58). It also masked "the distaste verging on dread with which some middle-class Englishmen [Dickens included] viewed the transported convict 'making good' in exile" (585). Both these perceptions informed Dickens's ambivalent portrayal of Magwitch as a demonic figure bent on revenge, "capable of redemption" as long as he never returned to England. Suffering "warped" Magwitch—as it did other convicts—into a "permanent" outsider (586). Along the same lines, John Bayley, sees the terror the returned Magwitch unleashes in Pip as deriving from the fear of being possessed by another, and calls this "the direst threat Dickens's unconscious

knows” (93). This certainly seems to be the case with Tobias Oates, whose fascination with the other’s “Criminal Mind” turns gradually into fear and ultimately into repulsion.

It can be argued, of course, that such a warped view of the other, as well as the anxiety attendant upon it, was inescapable within the emerging capitalist system of Victorian England. Nor could it be resisted, except partially, given that “the racist inequities of the colonial periphery were inaccessible to metropolitan experience” (Cheadle 103). The reality of these contemporary ills looms large in Maggs’s chronicle of his victimization, resurfacing during the hypnotic sessions orchestrated by Oates. To the extent that Carey’s narrative is concerned with foregrounding this grim reality, with seeking out and articulating the hidden/the repressed, its aim is to restore the truth, or at least test it through imaginative methods. As the arguments reviewed above indicate, this was a truth that Dickens may or may not have fully known, but that he too pursued. To put it in Elias’s terms, the meta-historical consciousness in Carey’s novel aligns itself with the consciousness of the Other, confronting the Self with the nightmare of history in which the Self too is implicated. At one point in the narrative, Maggs admits to a “strange thing”: the “Phantom” that has been haunting his dreams was planted inside him by no one but Oates himself, who had claimed the power to be the “surgeon” of the convict’s soul. A metaphor for the otherness embedded in the English psyche, the “Phantom” remains—for both Oates and Maggs—a terrifying presence up until the latter decides to leave England and return to New South Wales for good.

Speaking of phantoms, in telling the story of a story—the writing of *Great Expectations*—Carey too is conjuring up ghosts—of the author, of his literary artifact, and of his characters—all made strange even as they seem familiar. In his will, Dickens implored—the actual verb he used is the archaic “conjure”—his friends “on no account to make me the subject of any monument, memorial, or testimonial whatever” (qtd. in Bowen 30). Writing is granted as “a free gift,” for which remembrance is the only form of “repayment.” This injunction, Bowen correctly remarks,

places readers in “a double bind,” as these are expected “both to memorialize and not to memorialize Dickens’s writing and name” (31). *Jack Maggs* registers the force and significance of Dickens’s name and writing—Carey’s indebtedness to Dickens—at the same time that it makes the latter responsible for a “debt” implicit in his distortion of the truth about Magwitch.

The Purloined Story

“Look back, and the past becomes a story. The fixed shadowy shapes begin to move again, and make new patterns in the memory, some familiar, some strange.”

(Richard Holmes 3).

Jack Maggs is most impressive for its creative energy, which issues forth in the proliferation and interaction of story lines, modes, tones, styles, rhythms, and voices—all able to inscribe as well as challenge and destabilize different ideological positions. James Bradley has described the text’s multi-layered structure as a “kind of fictional double gambit,” in which “the story-telling process is twice internalized, by the novelist, Tobias Oates, and the narrator of the novel (or more accurately meta-novel)” (2). Among the novel’s stories within stories, the most obvious are Maggs’s own account of his victimization and Oates’s drafts of his planned novel. In *Jack Maggs* Carey imagines the sources for novelist Tobias Oates’s creation of his 1860 novel, *The Death of Jack Maggs*, which he abandons in 1837—the year when *Oliver Twist* was published—to take it up again in 1859. The fictive date of publication corresponds to that of Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (serialized between 1860 and 1861 in *All the Year Round*).

Carey furnishes readers with a context drawn from Dickens's personal life as well as from early Victorian England—both intimately informing Dickens's work and art. London comes alive with the specificity of Dickens's own graphic evocation of the smells, textures, tastes, sounds, and feel of the metropolis, from its stylish houses to its back lanes and snuggeries. Carey's novel is more explicit, however, in its presentation of gritty details, of squalor and sexuality, than Dickens's. The narrative opens in April 1837, when Maggs, who had been deported as a criminal at an early age, returns to London in secret and at great risk, to seek out the son he surreptitiously adopted many years before. Like Magwitch, Maggs has devoted his life to raising a simple "orphan" out of poverty and into the life of a gentleman. Unlike Dickens, who leaves the source of Magwitch's fortune ambiguous, Carey makes it clear that Maggs's wealth was hard-won (the result of brick making). Finding Phipps's house empty, he takes employment next door in the household of Percy Buckle, a former grocer turned gentleman. During his first day as a footman, he is struck by an excruciating attack of pain, which one of the dinner guests, Tobias Oates, claims he can treat through animal magnetism.

In the person of Oates, Carey is giving us a glimpse of Dickens's younger self, as he is rising in his literary profession. Having earned a degree of fame as the inventor of "Captain Crumley" (a variation on Mr. Pickwick) and "Mrs. Morefallen," Oates channels his ambitions into a new project, a study of the Criminal Mind. Once introduced to Maggs, the novelist feels drawn to his mysterious mind, in which he suspects lies hidden a "world as rich as London itself. What a puzzle of life exists in the dark little lane-ways of this wretched soul, what stolen gold lies hidden in the vaults beneath his filthy streets" (90). Oates persuades Maggs to allow himself to be hypnotized by offering him a deal: if the writer can, through magnetism, "sketch the beast" within Maggs, he promises to introduce Maggs to the notorious "Thief-taker," who in turn can help him

find his long lost son. From this point on, the relationship between these two “writer figures”—so different in their cultural position, yet so similar in other respects—takes center stage.

The background Carey gives Maggs is strikingly similar to that of many Dickensian protagonists: orphanhood, poverty, dreadful labor, abandonment, betrayal, social humiliation, and oppression. Lonely and vulnerable, but defiant and resilient, Maggs immediately wins our sympathy: “I am an old dog . . . who has been treated bad, and has learned all sort of tricks he wishes he never had to know” (72-73). Maggs’s self-characterization brings to mind Grahame Smith’s point about Dickens’s radicalism in his social and personal life. Much like Dickens, Maggs comes across as a man who, “rightly or wrongly, felt himself driven to desperate measures by desperate times” (Smith 15). Brutish and violent, Maggs is determined to put his life in order and record his own story, which he does by writing it backward in invisible ink. This peculiar method suggests his eagerness to simultaneously reveal and conceal his troubled past, just as he is torn between the compulsion to speak out and keep silent. “Even the lowest type of renegade,” says Oates, “has an inner need to give up the truth. [...] It is what our fathers called ‘conscience.’ We all have it. For the criminal, it is like a passion to throw himself off a high place” (28). We will see that although driven by the same need, Oates is in fact hiding the truth about his private life under a respectable camouflage, and sees nothing wrong with twisting the truth that Maggs “gives up” during the mesmeric sessions.

Maggs’s “high hope” is that the story he is so painstakingly transcribing will strike a sympathetic chord in Phipps, who will then accept Maggs for who he has become after his Australian sojourn: “I cannot bear him to think me a common criminal,” he tells Oates (228). The letters fail, however, to move the young gentleman, who instead perceives them as “harbingers of destruction,” a threat to his comfortable life. As it soon becomes clear, Phipps has no wish to meet Maggs, except to murder him in order to secure the house in Great Queen Street the latter

provisioned from afar. Weak, callous, and snobbish, Phipps eludes his benefactor's pursuit, just as the latter's dream of an idealized England becomes more and more elusive.

Jack Maggs is on many levels a novel of confinement, in which prison figures as an abusive enforcer of the law, as well as a complex metaphor for social relations and psychological life. The prison in New South Wales adds to other images of imprisonment that we encounter in the course of the novel, images that point, on the one hand, to Maggs' alienation from society and, on the other, to his struggle with himself. Maggs recalls that in his penitentiary, Silas had more freedom than he and Sophina did, continuing to "control much of our activity and to take, according to Tom, the lion's share of the profits" (213, 208). Maggs' and Sophina's confinement in the house of Ma Britten did not shelter them against dubious practices, for the rooms they were supposed to clean were those where Ma Britten performed abortions. While providing escape from such drudgery, the burglary expeditions only reinforced their imprisonment in the criminal life.

As the events unfold, it becomes less and less clear whether Maggs's criminality is inherent or the product of his environment. The question that the Judge asks of Sophina at the trial as imagined by Oates applies to Maggs too: "Do you mean that you are a thief by nature or a thief as evidenced by these charges?" (276). The criminal justice system uses these charges to demonize, dispossess, and dislocate Maggs, abandoning him to a strange land whose otherness Maggs comes to embody. This otherness is extremely unsettling, as it carries with it the memories and legacies of imperialism. Upon his return from the colony, the outcast brings with him the searing image of his brutal lashing by an officer of the Crown as well as two dark locks of hair belonging to the two sons of "Australian race."

Maggs's story presents a moving account of the convict's experience of exile in which he went with a soul steeped in history—personal and national—bearing in it many intertwined threads. For Maggs is imprisoned not merely in the harsh reality of class and colonial exploitation,

but also in a roseate fantasy of England. We sense that, as for the wanderer in Blake's poem "London," the manacles that are "mind-forged" can be far stronger than those that are externally imposed. Carey's metaphor for the human mind is the "tin box" in which Oates locks his characters' dark secrets that he extracts with his magnets and where Maggs keeps alive the memory of "England's green and pleasant land" (229, 231). Despite the losses he sustained before his deportation, when he saw his 'brother' Tom betray Silas Smith and his childhood sweetheart sentenced to be hanged, Maggs is yearning for an England that is as much remembered as it is romanticized. All of Maggs's references to his native country have an elegiac tone associated with loss, distance, and nostalgia for vanishing beauty and innocence. Underneath "the scalding sun" at Morton Bay, he used to imagine "the long mellow light of English summer" (322), his mind,

always, constructing piece by piece the place wherein his eyes had first opened, the home to which he would one day return, not the mudflats of the Thames, nor Mary Britten's meat-rich room at Pepper Alley Stairs, but rather a house in Kensington whose kind and beautiful interior he had entered by tumbling down a chimney, like a babe falling from the outer darkness into light. Clearing the soot from his eyes he had seen that which he later knew was meant by authors when they wrote of England, and of Englishmen. (322).

Maggs's dream of England, together with the vividly recalled memories of his childhood and his youthful love for Sophina Smith, have sustained him in exile, offering solace to his traumatized consciousness. He passionately identifies himself with the country that expelled him and denies any ties with those of "that race," the "Australian race," as well as the freedom awaiting him there: "I'd rather be a bad smell here than a frigging rose in New South Wells" (230).

Because Phipps is a part of the English "family" to which he feels emotionally attached, Maggs persists in his love for his foster son at the expense of his own children back in Australia. He says that he determined to "weave [Phipps] a nest so strong that no one would ever hurt his goodness" (264). He carries with him the framed portrait of the four-year old boy who has kept him alive for the past twenty-five years. Through Phipps, Maggs lives out a compensatory and

empowering dream on which he will not give up: “I am his da. He is my son. I will not abandon him” (264). This moving speech points, albeit obliquely, to the “Australian anxiety” that Peter Pierce explores in his book *The Country of Lost Children*, where he puts forth the “shocking” notion that “Australia is the place where the innocent young are most especially in jeopardy. Standing for boys and girls of European origin who strayed into the Australian bush, the lost child is an arresting figure in the history and the folklore of colonial Australia” (xi). Granted, Phipps has never been to Australia, but, as Pierce contends, the abiding force of the figure of the lost child has “deeper and darker origins and implications,” standing for the generation of its parents, representing the anxieties of European settlers because of the ties with home which they have severed upon their arrival in Australia (x).

Such protection as Maggs wants for his son is ultimately impossible because of Phipps’s own implication in the machinery of corruption. The London to which Maggs returns is no different from the London he grew up in—a hellish place that breeds crime even in the innocent.⁵ As Oates recognizes, the miniature Phipps sent to Maggs is a portrait of King George IV; interestingly enough, the Phantom haunting Maggs’s dreams also appears dressed as a soldier (Captain Logan) of the 57th Regiment who flogged Jack when he was a convict at Morton Bay. It is no coincidence then that Phipps has joined the same regiment. At one point, Maggs tells Mercy that he was flogged by a “soldier of the King,” to which the maid replies, “Then it were the King who lashed you” (318). This insight is both devastating and liberating for Maggs, who finds his dreams shattered, yet his dignity and peace of mind restored.

As Anthony Hassall points out, the recognition also releases Phipps from the “the script” his benefactor had “written for him into his own life and his preferred sexuality” (4). For years, he has been living a lie, perpetrated by his replies to Maggs’s letters:

He had known this time would come ever since that day sixteen years ago when Victor Littlehales, his beloved tutor, had rescued him from his orphanage. Now this privileged tenure was ended and he must leave his house, his silver, his rugs, his paintings. He must be a soldier. (Carey 4)

Thus, the final confrontation between the soldier and his benefactor suggests that neither “can escape without violence from the fictions which have structured their lives” (Hassall 5).

Implicit in the false ideal Maggs constructs for Phipps is the desire for revenge on the genteel society that ostracized and vilified Maggs. As in Magwitch’s case, Maggs’s generosity to Phipps is meant to show that respectability is for sale—merely another fiction. Echoing Hughes, Bradley notes that in Phipps, Maggs “has created a gentleman of his own, a living [Hughes calls it “black”] joke at the expense of the country and class that has ruined him” (3). But Maggs cannot escape fictionalization either, for not only does he become a subject of stories circulated in both the Oates household and the house in Great Queen Street where he passes himself off as a footman, but his life story is being appropriated by Oates as raw material for one of his novels. With the exception of Mercy, all the other characters stereotype Maggs in terms that reflect what Hughes refers to as the myth of the “geographical unconscious”; ironically, the same spatial metaphor figures in Oates’s own comparison of the Criminal Mind to London itself. “So,” Hughes concludes, “there was a deep ironic resonance in the way the British, having brought the Pacific at last into the realm of English consciousness, having explored and mapped it, promptly demonized Australia once more by chaining the criminals on its innocent dry coast. It was to become the continent of sin” (44).

It is this notion of the convict as a bearer of sin that Dickens apparently emphasized, and that Carey sets out to revise by presenting Maggs as more sinned against than sinning—a brutalized man, yet “full of love.” For the trials and tribulations that the convict had to suffer did not end after he had expiated his crime; indeed, the cruelties inflicted by the English have left physical as well as

psychological scars that cannot and should not be ignored: “It would not have been lost on [Oates] that Mercy Larkin’s wedding finger was blown away, and that when Jack Maggs came to her side, the pair were finally matched in deformity” (327). The twin deformities imply that Maggs’s sense of identity is intimately bound up with both England and Australia, though he finally embraces the more tolerant and hospitable culture of the latter. In the tersely narrated climax, Mercy alerts Maggs to the danger of deluding himself into thinking that Phipps is a “better class of son” (318), by which he would do to his own children what England did to him. Having awakened Maggs from his somnambulistic dream, helped him overcome alienation, and even risked her own life to save his, Mercy earns the right to become his wife and the guardian of his legacy. Together Mercy and Maggs return to the New South Wales colony, where Maggs lives a long and prosperous life, respected by the community and loved by his family.

The ending that novelist Tobias Oates has in store for Maggs is different, however, than the one envisaged by Carey. When filtered through Oates’s hungry, but largely unsympathetic imagination, Maggs’s life story follows a much darker course, as suggested by the title of his planned novel, *The Death of Maggs*. In Tobias Oates, Carey offers readers an intimate, far from flattering, portrait of Dickens as a young man and as the creator of Abel Magwitch. It is to this fictional portrait that I will turn my attention next. In revisiting some of the issues explored in the first section of my essay, I will argue that Carey’s dramatization of the novelist’s “crooked business” poignantly sets forth the moral implications of the process by which novelists create characters and use their imagination to enhance, if not reshape reality. In the context of Carey’s own recreation of one of Dickens’s fictional characters, the word reality should, of course, be enclosed within quotation marks. But even though as a postmodernist Carey questions the possibility of any solid reality behind the discourse of representation, as a postcolonial writer, he

never questions the emotional impact, the felt truth, of stories such as Magg's in which great expectations—in this case, self-definition and self-assertion—are finally realized.

The Storyteller and His “Crooked Business”

“There were, as in all crooked businesses, two sets of books, and had Jack Maggs seen the second set he might have recognized scenes (or fragments) more familiar to him: a corner of a house by London Bridge, a trampled body in a penal colony. But even here the scenes were never clear. For the writer was stumbling through the dark of the convict's past, groping in the shadows, describing what was often a mirror held up to his own turbulent and fearful soul.”

(Carey 91)

A complex tribute to England's great novelist, Carey's meta-narrative bears out the truth of John O. Jordan's statement, according to which Dickens is “also a living and ever-changing text, as important to late twentieth-century writers in the Anglophone Diaspora as he has always been for those closer to the metropolitan centers” (249). Jordan's essay focuses both on postcolonial works that feature intertextual references to Dickens, such as V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), and on more extended instances of Dickensian intertextuality, like David Allen's play, *Modest Expectations* (1990), Frederick Busch's novel *The Mutual Friend* (1978), and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Versions of Dickens that emerge from these works resurface in *Jack Maggs*, most notably, “Dickens the magical realist, haunted by scenes of violence and grotesque comedy” and “Dickens the verbal fantasist, creating the world out of language” (242). What really captivated Carey's imagination, however, was “the notion of the writer raiding, burgling the soul of his subject” (“Interview” 3). And since Jack Maggs is telling his story himself, the image of the writer as thief is juxtaposed with that of “the thief as writer.” As their stories unfold against London's dismal background, these characters' destinies intertwine, generating the

tension that provides the novel's compelling dramatic structure and enriching its tapestry of fact and fiction.

Jack Maggs is not really a novel about Tobias Oates, or even about its eponymous hero, so much as it is a novel in which these characters reveal themselves to us in all their complexity through flashbacks, action, and interaction. The novel relies on the readers' familiarity with both Dickens's *Great Expectations* and some key events from his biography that illuminate the novelist's particular sensibility. This intricate tangle of references and cross-references aligns *Jack Maggs* with other postmodern interrogations of the relationship between fact and fiction, life and work, memory and imagination. More specifically, as I demonstrate below, the "crooked business" in which Tobias Oates embroils Jack Maggs sends a cautionary message about the lengths to which writers can go in their attempt to carve out a name for themselves. Atwood's warning, that writers "can be accused of appropriating the voices of others," of exploiting the misery and misfortune of the downtrodden for [their] own gain" (119), bears directly on Oates's method of character making in *Jack Maggs*. The novel invites us to consider the question of an author's "dominion over and answerability to the personae he has called into being" (Steiner 42). "Is that dominion," George Steiner asks, "boundless or do the 'creatures' have certain rights in respect of their creator?" (42). Seen in this light, Carey's project is to restore Magwitch's claim to his inviolate inwardness, his right as a "creature" whose past, present, and future, are on a symbolic level, entangled with the history of Carey's own country. He thus indirectly holds Dickens accountable for having trampled on this particular character's freedom. At the same time, Carey reminds us that "theft"—in the sense of textual and cultural appropriation—plays an inevitable part in the creative and transformative process.

Part of Dickens's appeal for Carey concerns, on the one hand, with his social, financial, and emotional insecurities, and, on the other, with his restless energy and ambition—his eager

determination to succeed: “Having come from no proper family himself, or none that he could remember without great bitterness, he [Oates] had for all his short, determined life carried with him a mighty passion to create that safe warm world he had been denied” (36). Carey intentionally stresses Oates’s resemblance to his literary forebear—and to Jack Maggs as well—by delineating his humble beginnings and trying personal circumstances. Oates recalls how he was “forced to make his own way” in the world, “to find his feet in a city that would as soon trampled him into the mud.” An autodidact, Oates “had made himself, by will, a sorcerer of that great city”(184). Like Dickens, Oates makes his living from writing character sketches and little vignettes of London life for the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Observer*. His first achievement as a professional novelist was the tale of Captain Crumley, which parallels the launching of Dickens’s own career with the successful serialization of *The Pickwick Papers* (1837).

The emotional deprivations of his childhood—the feelings of neglect and abandonment—left indelible scars on Dickens’s consciousness and fueled an irrepressible desire to be loved. Tobias Oates also fears that “he would not be loved enough, not ever” (37). He assures Maggs that it is not hard for him to understand his feelings, for he too has a son upon whom he dotes, “as his father had never doted on him.” And because he would not have his son grow up in dreariness, or darkness,” Oates has built a relatively safe haven for him, filling his house with “books and laughter,” with “colorful rugs” and mirrors, “these last being desired for their light” (37) as well as, we suspect, for their distorting effect. This overprotective impulse, we recall, was equally strong in Maggs, who would keep Phipps, as he remembered him from years before, out of harm’s way.

Where both Maggs and Oates are concerned, emotional dysfunction stems primarily from a lack of proper father images. Oates suffers the same stigmas that Dickens felt in relation to his father, whose financial difficulties led to his imprisonment for debt.⁶ Oates tells Mary, his wife: “My father will tell any untruth to get his hands on money” (117). But he should plead guilty to the

same charge, for the deal he has cut with Maggs entails just that: telling “untruths” so that he can pay his own debts. He is in fact very confident that “[m]oney will come of it” (118). The fact that Oates sells the copyright of *The Death of Maggs* even before he has written the novel brings into focus the mercantile motif which governs both the economic and social worlds of the novel. As evidenced by the calculations in the margins of his manuscripts, “[m]oney was a subject always on his mind” (129). In only “five minutes,” Oates writes his father a “painful letter” disclaiming further responsibility for his debts, but then it takes him almost half an hour “composing a more cautious public announcement to the same effect” (177).

Oates’s deeply ambivalent attitude toward his father, while subtly mirroring that of Carey towards Dickens (his literary father), serves to explain why Oates felt compelled to turn his energy from private to public life, and from actuality to fiction. His “strongest impulse was to go where he most feared the deluge would sweep him” (197). When Oates was five years old, his father was charged with killing a man in a tavern brawl, for which he was tried at Old Bailey and condemned to death by hanging. “Toby’s earliest memories of London were still locked in that fetid little death cell, where his father sat writing, day and night, getting up petitions for his pardon” (196). From his father, Oates “inherited his habit of confronting what he feared,” a habit that fed into his writing: “He feared poverty; he wrote passionately about the poor. He had nightmares about hanging; he sought out executions, reporting them with a magistrate’s detachment.” Although Oates prides himself on his detachment, he has difficulty maintaining it. For direct exposure to the desperate conditions the writer has reported on has only “magnified” his fear of eventually drowning himself and his family into “such purgatory” (198).

Dickens’s domestic misery finds its way, much disguised, into the main subplot of Oates’s ill-fated marriage to Mary and his self-indulgent love for her sister, Lizzie Wariner. Unlike Mary, who “had little patience for either science or literature” and did not value her husband’s genius

highly (82), Lizzie looks up to Oates and understands his intellectual aspirations, even as she sees through all the tricks of his “trade” (art). Their liaison has disastrous consequences—the wasting of Lizzie’s young life and the poisoning of his marriage—that Oates realizes only too late. The date of Lizzie’s death (May 7, 1837) corresponds to the date on which Dickens’s sister-in-law Mary Hogarth died in his arms, a loss that affected him deeply and colored his fictional representations of young women. It has been speculated that Dickens felt a paternal love for Mary Hogarth, in whom he saw a symbol of all the innocent qualities he loved about childhood. He cut off a lock of her hair, took a ring from her finger, and kept all her clothes. He even requested that he be buried next to her when he died (Ackroyd 115-7).⁷ Dickens did become involved in a liaison with actress Ellen Ternan, for whom he eventually left his wife, in 1858. The rumors caused by the failure of his marriage troubled Dickens who, in the public mind, had until then been associated with family values.

In *Jack Maggs*, Oates also feels a tug of guilt and shame for the betrayal he has committed and ponders the dreadful consequences of public disclosure: “Yet once it was known that he had betrayed his wife and ruined her young sister, who would ever wish to touch a book with his name upon its spine?” (198). Hiding his doubts and unfulfilled longing beneath a veneer of popular success, the young novelist “invented a respectable life for himself: a wife, a babe, a household” (182). This precarious respectability, we will see shortly, makes Oates as vulnerable to life’s blows as Maggs. To the latter’s mind the writer did not seem “to warrant any of the excitement his name had stirred in Mercy Larkin’s imagination” (26). To Lizzie, Oates had always appeared “as fierce and fatherly, but now she saw how the mantel was too tall for him, and how he stretched to accommodate to its demands. It was a vision most profoundly discouraging, and one she wished to God she had not seen” (196). In cutting Oates down to human dimensions, Carey underscores his likeness to others and suggests that learning to accept one’s humanity may be as valuable as one’s

art. Oates has yet to learn what Dickens learnt, namely, that a mature artistic vision entails a compassionate understanding of fellow humans.

So far I have touched on two aspects of Dickens's appeal to Carey—his wrestling with personal demons and his craving for love—as they carry over into the subplot about Tobias Oates's domestic life. In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on Oates as both an embodiment of the artistic temperament in general, committed to an understanding of fiction as the artificial shaping of life, and as the practitioner of an art whose nature is exposed as morally questionable, or “crooked,” and therefore dangerous.

In his interview with Ramona Koval, Carey mentions that he discovered in his reading about Dickens that the latter was a passionate mesmerist who treated a woman called Madame Emile de la Rue for her condition called *tic douloureux*, an acute pain in the face. Indeed, widely read and self-taught in various subjects, Dickens followed with much interest the emergence of mesmerism, physiognomy and phrenology, all new sciences that offered different forms of investigating the hidden mind and cures for plagues of the nervous system.⁸ A close friend of John Elliotson, who founded the *Zoist: A Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism*, Dickens attended, in 1838, Elliotson's mesmeric demonstrations and learned how to perform such experiments himself. Mesmerism nurtured Dickens's novelistic imagination by providing him with a vehicle for exploring the human self, the origins and nature of evil, the nature and influence of power relationships between people, the uses of energy and will, reality and dreams, etc. His major experience as a mesmerist, which was strongly to influence his life and his fiction, took place in 1843, in Italy, where he met Madame de la Rue.

Several biographers—among them Johnson (541-42), Ackroyd (449-52), and Kaplan record that Madame de la Rue believed she was pursued by a phantom, a “bad spirit,” which Dickens perceived as “intimately connected with the hidden pains and anxieties of her being”

(Kaplan 86). As Kaplan observes, Dickens's speculations on the origins of the Phantom—the notion that his patient's nervous disease was "itself attacked by the inexplicable agony of the magnetism"—demonstrate "the psychological perceptiveness of Dickens the novelist, who frequently used some symbolic projection of the inner life and the imagination to represent a central illness of the spirit" (85-86). In his determination to "imprison or destroy the evil force," Dickens himself "became a surrogate for the patient, internalized her struggles, and took the Phantom as his personal enemy." Dickens feared that the power of the Phantom might reassert itself and take "horrible revenge" not only upon Madame de la Rue but on him as well "unless she gave up the mesmeric treatments" (qtd. in Kaplan 87-88). Even more remarkably, he developed an anxiety concerning her being "somehow a part of me," implying that his "patient" and her Phantom were "extensions of him" (qtd. in Kaplan 89-90). Hence the possibility that Dickens "recognized" his own "strange afflictions" in Madame de la Rue's (159).

I have dwelled on Kaplan's account of Dickens's involvement with Madame de la Rue's case because similar transferences occur between the mesmerist and his patient during their sessions together in *Jack Maggs*. To dramatize the parasitic relationship between the two, Carey draws heavily on the language and imagery of mesmerism that Dickens himself used both in his journal and fiction. Thus not only does he have Maggs suffer from the same physical pain as Madame de la Rue, but he also shows Oates attempting to cure this condition—along with its mental cause (the psychic trauma)—through what he calls "magnetic somnambulism" (27). Maggs exemplifies for Oates the mystery of psychological forces whose attraction the young novelist, much like Dickens, finds irresistible: "When he entered the soul of Jack Maggs, it was as if he had entered the guts of a huge and haunted engine. He might not yet know where he was, or what he knew, but he felt the power of that troubled mind like a great wind rushing through a broken window pane" (58). "He cannot help himself," one of Oates's servants tells Jack, explaining:

He saw your livery, and thought: There's a chap with dirty livery. Just what you would think or I would think, but Mr. Oates, he can't stop there—he's thinking, how did that fatty-spot get on his shoulder? He's wondering, in what circumstances were the stockings torn? He's looking at you like a blessed butterfly he has to pin down on his board. It is not that he hasn't got a heart. But he is an author, as I'm sure you don't need telling, and he must know your whole life story or he will die of it. (42)

These quotations vividly set forth the illuminating connection between the concerns about the workings of the hidden mind raised by mesmerism and the fascination with the process of creating character, a process driven by intuition as much as it is by conscious intent.

Oates's imaginative insight into criminal psychology, his versatile journalism, and his familiarity with court proceedings—all bring to mind Dickens and his peculiar method of collecting characters based on real-life criminals. Lizzie reflects that “Toby had always had a great affection for Characters,” i.e. “dustmen, jugglers, costers, pick-pockets,” whose histories he writes down in his chapbook. From the narrator, we learn that Oates has “much of the scientist” about him. His study is as methodically ordered as a laboratory, with everything neatly categorized and labeled. In its corners Oates “stored not only his Evidence, but also experiments, sketches, notes, his workings-up of the characters who he hoped would one day make his name, not just as the author of comic adventures, but as a novelist who might topple Thackeray himself” (44). Relishing his role as the “first cartographer” of the Criminal Mind (90), Oates “blithely” likens himself to Thackeray, whose success he is eager to emulate (91).⁹

In *Jack Maggs*, however, the writer laughing at the foibles of others becomes himself a target of satire because of the scientific pretensions underpinning his method of creating characters. As indifferent to her husband's artistic pursuits as Mary might be, she cannot help wondering why, in approaching his new subject (Maggs), he is no longer solely relying on his imagination: “You never needed magnets before. You used an ink and pen. You made it up, Toby. Lord, look at the people you made. Mrs. Morefallen. Did you need magnets to dream her up?” (118) But for Oates,

as for Dickens, mesmerism was “an example of the inventive process of the imagination” (Kaplan 90). Unlike Dickens, however, according to whom “most writers of fiction write partly from their experience, and partly from their imagination,” (qtd. in Lettis 187), Oates maintains that his business is “to imagine everything” (88). So inflamed does his imagination become with the possibilities of peering into Maggs’s soul that it preempts the subject’s lived experiences.

By deliberately neglecting the demands of verisimilitude, Oates is highlighting certain aspects of Maggs’s personal history, while obscuring others. Trapped as he is inside his own mind, in the mental chains of snobbery and pretentiousness, the writer fails, or simply refuses to see, that this history takes deep roots in both the culture of the colonized and that of the colonizer. His presumption of omniscience—“I got the rascal” (86), he triumphantly announces to Buckle—is thus deeply suspect once we realize that “everything” he ends up writing about Maggs he has “dreamed up.” Consequently, after reading the drafts of the novel which is supposedly about him, Maggs confronts the author with the fact that he actually understands “nothing” about him: “You can hoodwink me into taking off my shirt, but you don’t know a rat’s fart about me . . . You steal my Fluid but you can’t imagine who I am, you little fribble” (252).

The novel can then be read as a cautionary tale about the limitations of imaginative life, with Maggs embodying a mystery that, because it cannot be imaginatively fathomed, stands outside representation. This mystery, Carey seems to imply, can only be approached with the heart, not with the mind; in the absence of absolute truths, the only truth worth searching for is compassion. Maggs, we have seen, finds it thanks to Mercy, the young Englishwoman with a great capacity to heal and love. But Oates, who is writing about Maggs and pretending to know his innermost thoughts and feelings, must also be willing to respond to him with the fullest extent of his humanity. As Richard Holmes so wonderfully puts it, “To find your subject, you must in some sense lose yourself along the way, [you must] stray into the geography of the human heart” (iv).

In the first section of my chapter, I showed that Dickens possessed this capacity for interacting, even identifying with, rather than simply reacting to his subject matter. His preface to *A Tale of Two Cities* ensures his readers that, “I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it myself” (7). Here Dickens suggests that his work does equal justice to external and internal reality, to the world the author inhabits and to his experience of that world. We are also led to believe that his characters and situations evolved out of the depths of his consciousness, although he typically began with his experience of real people and then brought his creative imagination to bear on it.¹⁰ Describing Dickens’s essentially dramatic method of creating characters, Lettis has argued that the novelist “did not care for psychological fiction: it was the secret processes not of the mind but of the heart that he thought fiction should seek out” (61). But the first part of this statement overlooks Dickens’s interest in “the multi-layered psychological and ideological complexities” of mesmerism, the extent to which it is enmeshed in issues of power, energy, and will—three concerns that pose moral questions in that they are “potentially both destructive and constructive” (Kaplan 9, 19).

In *Jack Maggs*, Oates’s engagement in such an exercise of power and will shows little regard for moral considerations. Although claiming that “no mesmeric act on earth will have anyone perform an act against their moral temper,” and pretending to liberate Maggs from his “Phantom,” Oates is in fact itching to purloin his subject’s story for a groundbreaking study of the Criminal Mind. His true motives are commercial and his commitment self-serving. From the very beginning, the relationship between mesmerist and patient takes the form of a clash of wills, with Oates seeking to impose his mesmeric force on Maggs and the latter resisting a forfeiture of will. With each session of hypnotism, their relationship grows increasingly deceptive and exploitative. One of the first things Maggs notices about Oates is his drive to dominate: “He was edgy, almost

pugnacious, with eyes and hands everywhere about him as if he were constantly confirming his position in the world, a navigator measuring his distance from the chair, the wall, the table” (26).

Hands, and the imagery associated with them, play an important role throughout *Jack Maggs*, as they do in *Great Expectations* (chapter 83). We learn for instance that when he set out to write about Maggs, Oates

first produced a short essay on his hands, pondering . . . their history: what other hands they had caressed, what lives they had taken in anger. He began by picturing the newborn hand resting briefly on its mother’s breast, and then he sketched, in the space of four pages, the whole long story leading towards and away from that ‘hideously misshapen claw.’” (303)

Thus, by contrast with Oates’s hands, which figure as a visual correlative of manipulative power, Maggs’s “hideously misshapen claw” is an index of his marginal status as an eccentric, or colonized subject.

Taking great pride in the essay referred to above, Oates “hoarded it like a clock-maker” and set it aside for “its small part in his grand machine” (303). These words clearly reveal Oates’s problematic approach to his subject. According to Kaplan, Dickens was also “used to controlling and manipulating people, just as he was used to creating and manipulating characters in fiction” (72). But whereas he used his immense power of will “for what he assumed were beneficial and therapeutic ends” (237), Oates, while professing the same ends, is in effect misusing this power. For one thing, he is turning mesmerism into a stage show, an “Exhibition,” to which he invites his wife, his sister-in-law, Buckle, Constable, actor Henry Hawthorne, etc., who subject Maggs to intense scrutiny. Earlier, after the dinner at Buckle’s house, when Maggs pressed Constable to describe what the guests had seen and heard, Constable replied: “You were a great turn, Mr. Maggs. You were a great thrill for the gentlemen” (31). Pinned by their gaze, Maggs becomes an object of curiosity and entertainment. Lizzie, on the other hand, is genuinely moved by the

indelible marks of suffering written all over Maggs's body: "As Lizzie Warriner raised her eyes, she gasped at the sea of pain etched upon the footman's back, a brooding sea of scars, of ripped and tortured skin" (86).

"[P]ushing into the musty corridors of the Criminal Mind" at first gives Oates an exhilarating sense of discovery (91). The mesmerist believes he is in the possession of "a memory" that, like a "treasure house," he can "enter, and leave. Leave, and then return to." Oates's notion of memory reminds one of a passage from *The Confessions*, where Augustine puts forth what James Olney calls an "archeological model for memory": "When I am in this treasure house," Augustine writes, "I ask for whatever I like to be brought out to me, and then some things are produced at once, some things take longer, and have, as it were, to be fetched from a more remote part of the store" (qtd. in Olney 19-20). Oates, too, sees himself as an "archeologist" of Maggs's mind, digging down through layer after layer of memories to unlock his mystery. "You can hear the cant in his talk," he tells Buckle. "He has it cloaked in livery but he wears the hallmarks of New South Wales." Buckle, however, feels that this sweeping characterization is unjustified: "We do ourselves no credit in judging him" (87). Instead of empathizing with Maggs and his plight, Oates insists that Maggs is "a scoundrel" (87), or, to quote Bradley, "a symbol of demonic energy, of colonial wickedness, and perfidy. In this, Oates's attitudes to the real-world Maggs are similar to Dickens's fictional intentions for Magwitch" (3). To the extent that he sees what he wants to see, projecting his own fears and anxiety upon Maggs, Oates appears to be locked in the same ideological position vis-à-vis Australian convicts as Dickens.

As Maggs initially perceives him, Oates is "like a botanist" battling the demons that swim in his [Maggs's] "Mesmeric Fluid" and then describing them in his journal. Maggs is haunted not only by memories of an aborted child and a dying lover, but also by a vicious "Phantom," a nightmare self that, as Oates in the end reluctantly admits, "was his own invention, a

personification of pain that he had planted in the other” (203). Indeed, through mesmerism, Oates partly revives and partly inflicts the terror of the past. That wretched past has become a living part of the present, freighted with gruesome revelations of whippings with the “double-cat,” the brutality of the military guards, and the distrust between prisoners. When Oates rather condescendingly informs Maggs about the method he used to cue his memories, Maggs protests that, “Whatever it is called, it is a terrible thing, Sir, for a man to feel his insides all exposed to public view” (46). By the end of the novel, Oates, who has been desperately hiding secrets of his own, comes himself to fear that “he had done something against the natural order, had unleashed demons he had no understanding of, disturbed some dark and dreadful nest of vermin” (203).

In both Oates and Maggs, the fear of exposure creates the necessity for performance. “A fierce gent about his reputation,” as Buckle describes him, Oates plays up his role of a faithful husband, responsible father, and dutiful reporter. But Oates is also a “fine actor” in that he demonstrates “a great talent for all kinds of dialects and voices, tricks, conjuring, disappearing cards, pantomime performances” (83). Both Maggs and Oates resort to disguises to further their ends, the first passing himself off as a footman, the latter as a physician who has come to quarantine Buckle’s house because there is “contagion” in it (145). To Maggs, “this doctor” cuts an “incredible, ridiculous” figure, “with his twisted red mouth and wild bright eyes,” and yet he exists “given life by some violent magic in his creator’s heart” (146). Oates’s threats and talk of “Mesmeric Fluid” cause the death of Mr. Spinks, Buckle’s butler. The unfortunate incident functions as a reality check for Oates, whose life now begins to unravel (182). Having gained a measure of self-perspective, he reflects that his “fun and games had killed a man” (184). But by the end of the novel, Oates is, at least indirectly, responsible for three other deaths: the Thief-taker’s, Lizzie’s, and, in the final pages of his own novel, that of Maggs.

By arranging the convict's meeting with Wilfred Partridge, the Thief-taker who turns out to be a ruthless charlatan, Oates is unwittingly driving Maggs to commit murder. Once Maggs's violent tendencies are unleashed, the balance of power tips in his favor, causing his companion to become "almost neurasthenically aware of his force, his heat, his potential for further violence" (257). Fear overtakes the writer, as he realizes the compromising situation he put himself in:

If Jack were guilty of murder, Toby was guilty of being his accessory; if Jack were a bolter, it was Toby who had knowingly, criminally, harbored him. Of course he was a man of letters but he had been a Fleet Street hack himself and knew that, once he was in the dock, the Press would feast no less greedily on one of their own. He did not need to consider the explosive secrets Jack Maggs might add to this conflagration. (257)

This passage brings into focus what James Eli Adams has called "the Victorian obsession with secrecy" and, implicitly, the "acute Victorian unease with strangers" (13). Both Maggs's outward appearance and his interiority, because they seem to defy, or subvert, traditional economic and social norms, arouse in the other characters (Buckle and Oates, in particular) suspicion of hidden designs. Carey follows Dickens and Carlyle in suggesting that, "secrecy is not merely a social strategy but an ontological condition" (Adams 58). Secrecy is generated by, and in turn, sustains, a pervasive dynamic of surveillance. Twice in the narrative, Maggs insists on exchanging secrets, first with Edward Constable, and later with Oates. As he explains to his fellow footman, the value of secrets resides in the balance of power they establish between those who exchange them. This is the lesson he learned in the penal settlements of the New South Wales:

There a man might be killed on account of knowing another man's secrets . . . every man would be a spy on every other man. It was how they kept us down. If you and I were lads together in that place, then you must give me a secret of yours, should you chance to stumble over one of mine. That way we were in balance. (169)

Because the compromising secrets that Oates wrested from Maggs under false pretenses have upset the balance, Oates has to reveal a “very bad secret” of his own—his love affair with Lizzie and the pregnancy that threatens to expose them (233).

The novelist makes no secret of his obsession with others’ lives, but he himself is terrified that others might ruffle the paradise of fulfillment he has so carefully constructed for himself and his family. At the same time, though, as Nicholas Jose has remarked, “In satisfying his craving for money, love and recognition,” Oates “unravels himself too—as the writer of fiction spins invention from his own guts.” Indeed, the intensity of Oates’s relationship with Maggs threatens to disturb the equilibrium of the writer’s self in the present, marking as “crucial” a step in “the process of self-discovery” as Dickens’s experience with Madame de la Rue apparently did (Kaplan 106). Like Dickens, Oates fights out his own emotional battles by way of the struggles of his patient/character, but refuses to take a step further, as it were, and reach out to Maggs in real life.¹¹ The extent of his sympathy for Maggs does not go beyond an unfulfilled promise:

I wrote down what you told me in your sleep, Jack. One day you will read every word of it. Every dream and memory in your head, I’ll give them to you, I promise. You have had a hard life, my friend, and more than your fair share of woe. I would never make light of your misfortune. (265)

Maggs, however, comes to doubt the writer’s intentions, particularly after he discovers that the latter has fabricated the transcriptions of their meetings in order to “hide the true nature of his exploration” (91). One of the most intriguing scenes about writing occurs in the coach to Gloucester, in chapter 62, where Oates takes out his portmanteau and begins to compose the first chapter of his planned novel. When Maggs asks to see his notes, Oates reads out loud a sketch about “The Canary Woman,” an old eccentric famous for amusing “the family of the King and Queen” (226). Oates, whose heart is “beating very fast,” insists that this “comic figure” is not Maggs, but then, since “To the Gods we are all comic figures,” he adds: “If you could look on my

life from on high, you would split your sides to see the muddle I am making of it” (227). In making this confession, Oates hopes to pacify Maggs and elicit his sympathy for flaws and limitations that he, the writer, arguably shares with all of his characters. Apart from revealing the writer’s penchant for self-dramatization, the statement also brings to mind Dickens’s letter to Foster in which he mentions the “grotesque tragic-comic conception” that first encouraged him to write *Great Expectations* (734). In *Jack Maggs*, the tragic lies beneath the comic surface, and sometimes breaks through, but, in light of the tender ending that Carey has prepared for Maggs, the novel foregrounds adaptability and vitality as prime conditions for the survival of man as a civilized animal.

Maggs’s tale of survival falls on deaf ears, as it were, provoking anger mixed with envy in Oates: “To think this criminal should own a lease while he should be forced to waste his time on Comic Romps and Brighton fires” (228). Throughout *Jack Maggs*, ownership—the ownership of property, of one’s past, and, implicitly, of one’s identity—emerges as an important motif, linked suggestively to the image of the writer as burglar, who sees his character as a commodity, a “treasure house” to plunder at will. “You are a thief,” Maggs reproaches Oates; “You have cheated me, Toby, as bad as I was ever cheated” (279, 281). Infuriated by the novelist’s deceptive practice, Maggs forces the “transgressor” to burn the early drafts and the chapbook. This episode takes on a special significance once we learn that a short time before he began to write *Great Expectations*, Dickens made two bonfires of his personal letters and also re-read *David Copperfield*, perhaps the most overtly autobiographical of all of his novels. Smith has interpreted the episode as a “central suppression” motivated by Dickens’s stated need to conceal details of his private life “with which he had become dissatisfied” (“Suppressing” 44). According to Lettis, “Dickens greatly disliked the pursuit of literature through study of the lives of its authors,” and therefore burned the letters “to cut off any such indirect study of his work” (4). His message was that a writer’s life is personal property, irrelevant to an understanding of his work.

Much like Dickens/Oates, Maggs regards his own life as personal property, relevant insofar as he tells its story himself. Although we do not actually see Oates destroy any personal correspondence, the close relationship he develops with his subject, as well as his method of creating characters through imaginative transposition, suggests that the manuscripts he burns do carry a strong, albeit suppressed, personal meaning. The writer's task is somewhat eased by the fact that, having experienced the power—physical and mental—that Maggs possesses, he “lost interest in his subject: the Criminal Mind had become repulsive to his own imagination” (303). If later Oates “mourned the manuscripts he then so readily destroyed” it is because he “forgot how badly he had wanted Maggs gone from his life” (304).

Grief-stricken at the loss of Lizzie, his dream of love dispelled, Oates cannot resist heaping up “all his blame” upon Maggs: “It was now . . . in the darkest night of his life, that Jack Maggs began to take the form the world would later know. This Jack Maggs was, of course, a fiction” (326). On this fictional level, Oates succeeds where Henry Phipps fails, for the apocalyptic scene he envisions as the climax to his novel portrays Maggs as a demoniacal figure consumed by flames, “flowering, threatening, poisoning,” and hopping “like a devil” (326). As already seen, on yet another fictional level, the ending that Carey gives Maggs affords the consolation of romance, with Maggs marrying the woman who helped him recognize the claims of his Australian sons “to have a father kiss them good night.” “There is no character like Mercy in *The Death of Maggs*,” the narrator tells us. Whereas the first ending projects the violence and deep anxiety that attend colonization, the second “manages to reverse cathartically” this process, “the colony in a very real sense reclaiming its history from its imperial master” (Bradley 4).

Stephen Greenblatt once famously remarked that his new historicism “began with a desire to talk with the dead” (1). Bespeaking the same desire, Carey's postcolonial revisioning of *Great Expectations* rises successfully to the challenge and heights of Dickens's major work of the 1850s

and 1860s. Their common feature is a poignant criticism of Victorian society, which goes deep enough to be a universal criticism of human nature. Written with wit, style, and deep feeling, the novel bears out Carey's mastery as a storyteller acutely sensitive to the fragility of truth and the unreliability of memory. This is because our vision of the "real" world often hinges on what bring to it not only from past "reality" but also from the world of fiction or imagination. For Dickens, too, art is a distillation of the actual, just as memory is a distillation of the past, of those "saving spots of time" which nourish one's imaginative capacities. As Lettis put it, "Dickens looks at reality like a modern painter: what he sees is not just what is there, but [...] something more, something seen when one mixes memory and desire..." (190).¹² It is important to stress that Dickens did not see such an effort as a distortion of reality, but as an interpretation of it.

The inventive energy of language and situation in *Jack Maggs* masks, but does not displace, the anxiety about the hazards of imaginative life, more specifically, about the role of narratives in understanding and conveying trauma. By turns comic, sad, and nightmarish, *Jack Maggs* follows its protagonist's dramatic journey in search of a place he can call home; through the "mutually reflexive acts of narrative and memory" (Olney xiv), home is redefined as both a point of departure and a point of return. The trajectory of Maggs's life intersects with that of novelist Tobias Oates, another strong-willed figure whose "crooked business," and the mind behind it, Carey investigates in an attempt to explain the birth of a book (*Great Expectations*) and the death of a character (Abel Magwitch).

Doubtless, the novel offers no conventional portrait of the artist as a young man. Since the author makes no claim to a "real life" basis for representation, Oates's portrait surprises, amuses, and provokes. As a self-reflexive exercise in invention, *Jack Maggs* develops a great number of definitions for the writer: a storyteller, an archeologist of the mind, a mesmerist, magician, craftsman, and last, but not least, a "thief." To be a writer, Carey implies, is to have one's feet in

both worlds—the public and the private, the actual and the imaginary, the material and the intellectual. Oates’s professional life in the marketplace shapes his daily creative labors, which in turn reflect his desire to simultaneously confront and escape life’s harsh realities.

Oates is, like Maggs, a restless soul hungry for love, but ultimately incapable of committing himself with heart and soul to anyone. He therefore reserves little sympathy for Maggs, who interests him more as a case study, than as a human being who embodies the dual capacities of man for good and evil. The “truth” Oates fails or refuses to acknowledge is similar to the disturbing insight that Marlow gains from his encounter with Kurtz in Conrad’s novella, *Heart of Darkness*: namely, that Maggs’s “demons” originate not in the penal colonies, but in the very heart of the empire, which is London. Oates’s excursion into the depths of Maggs’s psyche leads him to proclaim “the horror” of the other, rather than the “saving illusion” of tolerance and compassion. Carey’s novel brings out what Henry James, reviewing Flaubert’s letters, referred to as “the whole question of the rights and duties, the decencies and discretions of the insurmountable desire to *know*.” While such a desire is deemed “good,” or “at any rate, supremely natural,” by James, he also hastens to add that, “[s]ome day or other surely we shall all agree that everything is relative, that facts themselves are often falsifying, and that we pay more for some kinds of knowledge than those particular kinds are worth” (LC2: 297).

Furthermore, the charges Carey levels at Dickens bring to mind James’s scathing review of *Our Mutual Friend* in 1865. There James attacked Dickens, to whom he was otherwise immensely indebted, for emphasizing the “deformed, unhealthy, and unnatural” in his characters, as well as for his inability to “see beneath the surface of things” (qtd. in Crunden 63). Yet one of the most poignant scenes in James’s autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others*, was his being sent to bed even though the family was about to read the first installment of *David Copperfield*. He pretended to obey, but in fact hid himself behind a screen, holding his breath. His sobs of sympathy for the

protagonist's plight at the hands of the Murdstones gave him away. This scene is incorporated in *The Master*, the novel I discuss next, and whose protagonist is no other than Henry James himself.

While James would depart from the sentimental realism he associated with Dickens, he shared the latter's fascination with the spectacle of life in which he remained, however, an observer, rather than a participant. "The great thing," he wrote to his brother William in 1888, "is to be *saturated* with something—that is, in one way or another, with life." And although James wrote extensively about sometimes cruelly neglected children, who often did not understand what they saw or heard, his modernist notion of characterization was rather elitist, as illustrated by his contemplation of a self-proclaimed artist in *The Princess Casamassima*: "We care, our curiosity and sympathy care, comparatively little for what happens to the stupid, the coarse, and the blind; care for it, and for the effects of it, at the most as helping to precipitate what happens to the more deeply wondering, to the really sentient" (qtd. in Crunden 71). James turned from Dickens's model of sympathetic authorship toward Flaubert's notion of the invisible deity reigning over the meaning of his fictional world. His authorial performance helped redefine Dickens's notion of "sympathy," becoming "a tool of cultural discrimination" rather than a means of erasing distinctions and thus "imagining universal cohesion" (Deane 105). Toibín shows the magisterial writer engaged in an exercise of memory and perception, but most of all power. The ingenious recreation of James's life provides a dynamic image of James the master and the man. The novel is a sustained meditation on life, art, and love—or rather, the lack of it—in a "dark time." It affirms the sovereignty of his aesthetic vision.

Notes

¹ Distinguishing between postmodern and postcolonial metahistory, Elias points out that while the first offers "an insider's reevaluation of Western history and cultural politics," the latter

“announces itself as a critique of the West from outside its political, epistemological, economic, or cultural borders” (xiv).

² Christian Moraru draws on Foucault’s theoretical framework to argue that postmodern authorial practices of appropriation—which include deliberate theft of literary property—are predicated upon the postmodern “technology” of the self: “And this is the ‘essence’ of Foucault’s ‘technology’ of authorship: the others are always, already inscribed, written into the fabric of the self” (71).

³ For an extensive discussion of the symbiotic relationship between memory and narrative, see James Olney’s influential study, *Memory and Narrative. The Weave of Life-Writing*, which traces the changes that the “twin powers of memory and narrative” have undergone, in both theory and practice, from Augustine to Samuel Beckett. According to Olney, “the twin powers of memory and narrative” constitute the “dual defining conditions of our being human”; “memory,” he writes, “enables and vitalizes narrative; in return, narrative provides form for memory, supplements it, and sometimes displaces it” (417).

⁴ Carey, while he too believes that “Writers always live in their heads” (qtd. in Koval), nevertheless gives his protagonist the freedom to tell his own story and, implicitly, the freedom to talk back to his creator.

⁵ In both Carey’s and Dickens’s London, the child comes not, as in Wordsworth, “trailing clouds of glory” from his divine home, but like the Blakean innocent, he inherits a ‘prison-house’ of limitations and prohibitions—weighing down on his sense of self.

⁶ Dickens gave full imaginative treatment to his fear of debt and debtor’s prison in *Little Dorritt* (1855-7).

⁷ Later another of Catherine Hogarth’s sisters, Georgina, moved in with the Dickenses, and their close relationships prompted rumors of an affair (Ackroyd 812-15).

⁸ A psychotherapeutic method introduced by German physician Antonio Mesmer (1734-1815) in 1779, mesmerism was a forerunner to the modern practice of hypnotism, which in turn opened the way into the unconscious. According to Mesmer and his followers, mesmerism posited a special correlation between mind and matter, between mental forces within and cosmic forces without. For a full discussion of both mesmerism and its influence on Dickens's fiction, see Kaplan's *Dickens and Mesmerism. The Hidden Springs of Fiction*.

⁹ In the context of Dickens's rivalry with Thackeray, the name of the pompous lawyer Makepeace, who talks Phipps into murdering Maggs, is therefore particularly telling.

¹⁰ As Lettis astutely observed, the line between "fictional and actual humanity" was for Dickens "thin indeed, at times almost nonexistent: the creations of his own stories and those of others had for him as powerful a force of conviction, of emotional involvement, as any in the real world" (140).

¹¹ Kaplan argues that Dickens was sometimes face to face with that "awful likeness of himself" (a phrase from the opening to *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, 1848), yet "he was more likely to evade the confrontation in his life than in his fiction" (111). In other words, "'Charles' saw what he wanted to see and often he did not want to see 'Charles'" (112).

¹² Along the same lines, Kaplan notes that, "For Dickens, art is such a mirror on which the real can be condensed and intensified; the artist is like the mesmeric operator, staring into the mirror, seeing within it heightened truths and powers, and transmitting them to his subjects, his audience" (113).

CHAPTER VI
THE BURIED LIFE: DISTANCING AND DISPLACEMENT
IN COLM TÓIBÍN'S *THE MASTER*

“Large and full and high the future still opens. It is now indeed that I may do the work of my life. And I will. . . . I have only to face my problems.”

(James qtd. in Edel, HJ4: 95)

“He lived, at times, he felt, as if his life belonged to someone else, a story that had not yet been written, a character who had not been fully imagined.”

(Tóibín, *Master* 111)

Each time a writer summons up “The Master,” Adeline R. Tintner has rightly observed, “there is personal revision or comment, a change in the picture that James composed, some new figure in the carpet” (9). Referring to Bruce Elliot’s *The Village* (1982), a novel featuring characters whose names have clear Jamesean associations, Tintern finds it ironic that, “the man who had been caricatured in the popular press of 1905 because of his aestheticism, expatriatism, and complex language, was in 1982 regarded as a cultural hero, the modern artist who atones for his hidden sexuality by his talent” (129). Today, she adds, “an interest in James’s sexual orientation usurps the attention given by scholars in the past to his work rather than to his life” (129).¹

Never did Henry James's grip on the literary imagination seem stronger than in 2004, which witnessed the publication of David Lodge's *Author, Author* and Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, two novels that attest to the "afterlife of his figure and fiction" (Tintner). While both works treat—the first at greater length than the latter—James's unsuccessful foray into playwriting and subsequent efforts to shore up his finances by returning to fiction, I have found that *The Master* most sharply evokes the challenges to the intellectual and emotional discipline of the novelist's art during a period (1895 to 1901) of personal and professional upheaval. Leon Edel, James's eminent biographer, has fittingly described these years as "treacherous," for they "harbored within them false prospects, false hopes, cruel deceptions, and a host of private demons" (HJ4: 115). In addition to the deaths and suicides of both family members and friends, James had to face the disappointing reception of *Princess Casamassima* and *The Bostonians*. He latched onto theater as a lifeline, but his plays also failed, culminating with the disastrous launch of *Guy Domville* on the London stage in 1895. Resigned to being without a large public for his work, James withdrew more and more within himself. When he returned to fiction afterwards, James did so with new confidence in his powers of sympathetic imagination, which, in the absence of a satisfying emotional—and physical—life, allowed him to discover "all passions, all combinations" (qtd. in Edel 267).

James himself recognized, however, that in order to "do the work of his life," he had to face those "problems" he had kept "shrouded in silence." As he wrote his old friend William Dean Howells, "all that is of the ineffable—*too deep and pure for any utterance*. Shrouded in sacred silence let it rest" (qtd. in Edel 95, italics mine). *The Master* compels our attention because of the subtle way in which it articulates the ineffable shrouded in the "silent art" (Tóibín 65) of James's fiction. The problem most intimate to the novelist—the desire whose name he dared not speak—was the secret he guarded most fiercely and locked into the "invulnerable granite" of his

art. In *The Master*, as we will see, homoerotic desire figures as lack, difference, and otherness. Similar to *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *The Master* allows us to see the creator constantly inventing himself as he constructs fictional worlds and personae that conceal as much as reveal, and that leave him uneasily poised between desire and gratification. For, if “the figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they *feel* their respective situations”—as James declares in a passage from the preface to *The Princess Casamassima* (vii)—then the eponymous hero of Toibín’s novel engages our interest precisely because the author brings him close to Lambert Strether’s startling recognition in *The Ambassadors*: the revelation of a “deep truth of . . . intimacy” precisely where he (like Strether) “labored not to notice or acknowledge it—in other words, where he has not dared to feel it” (313).²

Equally significant, the phrase “too deep and pure for any utterance” is echoed at a turning point in Toibín’s account of James’s attempts to salvage his writing career. Just a few days after the *Guy Domville* debacle, while vacationing in the countryside, James picked up the idea for a story whose “ramifications and possibilities lifted him out of the gloom of his failure” (64), even as it opened up old wounds. The ghost story told him by his friend Benson’s father, the archbishop of Canterbury, became the stimulus to a flashback about James’s early life and the close bond with his invalid sister, Alice. “The Turn of the Screw” took shape from his idea of a “fused self”: “Two lives, but close to one experience”—the irrevocable loss of their parents (63). As he drew out the scenes in their “full drama and fright,” the story acquired a pressing urgency. James felt his self-confidence and determination growing to the point where he “was ready to begin again, to return to the old high art of fiction with ambitions now *too deep and pure for any utterance*” (64). The novella that emerged has been interpreted as a “quest for the governess to find out the secret of the ghosts’ relation to the children, to get the children to confess this relation, and thereby purge and save them from the ghosts” (Flatley 104).

Toibín has his protagonist embark on a similar quest, in which the ghosts haunting James's dreams continue to shape and inspire his waking life. The novel opens with a disturbing dream "about the dead—familiar faces and the others, half-forgotten ones, fleetingly summoned up" (1), suggesting the weight of family and personal past impinging upon James. These pages are shot through with death images triggered by the painful loss of his mother and sister—"the two people whom he had loved most in his life" and to whom he could not offer consolation (2). James invokes the power of work and sleep to numb his pain, to distract him, "from the vision of these two women who were lost to him," and yet whose "unquiet" ghosts often came to him (3). As the novel unfolds, other ghosts come to haunt James—the specters of his father, his cousin Minnie, and his intellectual companion, Constance Fenimore Woolson.

Thus anchored in the protagonist's memory and desire that render him vulnerable to a return of the repressed, *The Master* bespeaks Tóibín's intense preoccupation with the themes of alienation he has explored in *The Blackwater Lightship* (a finalist for The Booker Prize) and tragic lack of self-awareness, which finds its best expression in *The Heather Blazing*. As I will demonstrate in what follows, the novel is charged with the energies and anxieties of both sexual self-definition and cultural validation, suggesting that James would be able to achieve the latter only at the expense of the first. In other words, for James to achieve literary mastery and gain cultural recognition, he had first to *master himself* by accepting, more or less consciously, the renunciations exacted by the creative life. Paradoxically, however, it is James's ascetic self-discipline that, as Tóibín remarked in an interview, liberates him and "enables [him] to imagine more fully, more deeply, the outside world in certain ways." By showing James's perseverance through difficult times, Tóibín creates a broader understanding of his character, so that in some sense "the experience is universal." Let us now look more closely at how Toibín puts these

seemingly contradictory pictures together to complicate, indeed problematize, our sense of Henry James the man *and* the Master.

The Buried Life

“It seemed strange, almost sad, to him that he had produced and published so much, rendered so much that was private, and yet the thing that he most needed to write would never be seen or published, would never be known or understood by anyone.”

(Toibín, *Master* 9)

The Master takes its place alongside several recent books, including John Carlos Rowe’s *The Other Henry James* (1998) and Eric Haralson’s *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (2003) that transform “the pompous figure of James as master of the novel . . . into the vulnerable, sexually anxious, and lonely writer struggling with the new modern art and new age he had helped make possible” (Rowe xxiv).³ Its title notwithstanding, Toibín’s book partakes of this process of demystifying the monolithic notion of authorship carefully crafted by James in the eighteen prefaces to the New York Edition of his work. Collected by R.P. Blackmur into *The Art of the Novel* (1934), these “enshrine,” as David McWhirter argues, “not only Henry James, but a conception of authorship—the author as an autonomous, unitary, originating and decidedly masculine genius—that seems increasingly untenable in the wake of poststructuralism, and more than a little suspect in the context of recent historicist, cultural, and gender criticism” (3). Like the other author fictions examined so far, *The Master* deserves scrutiny for the postmodern critique it effects, in that it replaces the canonized image of James the master formalist (and the implicit, reified notion of the impersonal author) with a situated subject constructed along the lines of gender and sexuality. Coexisting with the portrait of James, the morally responsible artist

animated by a keen interest in the politics of the private realm, is a portrait of James the man filled with “vague and uneasy hopes and dreams” (Toibín, *The Master* 282).

As Toibín has indicated, the “germ” of his novel can be found in Fred Kaplan’s biography of James. Here Kaplan writes: “Something extraordinary began happening to James in the mid-1890s, and more frequently in the next decade. He began to fall in love with young men.” “James’s self-consciousness,” Kaplan continues, “seemed either impossibly innocent or embarrassingly explicit” (qtd. in Toibín, *Love* 30). In the novel’s “Afterword,” Toibín also acknowledges his indebtedness to Leon Edel’s celebrated but somewhat outdated biography of Henry James as well as to Sheldon Novick’s *Henry James: The Young Master*, among others. Novick takes issue with Edel’s heavily psychoanalytic interpretation of James as a man whose passion for life was confined to observing rather than living it and whose homosexuality Edel regarded as a “kind of failure: The ‘passive male’ in the Freudian account was wounded and frightened by a powerful mother and a weak, absent father. This mythic figure retreated from the terrors of heterosexual rivalry into the world of delicate imagination” (xiii). Novick wonders, “why should we suppose that [James] accomplished so many miracles of the imagination?”—i.e. that he imagined, instead of actually experiencing the trials and tribulations of passion. Novick concludes from James’s essays, stories, and letters that, “one could hardly distinguish between the vividly imagined and the intensely lived” (393).

Toibín also believes in a continuity between reading fictions and reading lives, and in *The Master* he achieves a fusion of what James called the “real” and “romantic” modes of knowledge: thus, if “the real represents . . . the things we cannot possibly not know” about James—i.e. the recorded biographical facts—“the romantic stands . . . for the things . . . that reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge” of his thought and desire, and that Toibín gleans from James’s writings (LC2: 1062-3). In seizing both upon recent biographical findings and upon

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's queer interpretation of "The Beast in the Jungle," Tóibín arrives in *The Master*, as he did first in his collection of articles and essays, *Love in a Dark Time: And Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature* (2001), at a "darker" interpretation of the "life that James chose to live, or was forced to live."⁴ Traditionally read as a parable of the artist's life, of how the artist is forced to choose (in Yeats's phrase) "perfection of the life, or of the work," the story "The Beast in the Jungle" has been more recently seen to embody "James's nightmare vision of never having lived, of having denied love and sexuality" (Kaplan qtd. in Tóibín, *Love* 34-35). Like Marcher, the protagonist of this story, James "has failed to love," has been "unable to love" because "he could not deal with his own sexuality." As Tóibín goes on to say, "in 'The Beast in the Jungle,' James's solitary existence is shown in its most frightening manifestation: a life of pure coldness" (35).

For Tóibín, *The Master* offered a chance to probe more deeply into this life of "pure coldness" and to subtly illuminate not only the work resulting from it, but also the creative process that produced it. As such, *The Master* offers a subtle novelistic exploration of the homoerotic undercurrents in James's life and a provocative demystification of his work's "ambiguous aesthetic air" (James, Preface v). Relying on the psychologically intimate third-person style that "the Master" perfected and elegantly weaving his subject's words in and out of his own, Tóibín dramatizes the internal struggle for mastery over James's insecure and divided self. Indeed, far from being at war merely with Puritan mores, or with a socially and culturally uneducated reading public, James was also at odds with himself. His war "had been private, within his family and deep within himself" (*Master* 111).

James's formula for the self-image he constructs for his readers is articulated in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*: "Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious" (AN 46). But, Eric Haralson perceptively asks, "how conscious was this highly

conscious artist of the sexual meanings of his art?" Haralson considers that "criticism is obliged to indulge in conjecture on this point" because James's "case" is "instrumental to the evolving and politically important history of gay male writers" (22-23). The Henry James the critic hopes to evoke in his study of the relationship between James and queer modernity is "neither a perfect being (that misleading icon 'the Master') nor a perfectly neurotic being, but just various, interesting, human, and (yes, after all) queer enough to express his splendidly nuanced 'self' in a splendidly nuanced body of writing" (23). This statement accurately describes the multilayered portrait fleshed out by fictional means in *The Master*. For Toibín, as for Haralson, James was "so deliberate, so careful to control, that he could have left out anything he chose from his fiction" (*Love* 32). In one of his letters to Morton Fullerton, James exhorts his readers to "read into my meager and hurried words—well, read into them everything" (qtd. in Flatley 103). *The Master* alludes to fictions (*Roderick Hudson*, "The Author of Beltraffio" and "The Pupil"), in which James came close to "losing this control" and into which critics have "read" pretty much everything, including evidence of his gay sensibility.

James's internal repression mirrored an externally repressive system. Freedom from national prejudices was central to his cosmopolitan vision, but, Toibín reminds us, James could never actually free himself from the alienating cultural definitions of personality and human relations that were being perpetuated by a commercial, philistine, protestant, and heterosexist social order. Early in *The Master*, Henry—as Toibín refers to his character throughout—is told that, as an American abroad, he has the "great advantage" of being "anybody." This echoes a statement that James himself made in 1876, when he thought it "a great blessing" to be an American who can "deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically) claim our property wherever we find it" (qtd. in Crunden 59). This Henry "loved the yearning openness of Americans, their readiness for experience, their

expectation and promise,” as opposed to the ‘dry nature’ of the English, sure of their own place and “unready for change” (83). Both family and cultural pressures compelled James to turn to writing—in which he saw the “*only real basis of freedom and sanity*” (SL xix). By the same token, he conceived of his characters as his “projected performers” through whom he could make and remake himself in a changing culture (qtd. in Snyder 114). Hence James’s symbiotic relationship with his art: the act of writing created the author and vice versa. Yet the Master’s imagination, Toibín suggests in his essay collection, was not as “fearless” as that of other influential writers, from Oscar Wilde to Thomas Gunn, who, while also living in a “dark time,” nevertheless managed to reveal, albeit seldom, the “explicit drama of being themselves” (*Love* 6).⁵

Throughout *The Master*, Toibín pits the writer’s need for social engagement and public recognition against his longing for solitude and privacy. James’s aversion to “the deadly epidemic of publicity” (AN 284)—translated into a “tremendous desire to control his public persona” (Pearson 42). The promotion of James’s public image carried with it the need to guard, even conceal, his private self, “which no one in England knew or understood” (Toibín 108). He would simply not serve up his private life as public fodder. For instance, when copies of his sister Alice’s diary were privately published in 1894, he became “scared and disconcerted—I mean alarmed—by the sight of so many private allusions and names in print” (*Portable* 479). He burned his copy, one of only four published. Like Dickens, who had built a large bonfire at Gad’s Hill, piling upon it the accumulated correspondence of several decades, James built, a similar fire in his Lamb House garden, burning most of the letters he had received through 1908. In 1915, he destroyed many other personal papers. As Toibín notes, “[r]emaining invisible, becoming skilled in the art of self-effacement,” even to those he had known so long, “gave him satisfaction” (212). In Paris and London, secrecy, pretense, and duplicity ruled, making the need

to know or disclose what was hidden even more urgent, especially for a writer with James's insatiable curiosity (5). While always "ready to listen," he was not prepared to "reveal the mind at work, the imagination, or the depth of feeling" (211-12).

Henry's mind "moved into areas that would always have to remain obscure to those around him" (99), as when he pondered the secret meaning of a memory triggered by the name of his cousin, Gus Baker, who had been killed in the Civil War. Five years earlier, when the James family had moved back to Newport from Europe so that William could study art, Henry had come upon his cousin standing naked on a pedestal while the students were sketching him. The sight of the young man's beautiful and manly body was "stored away" in an "entirely private world" hidden behind the "social mask" (100).⁶ The Master's repressed homosexuality also surfaces in his secret attraction to a manservant, his unrequited passion for the Russian painter Paul Joukowsky, and his quiet yearning for the young Norwegian-American sculptor Hendrik Andersen. And last, but not least, Toibín evokes an erotically charged scene between James and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., when, in the late spring of 1865, the two slept naked in the same bed. Yet, Toibín is careful to add, there is "no evidence that James had a physical relationship with any of these men" (Toibín, *Love* 30). Edel has also found the evidence "ambiguous and inconclusive." "Like most Victorians," he explains, "James kept the doors of his bedroom shut" (Edel, HJ4: 315). But this does not prevent Toibín from imagining the writer's life behind closed doors and even opening those doors a little. Unlike Edel, Toibín would not defend James so easily. He would not make full allowance, as Edel does, for "James's long puritan years, the confirmed habits of denial, the bachelor existence, in which erotic feeling had to be channeled back"—sublimated—"into strenuous work," a sort of marriage to the Muse, as it were.

The "marriage," Toibín further suggests, could not have always been happy. The encroachment of journalism and advertising upon the world of publishing, as well as the changes

in the composition of the reading public were, to the imagination of fin de siècle writers, James among them, unsettling developments. Feeling completely demoralized, he saw himself as a novelist who “had fallen upon evil times,” when neither editors nor publishers “wanted” him. In the face of a new generation of writers, the “sense of being almost finished weighed him down” (12).⁷ Theater promised to offer him a new lease on life, but the actual productions only added to a state he called “embarrassment.” Significantly, in Volume XV of the New York Edition, James informs us that his fictions about writers emerged from the “hidden stores” of his own experience and imagination as a “homogeneous group.” These tales, completed in 1895, are gathered in the volume entitled *Embarrassments* published early in 1896. The more obvious embarrassment, conveyed in “The Figure in the Carpet,” is “his sense of being a misunderstood author” (Edel, HJ4: 149).

James’s great public defeat came on January 5, 1895, the opening night of his historical play, *Guy Domville*, when he was booed off the stage by a riotous mob. *Guy Domville* centered on a rich Catholic heir torn, much like his creator, “between the marital life and the life of pure contemplation, the vicissitudes of human love and a life dedicated to higher happiness” (13). Even before the first act was over, the paying public became impatient with the drama and began treating it as comedy, their laughter turning to jeers. This incident, amply documented by James’s biographers, represents the climax of Lodge’s narrative.⁸ That cold, damp night, a nervous James decided to attend *An Ideal Husband*, the newest play by his rival, Oscar Wilde. As he approached the Haymarket, he was struck by the “levity of those who were entering the theater, they looked like people ready to enjoy themselves thoroughly. He had never in his life, he felt, looked like that himself.” And unlike them, he found the play “feeble and vulgar,” silly, artificial, “badly done.” Far from calming James, Wilde’s play only intensified his uneasiness. Upon the conclusion of his own performance, he was led on stage by the play’s actor-manager George

Alexander, ostensibly to enjoy the curtain call but in reality to receive the boos and jeers of many in the audience. He returned to De Vere Gardens in a state of shock. These had been, he said, “the most horrible hours of my life” (SL 124).

The failure of *Guy Domville* brought home to Henry the “melancholy fact that nothing he did would ever be popular or generally appreciated” (Toibín 19). He began to feel that “he was destined to write for the few, perhaps for the future, yet never to reap the rewards that he would relish now, such as his own house and a beautiful garden and no anxiety about what was to come” (20). His fears were only partly justified, for, in the summer of 1896, as transatlantic travel became easier, more and more of Henry’s compatriots, friends, relatives, or other writers, expressed a wish to visit him in London, where “his name had been added to the list of the great local monuments,” such as the Tower, Westminster Abbey, and The National Gallery. Their letters made clear that visiting the capital “would lack all due shine were they to miss the famous writer and not receive his company and counsel” (Toibín 78).

It has often been said that James aimed his writing too high, that he was uncompromising about his art, which he deemed “pure and unconstrained by mere mercenary ambitions” (Toibín 20). In *The Master*, Toibín dramatizes James’s struggle to negotiate between the personal need to signal a highbrow literary aesthetic and the financial necessity of engaging an increasingly consumer culture. The writer’s industry, the novel suggests, arose as much from his desire for recognition as for income, or as much from his highly developed sense of vocation as from economic constraints. Money became a pressing concern for Henry, who feared that the “reduced circumstances” would reinforce his “public humiliation” (19). He did not actively seek the “hard doom of general popularity” that befell his friend Du Maurier following the success of his novel *Trilby*. Nonetheless he wanted to succeed in the marketplace without compromising his sacred art. “It mattered to him how he was seen,” and it pleased him to be seen as both one

who effortlessly produced popular works and one who devoted himself in “solitude and selfless application to a noble art” (20). He hoped to write his way out of “all of these melancholies” by reminding himself of the need to “Produce again—produce; produce better than ever and all will be well” (L3: 513).

James’s love for the theater carried over into his fiction, particularly in a predilection for the “*scenic method*,” or, what he called, “the divine principle of the Scenario,” which, in the late 1890s, became “my imperative, my only salvation” (qtd. in Crunden 69). Toibín makes effective use of James’s “scenic progression” technique through which the writer follows the character’s perceptions and memories in a sequence of settings. As readers, we accompany him in his continental wanderings and delight with him in the elegance of Paris, the sensuous beauty and warmth of Italy, the splendor of Rome. Dublin, on the other hand, struck James as a “queer, shabby, sinister, sordid place” (SL 191). To relieve the strain on his nerves after the *Guy Domville* debacle, Henry traveled to Ireland, visiting with Lord Houghton, the new lord lieutenant at Dublin Castle, and Lord Wolseley, who was commander-in-chief of Her Majesty’s forces. While both invitations showed that Henry was “still very much *persona grata* in the high world,” the actual visit brought with it a strong sense of estrangement, the “deep sadness of exile” in the very country of Henry’s forefathers. Hence the strategies of detachment through which he negotiated the urgent emotions triggered by his stay at the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham, as the Wolseleys’ guest. Since everything there, from silverware to guests, was “imported” from England, Henry felt a “great stranger, with nothing to match his own longings, observing the world as a mere watcher from a window” (Toibín 44).

The Master teems with images of doors, windows, and terraces from which the viewer (in this case James) takes possession of the scene in order to convert it into a text, whether a novel or a short story. Ross Posnock has interpreted the window as a metaphor for James’s state

of consciousness, one that is acutely aware of and receptive to difference, open, that is, to the fluid possibilities of modernity. For to be modern, as Wilde's example had shown, was to be willing, or "curious" enough, to venture into the strange territory of otherness, to never be one or the Other, but always multiple. Posnock regards James's curiosity as "a form of psychic energy that shapes a selfhood at once instrumental and contemplative, permeable and hoarding" (21). As the impetus behind cultural inquiry, curiosity allowed both Wilde and James to "transgress genteel boundaries" (Posnock 20) and interrogate constructions of masculinity. But unlike Wilde, who threw caution away and experimented with a wider range of sexual identities, encoding a forbidden homosexuality in his depictions of beautiful young men, James did not openly challenge standards of reticence in sexual matters.⁹ In Posnock's terms, James, unlike Wilde, "does not advertise his coming out with a yellow silk handkerchief and knee breaches" (5-6). Much more cautious both on and off the page, James remained safely above the fray of the scandal implicating Wilde, often displaying "grace under pressure." This becomes apparent in *The Master* when Mr. Webster, another one of the Wolseleys' guests, tries to make public his suspicions of Henry's homosexuality by suggesting he follow Wilde's example and marry as a disguise for his dangerous inclination. Throughout their conversation, Henry manages to preserve his dignity and keep the young politician at bay. Toibín's intent, however, is to strip away the defenses of the genteel, decorous Jamesean self, puncturing its complacencies and exposing a point of crisis, which, as we have seen, involved sexual excitement, often leading to bursts of creativity.

The detached figure, watching the lives of others, is recurrent in James's work—Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller*, Rowland Mallet (whom Novick compares to James) in *Roderick Hudson*, John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle," and last but not least, Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*. Toibín dwells on this figure to account for the shared intimacy between

Henry and Alice James. As Henry reflects, they both “had never been fully included in the passion of events and places, becoming watchers and nonparticipants.” Unlike their eldest brother, William, and then Wilky and Bob, who had both fought in the Civil War, Henry and Alice had been unready for the world and unprotected (Tofbín 47). Their childhood see-sawing between Europe and America made both of them “long for security and settlement” (80). Dragged “from city to city, hotel to apartment, tutor to school,” they “knew themselves to be strange,” and so they “learned to lean on each other” (50).

The worst time for Alice was the period before and just after Williams’s marriage to a woman who was everything she was not—“pretty, practical, and immensely healthy”—and whose name, “most cruelly,” was also Alice. The next blow came when her mother died and when Henry feared her “final and complete disintegration.” To his surprise, Alice managed to hold things together better than he had thought she could. But after their father’s death within a year, “her act fell apart.” The only thing left Alice was her close friendship with Katherine Loring, “whose intelligence matched hers and whose strength equaled her weakness in its intensity” (56). Miss Loring accompanied Alice to England, caring for her, tolerating her “strong opinions and morbid talk,” and admiring her courage in the face of death.¹⁰ Since he had not been present at his mother’s or father’s deathbeds, Henry was profoundly affected by Alice’s long agony in the early months of 1892: “He had described dying in his books, but he had not known about this” (61). Watching her die, he thought again of how similar their lives were: “They had both recoiled from engagements, deep companionship, the warmth of love” (62).

The two novels Henry wrote during Alice’s stay in England were “saturated with the peculiar atmosphere of his sister’s world.” *The Bostonians* captured the “dilemma of a woman brought up in a free-thinking family which confined its free thought to conversation and

remained respectable and conformist in every other way” (Toibín 59). The eponymous heroine of *The Princess Casamassima* embodied one half of Alice—“subtle, brilliant, and darkly powerful”—while the other half, Rosy Muniment, was “a strange bedizened little invalid,” confined to her bed (59). Similarly, as already indicated, in Henry’s mind, the ghost story told him by the archbishop of Canterbury, fused with memories of his sister: “Two beings with one sensibility, one imagination, vibrating with the same nerves, the same suffering” (63).

Throughout *The Master*, Toibín connects James’s fictions to both his inner and outer life in subtle, intriguing ways. His approach is selective, highlighting certain concerns that were foremost in James’s mind during the “Middle Years”—his need for a sizable reading public, his aversion to the vulgar literary marketplace, his longing for a “room of his own,” and his interest in dramatizing sexual rivalries and implicit homosexuality—and thrusting others, such as James’s friendship with George du Maurier, into the background. Toibín, unlike Lodge, is concerned less with the “historicity of the real James” (Woods) than with the personal, the intimate, and the psychosexual. James’s thinking about his characters and themes in *The Master* is consistent with the aesthetic theory he developed in “The Art of Fiction” (1884), where he redefines experience as an analytic, reflective process in the “chamber of consciousness,” the novel as a “personal, direct impression of life, and the novelist as “one of the people on whom nothing is lost” (*Portable* 432, 435). The “reality” reflected by the character’s individual consciousness is a function of memory, and the reader engages with James-as-character in an act of re-seeing “that” which fueled his creative imagination.

The Master underscores the sense in which the emotional and psychic “growing up” of Henry James can be traced in the depths of the works he produced between 1895 and 1900, and the writing of which is said to have served a therapeutic function.¹¹ James himself speaks of the creative process as “celestial, soothing, [and] sanctifying” (qtd. in Edel, HJ4: 267). But Toibín

cannot help asking whether the wounds were completely healed, or merely anaesthetized. He sees James as an artist who wrote out of his own nightmares, but who lived off others' experiences as well. By contrast with Edel, Novick stresses that James drew on the plenitude and fluidity of modern experience in order to create a new kind of realistic fiction: "The point is not that James was a closeted gay man, but that he had vivid memories of the ordinary experiences of life; his book were spun from this and *not neurotic fantasies*, as past biographers have claimed" (qtd. in Tintern 444; emphasis added). Thus James's sensuous and responsive nature made up for a chaste life, allowing him to absorb the "spectacle of human life" and feel its energy on his own pulses.

Its emphasis on James's consciousness notwithstanding, Toibín's novel does mirror the cultural anxieties of the fin de siècle, when scientific knowledge and capitalism, the fragmentation of truths and values, the relaxation of moral standards, along with the collapse of the distinction between private and public, drastically transformed social and intellectual life.¹² As David Lodge remarks in his novel about James, the "seismic shift" caused by these converging forces "made it impossible to for a practitioner of the art of fiction to achieve both excellence and popularity, as Scott and Balzac, Dickens and George Eliot, had done in their prime" (348).

Thus, we come to realize, those particular stories which James deemed typical of "certain modern situations" (Toibín 76) intrigued him precisely because they resonated so deeply with his own situation as an intellectual caught uneasily between the innocence and naiveté of the New World and the decadence and worldly wisdom of the Old, essentially English, culture. For instance, the Waldo Storys and the Maud Howe Elliots saw James as not only a fellow New Englander who, like them, had made his home in Europe, but as "an artist who had chronicled and given some significance to their peculiar aura, the strange dilemma and drama of their

presence in Europe” (259). He also shared in their drama, for “each book he had written, each scene described, each character created, had become an aspect of him, had entered into his driven spirit and lay there much as the years themselves had done” (271). During his stay in Rome in 1899, which he had first seen thirty years earlier, Henry is reminded of the characters he has imagined here, “figures for whom Rome was the ground of their making and their undoing, a place of exile but also a place of refuge” (264). Back then, “We all liked you,” the Baroness von Rabe tells Henry, “and I suppose you liked us as well, but you were too busy gathering material to like anyone too much. You were charming, of course, but you were like a young banker collecting our savings. Or a priest listening to our sins” (265).

If the drama gave James a new form for the novel, European society provided him with a rich feast of materials, of life. His exposure to the Old World during his formative years instilled in James a preference for Europe’s cosmopolitan centers over America. In Paris James associated with Flaubert and Zola as well as Russian expatriates, including the novelist Ivan Turgenev and his cousin, Nicolas Turgenev. At the latter’s immense palace on the Rue de Lille James met a young Russian painter, Paul Vassilievich Zhukovsky, who was to “mean everything” to him (Toibín 8). They saw each other often during the spring of 1876, but twenty years later James would suppress any conscious thought of his friend: “His presence had been buried beneath the daily business of writing and remembering and imagining” (8). He particularly recalled a rainy evening when he stood, tears in his eyes, gazing at Paul’s window, straining to see his face, waiting for a sign to take the “step into the impossible, the vast unknown” (9). Like “The Beast in the Jungle,” Toibín’s novel posits waiting as a metaphor for life—will something/someone come to lend Henry’s life meaning? Or is life, to borrow Yeats’s phrase, only a “long preparation for something that never happens”? Toibín’s book points to the latter: “No one came or went, and Paul’s face did not appear at the window. He wondered now

if these hours were not the truest he had ever lived” (9). Toibín’s account of this incident closely follows the story James told his friend and confidant Edmund Gosse, who recorded it in his memoirs as follows:

He spoke of standing on the pavement of a city, in the dusk, and of gazing upwards across the misty street, watching for the lighting of a lamp in a window on the third story. And the lamp blazed out, and through bursting tears he strained to see what was behind it, the unapproachable face. And for hours he stood there, wet with the rain, brushed by the phantom hurrying figures of the scene, and never from behind the lamp was for one moment visible the face. (qtd. in Novick 347)

In the other half of the story, “the rest of the story” that James “would never allow himself to put into words,” Paul and Henry would acknowledge their desire for each other and the impossible would happen (Toibín 10).¹³

What Henry James deemed “impossible” Oscar Wilde made notorious. What the first dreamed of the other lived up. A few days after Henry’s return from Ireland, his friends Edmund Gosse and Jonathan Sturges brought him news of the imminent scandal courted by Wilde, who was “flaunting his money, his new success and fame,” as well as his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. James’s attitude toward Wilde was a mixture of fascination and repulsion; as he wrote to his brother William, after Wilde’s fall from grace, “Wilde had never been interesting to me” until now when “Wilde threw caution away and seemed ready to make himself into a public martyr” (68).¹⁴ James feared the “Wilde effect,” which, as we have seen in chapter IV, entails the dissolution of the person into personality, the obliteration of the private and the personal by publicity. The greatest irony of James’s relation to Wilde was that it was “built upon a violently disavowed recognition of a kindred spirit” (Haralson 143). Purposely dissociating himself from Wilde’s scandalous sexuality, and, more generally, from an effete practice of writing, James would verge toward a modernist style and technique characterized by obscurity and obliquity. But despite the tendency, in his critical writings, to privilege the

“masculine” side of the binary opposition, in practice James exhibited that rare quality which Virginia Woolf claimed as the mark of true genius—the androgynous mind. His narrative strategies and concern with psychology and gender then bear out his progressive impulses and feminist sympathies.

James’s deeply ambivalent feelings toward Wilde can be better understood in light of his secret appreciation of another aesthete and defender of homosexuality, John Addington Symonds, to whom Toibín also alludes. James had met Symonds only on one occasion, in 1877, and corresponded with him only once, in 1884, but he read his privately printed pamphlets¹⁵ and passionate poems about what was called in those years “the love that dare not speak its name.” When there was some suggestion that Symonds might be homosexual, he admitted to being “devoured with curiosity as to this further revelation. Even a postcard (in covert words) would relieve the suspense” (qtd. in Toibín, *Love* 30-31). In 1884, James professed to share Symonds’s “unspeakably tender” feelings for Italy, and urged that, “victims of a common passion should sometimes exchange a look” (L3: 29-31). James’s notebook entry of 26 March 1884, a month after he had corresponded with Symonds, contains the framework of a story inspired by the unhappy marriage between Symonds—the “husband impregnated—even to morbidity—with the spirit of Italy, the love of Beauty, or art, the aesthetic view of life”—and his “narrow, cold, Calvinistic wife, a rigid moralist” (qtd. in Edel, HJ4: 125). In Toibín’s account, Henry conceived the idea for this story while listening to Gosse’s idle talk about the Symonds and imagining the clash between the wife’s “search for moral purpose” and the husband’s “search of ultimate beauty” (75). As James subsequently developed this conflict in “The Author of Beltraffio” (1884), the couple’s struggle for possession of their small, beautiful son ends with the mother allowing the boy to die to protect him from his father’s writings (75). Interestingly enough, Henry also decided to bring in an “outsider, An American, an admirer of

the father's work, one of the few who understood the father's genius" (Toibín 76). Mark Ambient's misguided young admirer also embodies the type of the decadent aesthete James had portrayed in Gilbert Osmond in *Portrait of a Lady*. The appearance of the story in the *English Illustrated Magazine* frightened Gosse, who "knew how much he had contributed," and prompted his criticism of what he perceived to be a "dishonest" and "somehow underhand" use of factual material and real people. Gosse objected to Henry's "art of fiction as a cheap raid on the real and the true" (76), but soon forgot his objections and continued to supply Henry with his "usual store of gossip" (76).

Toibín draws on James's notebooks and correspondence to uncover the biographical and cultural origins of his work, and thus depict the world lying submerged in the depths of his being, as well as to create a vivid picture of the artist who managed to "combine a questioning inner life with a quick sense of the social" (Toibín 86). One particular scene James recorded in 1895 was about a meeting Jonathan Sturges had in Paris with William Dean Howells, then almost sixty. Expressing regret for his rather late discovery of Paris, with the fresh sensations it stirred, Howells exhorted Sturges to "live all you can, it's a mistake not to. It doesn't much matter what you do—but live" (79). Listening to Sturges relay Howells's poignant message, Henry felt it was intended for him. Five years later, while working on *The Ambassadors*, these same words he had set down in his notebook would speak to him again.

Henry understood Howells's response to the seductive beauty of Paris, for he also liked to think of himself as a "well-traveled cosmopolitan gentleman." Now, however, he preferred spending his summers at Point Hill, near Rye, a soothing place that filled him with a "strange contentment" (Toibín 82). But the physical act of writing proved more and more difficult due to the increasing pain in his right wrist. At William's advice, he resorted to the services of a stenographer, a silent Scot named William MacAlpine, who seemed efficient, trustworthy, and

competent. He assured his friends that “talking his words into a machine” did not simplify his art of fiction. The method saved time and, most importantly, led to a significant development in James’s baroque writing style, characterized by indirections and qualifications, colloquialisms and elaborate metaphors that could do justice to the complex inner workings of his imagination.

Henry’s only visitor in those days of “industry and indolence” during May of 1896 was his boyhood friend, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., whom Henry had known in Newport and Boston. His guest’s nervous self-consciousness, stemming as it did from an effort to *ensure that the personal and the carnal would be held in check and not have to be on parade* (Toibín 84; emphasis added) also characterized Henry, in his effort to cultivate a “polite and polished blankness” (211). Holmes had also become an important public figure, but Henry felt more at ease in his company than in his brother William’s intimidating presence: unlike William, Holmes did not make him “feel that every word he said, or every gesture, would be open to censure, or mockery” (93). Both James and Holmes belonged to a “fully respectable and oddly Puritan” world, “led by the inquiring, protean minds of their fathers and the deeply cautious, watchful eyes of their mothers. They both had a sense of their destiny,” but sought different ways to fulfill it. A man of the world, Holmes loved to talk lightly of women and solemnly of the Civil War in which he had seen many battles and came close to death. By contrast, Henry’s war “had been private, within his family and deep within himself” (111). Furthermore, both had known and loved the spontaneous and spirited Minnie Temple, Henry’s cousin.

Toibín shows the two friends reminiscing about the late spring of 1865, when, the Civil War over, they joined the Temple sisters in North Conway, New Hampshire. Also invited was another Civil War veteran, the future Harvard Law School luminary John Gray. Every time the talk returned to war and military exploits, Henry felt like the odd man out. His first publication, “The Story of a Year” was ostensibly, not a story about the war, but about a “girl’s heart” (98).

In return for Minnie's appreciation of the story, Henry began to imagine another one, eventually titled "Poor Richard," inspired by Minnie's efforts to "soften Gray, to make him more conscious of his soul than his uniform, of his deepest fears and longings rather than of his self-protective arm talk, suitably censored for ladies" (101). Hence the words she wrote to Gray in the last year of her life: "You must tell me something that you are sure is true." These words carried a particular resonance for Henry, bringing Minnie's "exacting presence" close to him (103). In particular, he recalled an argument Minnie once had with his father over women's social position and intellectual potential. Contrary to Henry Senior's belief that women are by nature inferior in both physical strength and intellect, Minnie insisted that being physically weaker than man does not necessarily mean a lack of understanding or of intelligence (88).¹⁶ Minnie's audacity was matched by her vivacity: in the shadow of "so much death"—first her parents' and then her brother's—"she had developed what was her most remarkable feature—a taste for life."

Henry's refusal to take Minnie to Italy when she had fallen ill now filled him with sorrow, guilt, and shame. Most unbearable was the thought that "he had preferred her dead rather than alive, that he had known what to do with her once her life was taken from her, but he had denied her when she asked him gently for help" (Toibín 115). But since he had "known her as the world had not," he could now offer her, in the world of fiction, "the experiences she would have wanted, and provide drama for a life which had been so cruelly shortened" (105). Haunted by her death in 1870, James sought to "lay the ghost by wrapping it . . . in the beauty and dignity of art" (*Portable* 503). As he worked on *The Portrait of a Lady*, the lines between reality and fiction converged and blurred: he was at moments unsure whether the scenes he wrote had "genuinely happened or whether his imagined world had finally come to replace the real" (107).¹⁷ He wondered if other writers before him, such as Hawthorne and Eliot, "had

written to make the dead come back to life, had worked all day and all night, like a magician or an alchemist, defying fate and time, and all the implacable elements to re-create a sacred life” (106).

Toibín, who is also in the business of recreating lives, dwells on the events of late spring of 1865 for yet another reason: to evoke the circumstances surrounding the alleged idyll between James and Holmes, who, while in North Conway, had to share a room with a single bed. Sleeping so close to his friend’s naked body made Henry’s heart beat fast: “He wondered if he would ever again be so intensely alive” and whether Holmes was “as conscious as he was of their bodies touching, or if he lay there casually,” unaware that Henry was burning inside (92). The following morning he “imagined that what had happened between them”—the mere touching of their bodies—“belonged to the secret night, the privacy that darkness brought” (94). Having lingered as an “obsession importunate to all his senses,” that sensation “made everything but itself irrelevant and tasteless” (94-95). As Henry would realize later, the few weeks in North Conway would be “all he needed to know in his life. In all his years as a writer he was to draw on the scenes he lived and witnessed at that time” (102). That spring marked a new beginning for James, his transition to manhood. In Novick’s account of this year, the place changes to “a rooming house in Cambridge and in his own shuttered bedroom in Ashburton Place,” where Henry “performed his first acts of love” (109). Years later, while on a visit to America, he recorded the memory in his journal, referring to his sexual initiation as the “*l’initiation premiere* (the divine, the unique)” in Cambridge and in Ashburton Place. . . . Ah, the ‘epoch-making’ weeks of the spring of 1865!” (109).¹⁸

Another life-changing discovery, reminiscent of Chatterton’s, occurred at about the same time that Henry’s father embarked on a spiritual quest for God’s “great good plan,” which, he believed, one could learn to decipher from books (148). Henry’s favorite reading was of a

different nature, however, as suggested by the large bundle he found under the stairs of the house in Newport. The bundle contained back numbers of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, which “sang to him in the privacy of his room like a choir of angels.” The modern-sounding names of Saint Beuve, the Goncourts, Mérimée, and Renan “opened for him a world of possibility beyond the suffocating dullness and domesticity and patriotism and religiosity.” They suggested to him “not only the modern mind at its most inquiring but the idea of style itself, of thinking as a kind of style” (Toibín 150). From then on he took comfort in the privacy and solitude of his room, “spellbound” with the French journal and with Balzac’s *Human Comedy*.

In those days, Henry also discovered Hawthorne, whose name was as familiar to him as that of Emerson or Thoreau, but whom he did not associate with the modern literature written in France. Later, in his biography of Hawthorne, James observed how difficult it had been for Hawthorne to write a realistic novel due to the tenuous fabric of American social life. The “paucity of tradition” and the “stultifying system of morals” in New England “would make any novelist miserable.” For if literature and art, manners and social graces “are left out, he thought, than for the novelist everything is left out” (Toibín 161). Here Toibín quotes almost verbatim from James’s 1879 critical biography of Hawthorne, in which he catalogued the obstacles facing young American novelists who were pursuing literature as a profession: “No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army . . . no literature, no novels, no museums . . .” (*Portable* 419). Hawthorne’s achievement in *The Scarlet Letter* was therefore surprising, and, upon rereading it, at Sargy Perry’s insistence, James also fell under his spell, so much so that he judged it “the finest piece of literature yet put forth in this country” (*Portable* 421). As he began to realize, Hawthorne had managed to eschew the pettiness, narrowness, and frigidity of New England, aiming instead for intensity (Toibín 162-63). Moreover, Hawthorne

was certainly not a “country bumpkin,” but a serious artist, well traveled and well read, “possibly one of the most sophisticated minds in America” (164). Hawthorne’s example inspired James to outstrip his achievement and become a novelist of European stature. In pursuit of this ambition, however, he would have his own set of obstacles—material, emotional, and psychological—to overcome.

One such problem, alluded to in *The Master*, was the “obscure hurt” Henry suffered as a youth when, in the effort to put out a fire, he found himself “jammed in the acute angle between two fences.” Although most critics assume reference to a back injury, it has been suggested that the “obscure hurt” psychologically, if not physically, unmanned the young Henry. Furthermore, contrary to James’s own claim,¹⁹ Auchincloss has noted that James sustained this injury six weeks *after*, and not before, Fort Sumter (emphasis added; 36). Auchincloss criticizes James not only for his nonparticipation in the war but also for his pretensions to heroism in his fiction, where, as Toibín also implies, observers are granted the same dignity and authority as participants (36). His overprotective mother made sure that “no criticism of him was uttered by anyone” (Toibín, *Master* 150) and even excused him when he had unwanted company. But Henry’s civilian status could not pass unnoticed, and so, to find a name for Henry’s “abstract ailment,” his father took him to see an eminent surgeon, Dr. Richardson, in Boston. Upon examining Henry, the doctor declared the injury to be nothing at all. He even made light of it and prescribed neither care nor caution. The diagnosis cleared up the mystery as much as it deepened it; a source of relief, especially for his mother, it caused Henry further worries, for what would his future be?

To avoid father’s planning his future for him, Henry communicated his wish to follow in his brother William’s footsteps and study law (160). His unspoken wish, however, was to have the summer “free from his father’s nervous, watchful eyes and his mother’s ministrations”

(160) so that he could indulge his voracious appetite for reading. Pursuing the fiction of his law career, Henry went up to Cambridge and found a room in the Divinity Hall. He attended the morning lectures at the law school, but the subjects (mathematics, psychology, and philosophy) that William found so intellectually stimulating left him cold. Instead Henry would examine the students, “studying the types”—most of them displaying a rigid Puritanism that was firmly established in the homes they had been brought up in—and “transforming them into characters and temperaments” (168). He continued to train himself in the craft of letters by going to theater, reading Sainte-Beuve, and attending Lowell’s lectures on French and English literature, as well as Emerson’s speech against slavery.

This course of action, he would later recognize, was also a way out of the madness of the war raging outside Newport. By immersing himself in the “lonely realm” of fiction, James was able, on the one hand, to “eschew the thrills and dangers of action,” and on the other, to make the war, “to the extent of which his magnificent imagination was capable, *his war*” (Auchincloss 34, 36). As Toibín’s Henry believed, “[i]t was not wisdom which kept him away,” but “something closer to cowardice,” and his delight was soon clouded by “guilt and regret and memories of what had happened to his brother Wilky” (146). Removed from the field of action, Henry developed an interest in the war’s “unwritten history” (146). In the summer of 1862, he visited the wounded and the sick in a field hospital at Portsmouth Grove. Sitting with one soldier after another, Harry listened attentively to their tales and felt a deep sympathy for them. One youth, in particular, impressed him with his stoicism: “battling for survival, he was expecting the worst, while hoping for home” (166). That evening, on the steamboat back to Newport, he thought of what he had seen and “felt involved for once in an America from which he had kept himself apart” (167). But, he also “wanted to be alone in his room,” wrapped up in

his reading. At that moment he realized the inviolate separateness of his self from another self, such as that of the injured soldier (167).

Wilky's life took a different course than Henry's. As his letters, from which Mrs. James would transcribe only the "most edifying" parts, seemed to indicate, Wilky "had taken to army life," believing in the rightness of his cause and showing readiness to fight for it. His idealism, which was firmly rooted in the "heart of things" from which Henry had cut himself off, seemed unshaken even after he got seriously injured in the disastrous attack by Confederate forces near Charleston harbor. He was brought home on a stretcher, closer to death than to life and covered with an old army blanket, whose earthly smell of mud and tobacco evoked to Henry a vision of the battlefields. The blanket represented for Henry "the most vivid testament to what his brother had been through" (177). Until then Henry's room had provided a refuge from the horror of the war, but now that the scene that so horrified him moved closer to home, Henry could no longer choose to avert his eyes (177). As the family was ministering to Wilky, Henry conceived the idea for "Poor Richard," a story about a boy who goes to war, leaving his mother and sweetheart behind. In writing this story, Henry felt that he came closest to what concerned him in his waking life and most of his dreams: the fate of his injured brother (183).

A deeper source for James's "embarrassment" than being a "misunderstood" man of letters, instead of a brave man of action,²⁰ was the "burden" of Miss Constance Fenimore Woolson's "unfathomed secret" (Edel, HJ4: 149). In *The Master*, Henry recalls their first meeting early in 1880 in Florence when he was writing *Portrait of a Lady*. "While she had read everything he had written, he had read nothing by her" (214). He did not venture to introduce her into Florentine society, but he called on her two or three mornings a week, and they went to museums and galleries or walked in the Boboli Gardens. As Toibín makes it clear, James needed Constance for intellectual companionship and nothing more. "She had become his most

intelligent reader and, after he had extracted a promise that she would destroy his letters, a most trusted and sharp-witted confidante” (216). Although she did not talk about her work to him, he could sense that “the completion of each of her books brought with it a nervous collapse of which she lived in dread” (217). The qualities he admired about her—openness, curiosity, and the spirit of independence—went into his portrayal of Isabel Archer—but, while in control of his fictional character, he could never fully divine what Constance felt (215).

Between his departure from Florence and her move to Venice, Henry and Constance maintained correspondence and met in Geneva, London, Oxford, and Paris. On hearing about Constance’s plans to move to Venice, Henry expressed an interest in finding a retreat for himself there, “with many blind alleys on the way,” so that he could continue to live undisturbed (Toibín 234). He therefore became alarmed upon learning that Constance and Mrs. Curtis were looking for a pied-a-terre for him and broadcasting his plans to others. Knowing “how easily and quickly this could be misconstrued” (235), he wrote to Mrs. Curtis, explaining the misapprehension his friend seemed to be under: he had no plans to move to Venice, being detained in London for practical reasons. “Fancies,” Henry added, “can be entertained but briefly,” for the work makes continuous demands on the artist. He could easily imagine Constance’s response to this letter, her painful realization that she “was to be left to her own devices in Venice among people, especially the idle rich, whom he knew she would come to despise” (237). The tone of her last letter to him was distant and chilly, ominous in its implications. She merely informed him that she had moved from Casa Biondetti to more private quarters, that she was exhausted from completing her latest novel, and that she hoped for “nothing new except a bookless winter” (237).

In January 1895, when the news of her suicide reached him, Henry was in shock, but also in denial: “He thought in cold fright about his refusal to come to Venice and his not letting her

know directly” (Toibín 238). He blamed himself for having let her down and taken her affection for granted. He had turned a blind eye to her emotional needs, even as he had also “sent powerful and subtle signals of his need for her” (240). His imagination had failed him, having “stretched merely as far as his fears and not beyond” (241). Ten months after her death, Henry returned to Venice to help Constance’s sister Clara Benedict and her niece, Clare sort through her papers and belongings. Walking through Constance’s abandoned rooms and breathing in the atmosphere she had created filled him with anxiety. With each subsequent visit to Constance’s apartment, he would look for traces Constance might have left and that implicated him, even remotely, in her tragedy. In a gesture that would become typical of him, he consigned many of her letters (such as those she had received from him, and from Alice) to the flames. He looked upon his disposal of their correspondence as the only way he could guard *her* privacy after her death, but the mixture of curiosity and perturbation with which he did so suggests otherwise. Clearing out Constance’s wardrobe and disposing of her clothes in the Grand Canal only increased Henry’s apprehension. As some of her dresses floated to the surface again, surrounding and enclosing him, Henry knew he would never be free of her (Toibín 255). In taking her own life, Constance made Henry feel that in some strange way she had taken a part of himself with her.

In his account of the same episode, David Lodge mentions a passage from Constance’s notebook that most disturbed James’s inner quiet, as he could not help but feel her words were directed at him: “imagine a man born without a heart. He is good, at least not cruel; not debauched, well- conducted; but he has no heart” (Lodge 211). Apparently an idea for a story, this passage is said to have reminded James of a “devastating accusation” Flaubert received from his mother: “Your mania for sentences has dried up your heart” (Lodge 211).²¹ Could this be, Lodge has his Henry James wonder, the “inevitable price one had to pay for artistic

achievement?" (Lodge 212) The question might have also crossed James's mind, especially since he shared Flaubert's obsession with the "right word" and for perfectly balanced sentences. Furthermore, as both Lodge and Toibín assume, James would have found it most painful to recognize that, unlike Flaubert, who "had at least known passion," he himself had always been "well-conducted" (212). James's secret desires are amply on display in Toibín's novel, but the question remains whether he has acted them out or not. The ardor and intensity of his passion led James to configure experience in terms of a "fusion of intellect and sensation" (Novick, Introduction 18), which was consistent with his ideal of the artist upon whom "nothing is lost."

Contrary to Edel, Toibín suggests that Constance's own passion had not been lost on Henry, who had divined her secret only to wish he had never done so because the burden was too much to bear. In order to shake off her phantom and "empty his mind of the shadow of Venice which continued to hover over him," Henry left for Rome (Toibín 257).²² The city's modernity, as he wrote to Paul Bourget, made him feel "increasingly antique" (256). The streets, colors, and faces his younger, more impressionable self had seen for the first time thirty years earlier "seemed a rich and valuable part of what he was now" (256). Much like "the Eternal City itself," Henry "was dented by history, he had responsibilities and layers of memory, he was watched and studied and in much demand" (258). His celebrity status made him wary of intrusions into his "secret history," which he guarded as his "prized and private possession" (258, 262).

Although Henry came to Rome to seek solitary pleasure, after a few days he found himself accepting the hospitality of the Waldo Storys and the Maud Howe Elliots, visiting with them on alternate evenings. On one of his visits at the Elliots' art studio, Henry was introduced to a young sculptor, Hendrik Andersen, from Boston, but of Norwegian birth. As he got to know him better, Henry came to relish the artist's "restless ambition" and readiness for life (271). In

one of the most touching scenes in the novel, Henry shows Andersen the Protestant Cemetery, where he loved to visit. Upon reaching Constance's recent grave, Henry realized the difficulty of explaining his relationship with her: "Constance was a great friend," he told Andersen, and uttering her name brought tears to his eyes. As he turned away and tried to regain control, Henry found himself in Andersen's arms, "wanting desperately to be held longer, but knowing that this embrace was all the comfort he would receive" (270). Here Toibín seems to be "transcribing" James's letters to Andersen, which, in their sexually suggestive vocabulary,²³ articulate a desire for contact that transgresses narrowly defined labels of gender orientation.

This section of the novel brings to light both the sexual and ontological need behind the Master's attachment to his pupil. During the time the two artists spent together in Rome, and soon after at Lamb House, they found they had a lot in common. Not only did they bear the same first name, but also their birthdays fell in the same month, and both were second sons who grew up in the shadow of talented brothers. Furthermore, Henry was "struck by how close the sculptor was, in background and temperament, to the eponymous hero of his own novel *Roderick Hudson*, which he had published more than twenty years earlier" (Toibín 273). To Henry "it was as though one of his characters had come alive, ready to intrigue him and puzzle him and hold his affections, forcing him to suspend judgment, subtly refusing to allow him to control what might unfold" (273). The tragic outcome of what ultimately unfolds is the protagonist's death because, within that cultural climate, characters embodying an ambivalent sexuality were doomed to be excluded and die. As Haralson has observed, "neither James *nor* his culture could imagine a narrative of homosexual love in which he might not only live, but also survive and thrive" (44).²⁴ In Andersen's company, Henry found that he had to "disguise longings which he did not entertain with much ease or equanimity" (274).

Andersen would also serve as a model for Chad Newsome, the young American in *The Ambassadors*, whom Henry pictured as “guileless and mercurial and vulnerable,” although Andersen was, in reality, far from that. The other character envisioned by Henry was Mrs. Newsome, the mother reclaiming her errant son from his Parisian sojourn. The idea of the clash between the young man’s refined manners and ambitions, on the one hand, and his mother’s “needs and worries and longing,” on the other, fascinated Henry now as a “possible drama” (Toibín 294). Reflecting on “the challenge for the sculptor in the years ahead—the possibility of failure and neglect and solitude,” he wondered *how* he might rise to this challenge (275). Henry’s intended, but never articulated, *carpe diem* message to Andersen echoes Sturges’s exhortation to Howells and prefigures Strether’s outpouring to Little Bilham: he wanted to tell his friend that he “should take as much from life as it would offer him, that he was young still and should want everything and live as much as he could” (279).

Henry also wanted to convey to Andersen the importance for the artist to face reality and not lose himself in grandiose daydreams. As he listened to his friend’s overconfident speech about his future success in the vast cities of the world, Henry realized how “dingy and shabby” Rye must seem to one with Andersen’s “large and ambitious imagination” (Toibín 285). Smaller in scale and more down to earth than the sculptor’s plan of designing a “world city” where beauty and harmony could thrive (287), Henry’s writing project focused on a sensitive, intelligent journalist-biographer, whom he imagined as “close to himself as he could make it.” His readers would never guess, he thought, “he was playing with such vital elements, masking and unmasking himself” (287). Toibín’s novel also brings out the tension between James’s “deepest self” and his “masks,” i.e. between his inner life and social performance. Compared to the city firing up Andersen’s imagination, Henry’s quasi-autobiographical project “stood against

abstraction, against the grayness and foolishness of large concepts” (287). As Henry tells Andersen, “I am a mere storyteller,” laboring at “the humble business of fiction” (288).

Throughout Andersen’s brief stay at Lamb House, Henry felt his tenderness and affection towards him grow so intense that when the visit was over, he felt “absurdly sorry” to lose his guest (qtd. in Edel, HJ4: 311). The intensity of Henry’s attachment to Andersen comes close to Wilde’s love for Lord Alfred Douglas, a passion so strong even when “smothered by the sculptor’s failures in perception [and] his indifferences” (Edel, HJ4: 315). Intuiting the impossibility of their relationship, Henry experienced again “the sense of doom which came with longing and disappointment’ (281). He had never forgotten the time in Paris with Paul Joukowsky more than twenty years earlier: the painful disappointment of that night “lived with him in its drama and its finality . . . For hours he had stayed there, his long vigil ending in defeat” (Toibín 281).

As *The Master* shows, for Henry James sibling ties and tensions were as complex and vexed as his friendships and flirtations. His relationship to his brother William was a constant clash of wills and personalities, reaching a climax around the time Henry contemplated owning a place of his own. He had always dreamed of having a small hermitage outside of London, away from the social swirl. Consequently, when Lamb House in Rye, Sussex, had fallen vacant, he made arrangements to rent it. The house promised to offer “a space for his work to flourish and his sleep to come easy” (205). But no sooner did he settle in than he was seized with a vague foreboding, for he could not help thinking that he this might be “his own place of death” (125). To A.C. Benson he wrote that his house was “good enough to be a kind of little becoming, high door’d, brass knockered *facade* to one’s life,” which was “indeed what Lamb House became” (Edel, HJ4: 197). He slept for the first time in Lamb House toward the end of June 1898. The servants followed—the liquor-loving Smiths, who showed some uneasiness and took to the bottle

in anticipation of exile from London (Toibín 222-23). Soon after his move to Lamb House, James hired a fourteen-year old lad, Burgess Noakes, as his valet, always eager to please his master. His visitors were important to Henry, but not as important as his work. More than the guest's actual stay—which he tried to make as pleasant as possible—Henry relished the “sense of expectation before a visit” and the peace of the house after a guest had departed, “as though the visit had been nothing except a battle for solitude which he had finally won” (197). On bleak days, however, “his contended solitude could turn to loneliness,” and the house itself “could seem like a cage.”

As he did not have ready money to purchase Lamb House, Henry turned promptly to his brother William, asking for his opinion and expecting him to understand how important the acquisition was to him. William's response—that the house was not worth \$10,000—caused Henry to write a letter of anger and frustration, but suffused with pathos: “My whole being cries out aloud for something that I can call my own” (qtd. in Edel, HJ4: 319). Apologizing for “rubbing his brother the wrong way,” William offered him money, but this only increased Henry's resentment at his brother's refusal to take his flat in Kensington and at his decision to go to Germany before he came to England. As it turned out, however, William had not gone to Nauheim to avoid Henry's hospitality, but because he was ill, having developed a serious heart condition. To pay for Lamb House, James worked at a furious pace, in spite of distractions, anxieties, and interruptions. William James, his wife and young daughter Peggy arrived at Lamb House early in October 1899. Seven years had passed since the brothers' last meeting. In the intervening years, Henry had had his crisis, while William's fame as philosopher had continued to grow. William felt tolerably well after his Nauheim cure. Tiring easily after his walks, he sat in the garden, read, and worked at the Glifford lectures he hoped to give at Edinburgh on the varieties of religious experience.

The most compelling part of the last chapter is William's lecture to his brother on the "coldness" at the heart of James's writing. An avid reader of Henry's work, William held strong opinions on both the subject and the style of Henry's fiction. He often complained of the tendency in his brother's travel letters, as in his fiction, toward over-refinement of language and feeling. He represented "gruff masculinity against his brother's effete style" (Toibín 298). He also believed that his brother had not found his subject in England, and that he should have been a chronicler of the American society. "The English have no spiritual life, only a material one. The only subject here is class and it is a subject of which you know nothing" (315). Herein lay, to William's mind, Henry's major difference from British novelists like Eliot, Dickens, Trollope, and Thackeray. William's grim prediction spelled out Henry's deepest fear: "In this crowded and hurried reading age you will remain unread and neglected as long as you continue to indulge in this style and these subjects" (316). What Henry should write, in William's opinion, is "a novel with no grand English people, but dealing with the America you know," a novel about the Puritan Fathers (316, 317).

But "the America" Henry knew, or rather remembered, no longer appealed to him. In his notebooks around the time of his brother's visit, James recorded the phrase "in search of, in flight from, something or other," which, Edel has pointed out, contains his "essential life experience in eerie form" (HJ4: 328-29). As the "archetypal American in flight from home," James "had gone in search of 'something or other'" in the Old World. His brother's visit reminded him again of those "things from which he had taken flight," the world of "old taboos and prohibitions, the invisible barriers of his childhood and youth" (Edel, HJ4: 329). In particular, William's visit refueled the tensions of those days immediately after Henry Senior's death. Because William's famous letter of farewell to their "sacred old father" (Toibín 321) arrived too late, Henry took it to the Cambridge cemetery and read it aloud over the grave, sure, as he wrote to William, then on

sabbatical in Europe, that “somewhere out of the depths of the still bright winter air” the father heard. Twenty years later, “an afterglow” of that “rancor” still burned at Lamb House.

Over and against William’s harsh criticisms of his brother’s art, Toibín stakes the Master’s modest claim to being “a poor storyteller,” a “romancer, interested in dramatic niceties. While my brother makes sense of the world, I can only attempt to make it briefly come alive, or become stranger” (334). In William’s daughter, Peggy, who had just finished *The Portrait of the Lady*, Henry had a more sympathetic reader, one who comes close to the “ideal” reader James framed in his Prefaces to the New York editions of his novels. Intrigued by the novel’s ending, Peggy asked Henry why he had Isabel Archer return to her husband. Henry’s answer, suggesting as it does Henry’s identification with his troubled heroine, sums up the point of Toibín’s whole novel: “It is very difficult for anyone in their lives . . . to make leaps into the dark. . . . Making such leaps requires us to be brave and determined, but doing so also may freeze any other possibilities. It is easier to renounce bravery rather than to be brave over and over” (324-25). Hiding himself behind his imaginary character, Henry had been able to contemplate “a life that seemed boundless in its possibilities.” Like Isabel, he had also come to Europe so that he “could live, live passionately and intensely if only for a short time.” This, Toibín implies, was the story James had always wanted to write, but could not bring himself to. The drama of Isabel’s, and implicitly, James’s consciousness arises from the disparity he perceived between the self that desires and the world that disappoints, or, in Eugene Goodheart’s terms, “between the potentialities of the self and the limiting conditions of social existence” (98). The “exacerbation rather than the resolution” of this tension accounts for the “pathos of James’s fiction” (Goodheart 98), as demonstrated by Peggy’s reaction to the unhappy resolution of the (marriage) plot of *The Portrait*.

Novick ends his book about the “Young Master” just after his subject has published *The Portrait of a Lady*, with almost half his life still ahead of him. Toibín hints at another “outpouring of greatness” toward which James had worked doggedly after his disastrous detour into theater. More specifically, Toibín leaves James on the doorstep of the major phase in his career, when he wrote his richest, densest stories, which were to become landmarks on the path to modernism. As *The Master* draws to a close, we learn that Henry has already embarked on two of these projects. The first, to be published as “The Beast in the Jungle,” centers on a man who all his life believes something dreadful will happen to him. The woman he tells of this “unknown catastrophe” becomes his greatest friend, but “he does not see that his failure to believe in her, his own coldness, is the catastrophe, it has come already, it has lived within him all along” (334). In another story, that would be developed as *The Ambassadors*, a middle-aged American, with “much intelligence and a sensuous nature which has remained hidden all his life,” understands, upon seeing Paris, that “it is our duty to live all we can, but it is too late, or perhaps it is not” (334).

The novel’s final image shows the Master, alone at Lamb House, after his brother’s departure for France, wandering into the rooms “as though they, too, in how they yielded to him, belonged to an unrecoverable past,” joining “all the other rooms from whose windows he had observed the world, so that they could be remembered and captured and held” (338).

Epilogue: The Lesson of *The Master*

“The artist—the artist! Isn’t he a man all the same?”

(James, CT7: 268)

As we have seen, a private/public dichotomy was integral to James's experience and understanding of authorship, to how others saw him and how he wanted to be seen beyond the confines of his "ivory tower." The concepts of private and public informed his thinking about people and the spaces, whether literal or metaphorical, they inhabited, and structured his interactions with others. *The Master* explores and illuminates the interior recesses of James's mind through the lens of his writings, bringing out the tension that besets all artists with a highly developed sense of vocation. According to Maurice Beebe's definition, this type of artist is constantly "wavering between the Ivory Tower and the Sacred Fount, between the calling of his sacred mission and the human voices that entice him to participate in the life around him, or that threaten to drown him" (Beebe 358). By immersing himself in the luxurious "life of art," the artist envisioned by James experiences an exquisite pleasure-in-pain that is worthwhile, even as it leaves him "weary and worn":

[T]he partaker of the "life of art" who repines at the absence of the rewards, as they are called, of the pursuit might surely be better occupied. Much rather should he endlessly wonder at his not having to pay half his substance for his luxurious immersion. He enjoys it, so to speak, without a tax; the effort of labour involved, the torment of expression, of which we have heard in our time so much, being after all but the last refinement of his privilege. It may leave him weary and worn; but how, after his fashion, he will have lived! (LC2: 1061)

This single-minded devotion to art led Wilde to quip that, "Mr. Henry James writes fiction as if it were a painful duty" (61). Henry James, it bears repeating here, eschewed marriage and lovers in order to safeguard his art and the quiet he needed to be a writer. He held this "dubious theory" (Auchincloss 39)—incorporated in stories such as "The Lesson of the Master" and "The Next Time"—that the strength of one's devotion to art might be undermined by the artist's weakness as a man. "Personal passion" was inconsistent with the sense of his calling, destructive to the intellect, discipline, even the life of the writer. Susanne Kappeler argues that for James,

“The writer’s intimacy must be fully devoted to the artistic” (qtd. in Chapman 83). In his turn, Edel sees in the dream world of “The Great Good Place,” where George Dane finds temporary respite from materialism, as a “pre-vision of Lamb House,” speaking to James’s “wish for an exclusive man’s world, a monastic Order, a sheltering brotherhood” (240). Withdrawing from the world of marriage into the “house of fiction,” James nevertheless conceived of his literary endeavors as “active and worldly, as masculine in a hegemonic, bourgeois sense” (Snyder 121). Katherine Snyder’s study *Bachelors, Manhood, and the Novel. 1850-1925* focuses on the bachelor figure as a narrative device for male authors, both pre-modernist and modernist, who occupied vexed cultural positions. As she argues, with regard to James’s fiction,

the figure of the bachelor, as a paradoxical exemplar of both normative and counternormative masculinities, helped to shape the figure of the high-cultural male artist that James wished to be and, in fact, became. In James’s mid-career tales of literary life and in his personal papers and literary criticism, the figure of the bachelor represents the tensions between man and artist as well as the compatibility of these two identities. (106)

Artistry and bachelorhood were “two intricately bound aspects of masculine selfhood” that he “continuously negotiated in his fiction and in his criticism, his notebooks and his private letters” (Snyder 104).

However, James also affirmed the value of personal relations in such stories as “The Middle Years,” “Broken Wings,” and “The Great Good Place.” The writer-characters in these stories “come closest to James’s own final position: intimate connections with others, though difficult, are not only possible for the creative artist but essential to both his life and work” (Chapman 127). “The great thing,” as Dencombe says in “The Middle Years,” is “to have made somebody care” (CT9: 75). This story becomes an occasion for Nathan Zuckerman, the writer-character in Philip Roth’s *The Ghost Writer* (1979), to ponder the contradictory claims of art and experience on the artist’s life: “If you’ve doubted, if you despaired, you’ve always ‘done’

it,” Dr. Hugh tells Dencombe, the writer for whom he develops, in the course of the story, a “passionate idolatry” (qtd. in Roth 116).

This is precisely the lesson that Paul Overt must acquire in “The Lesson of the Master”: the artist’s recognition of human fallibility, of the fact that, “it is not our high purposes alone that make us moving creatures, but our humble needs and cravings” (Roth 21). In this other story, St. George, a writer who has failed to live up to the promise of his genius, gives voice to James’s own necessary ideal: “the sense of having done the best—the sense which is the real life of the artist and the absence of which is his death” (CT7: 263). Robert M. Crunden believes that “the Master” has done his best, or as Dr. Hugh says, “the feasible”: “Henry James knew the limits of the possible. Despite the defeats that he suffered in writing plays or establishing relationships, he knew that, all things considered, his own conscious life had been very rich. He had chosen wisely when he had chosen to live alone, to write, and to reside in Europe” (74). Toibín, on the other hand, suggests that James the man could have done more—i.e. he could have acted upon, indeed carried out, the promptings of his heart—but he nevertheless admires the Master’s boundless energy that went into creating a body of work of such rich interiority and consummate artistry. Whether on the page or on stage, this work functioned as a mirror forcing its author to confront the problems from which he had been trying to escape. For us, the Master’s protean fiction reveals his exquisitely refined aesthetic sense and acute alertness to the moral implications of the decisions that shape our fate.

Another author fiction that foregrounds the roles of memory and desire in the construction of identity is Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* (1998), an intricately patterned novel unified by yet another culturally resonant figure, Virginia Woolf. Although my field of inquiry has been so far limited to a narrow canon of male writers, my last chapter points the road to the fruitful but only partly explored landscape of female-centered author fictions. One

may ask, in fact, is there a cult of the female literary genius? Do the lives and stories of women writers hold just as powerful a grip on the contemporary literary imagination as male writers' biographies? How does the postmodern practice of rewriting help reinvent feminine identity and authorship?

As in James's case, or even more so, Woolf's widely acknowledged eminence has been closely related to modernism, with its high standards of artistry. Despite their reservations about publicity, and the commodification of genius that publicity entails, both James and Woolf wrote extensively about how material interests can sustain or undermine a person's physical health and psychological well-being. What Woolf called the "practical business of life" and James "the so-called practical order" (*Portable* 416) was never far from their minds. In fact, James's "central theme," to which Woolf returns in "A Room of One's Own," is "the terrible need for practical means with which to create a personal identity, a private place of one's own: a room in which to love and work" (Novick xvi).²⁵ Virginia Woolf typifies the highly self-conscious artist concerned with recovering a true sense of self—in and through the "privacy" afforded by her own "house of fiction"—and reuniting that self with the world. Her frequent oscillations between society and solitude, between London and Richmond bring to mind James's literal movement between London and Rye. Not only does *The Hours* capture the same complex negotiation between the private and the public spheres as *The Master* but also it is even richer in homoerotic suggestiveness, highlighting the role of same-sex desire in its subject's search for personal and artistic truth. Both works explore the boundaries that circumscribe authorial consciousness and throw light on the corners of their subjects' inner worlds only to reveal the crises of sexual identity that these writers displaced onto their imaginative productions. Precisely *how* this crisis plays itself out in Cunningham's retelling of *Mrs. Dalloway* compels further inquiry.

Notes

¹ Tintern examines the legacy of James's work in selected stories by Constance Fenimore Woolson, in David Plante's *The Ghost of Henry James* (1970), Louis Auchincloss's short story, "They Who Have Power to Hurt" (1994), and Rebecca Goldstein's *The Dark Sister* (1991), among others. A more recent testimony to James's lasting appeal across geographical boundaries is Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

² Eric Haralson sees Strether as a "culminating figure in James's quest to imagine a sympathetic masculinity whose bearings are homosexual, whose own sex appeal is significantly ambivalent, and yet whose affective complexities are not easily reducible to the rigidifying grids of the modern sex/gender system" (25).

³ Other studies that highlight the gendered construction of James's authorship include Hugh Stevens's *Henry James and Sexuality* (1998), Wendy Graham's *Henry James's Thwarted Love* (1999), Peggy McCormack's *Questioning the Master: Gendering and Sexuality in Henry James's Writing* (2001), and Leland S. Pearson's *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (2003).

⁴ Here Tóibín sets out to trace the "tension between the fearless imagination and the fearful self" (8) by examining the life and work of some of the greatest and most influential writers, from Oscar Wilde to Thomas Gunn, figures who, although fully aware of their homosexuality, only seldom revealed the "explicit drama of being themselves" (6). As Daniel Mendelsohn points out in his review of *The Master*, "for Tóibín, [James] stands as the negative example—a figure who, because of his self-repression, not only didn't have a 'gay life,' but had no life at all."

⁵ See also Louis Auchincloss's discussion of Henry James in his latest book, *Writers and Personality*, the premise of which is borrowed from Sam A. Lewisohn's *Painters and Personality*: "In the creation of significant art the personality of the artist is the decisive factor"

(1). Although James held his homosexual urges “under rigid control” (39), his “very suppression of personality” strikes Auchincloss (and Toibín, too) as revealing (1).

⁶ This scene, which James recorded in *Notes of a Son and Brother*, is also singled out by Auchincloss, who observes that James’s only descriptions of nudity are of young males, and they contain a “distinct erotic note” (38).

⁷ Toibín quotes from a letter James wrote to William Dean Howells: “A new generation, that I know not, and mainly prize not, had taken universal possession. The sense of being utterly out of it has weighed me down” (qtd. in Epstein 180).

⁸ Edel speaks of a war that had erupted between “the forces of civilization in the house,” as James later referred to the cultural elite, and “the roughs,” whom James compared with a set of “beasts at some infernal zoo” (qtd. in Edel 79). His public humiliation bears comparison with the disgrace his rival, Oscar Wilde, was soon to suffer, albeit for different reasons: “He had been hooted by a brutal mob as if he were some old-time criminal, led through the streets for execution” (Edel 84).

⁹ Auchincloss believes that James “shared society’s prejudice against homosexuality,” the popular version of which carried the stigma of effeminacy that clashed with his “own concern about appearing and *being* a man” (39). Unlike Wilde, whom he described as an “unclean beast,” James “always was socially conventional” (39).

¹⁰ Judged as a “neurasthenic” invalid from a relatively young age, toward the end of her life Alice James received the diagnosis of breast cancer with some relief: “I have longed and longed for a palpable disease” (*Portable* 524). In her novel *The Dark Sister*, Rebecca Goldstein quotes Henry’s comment to William that Alice’s “tragic health was in a manner the only solution for her of the practical problem of life” (5). In the prologue to her novel, Goldstein describes Alice as possessing the “Jamesean heightened consciousness, its gift for making itself known to itself” but not to “that outside world, which her two eldest brothers transform into their own” (4).

¹¹ The novels and tales that “deal with children and ghosts—with the phantasmagoric—and the ways in which the imagination endows reality with realities of its own” (Edel 14) are indeed capstone texts for Toibín’s imaginative purposes. In these narratives Edel has discerned “an extensive personal allegory of the growing up of Henry James” (262). “His precocious little females grow a little older in each story,” from *The Other House* to *What Maisie Knew* to “The Turn of the Screw” to “In the Cage” and to *Awkward Age*—“as if they were a single child whose life experience is being traced from the cradle to coming of age” (260).

¹² Wilde’s conviction and imprisonment in 1895 has been identified by scholars of gay and lesbian studies as a defining moment in the transition from the Victorian to the modern and a cultural shift in attitudes towards and assumptions about homosexuality in the public sphere. The scandal demonstrated “the demand for and the difficulty of proper regulation of male identity and desire in this period” (Snyder 106).

¹³ It is worth noting that the same “waiting” motif surfaces later in a different context, that of the novella “The Turn of the Screw.” As James wrote, he made the governess’s “loneliness and her isolation into a longing to meet someone, for a face at the window, a figure in the distance” (140). And like her, James would move into Lamb House “full of hope, but full also of a foreboding which he could not erase” (144).

¹⁴ To his friends, James characterized the Wilde affair as “hideously, atrociously dramatic and really interesting,” but added that the interest was “qualified by a sickening horror” (SL 147). Wilde, he wrote in a letter to Gosse, during April 1895, “was never in the smallest degree interesting to me—but this hideous human history has made him so—in a manner” (147).

¹⁵ In 1893 Gosse gave him one of the fifty copies of Symonds’s privately printed *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, which stirred heated debates, as it made a case for homosexuality on both moral and aesthetic grounds.

¹⁶ In another exchange, with John Gray, Minnie opposed the latter's views on the "proper" function of the novelist by arguing that a real novelist, like George Eliot, and unlike Trollope, should be capable of understanding not only the "intricacies of the human heart," but also "the great mystery of our existence" (96).

¹⁷ Other works for which Minnie served as a model were "Daisy Miller," "Traveling Companions," and *The Wings of the Dove*—all of which suggested that "narrow life had no place for her" (Toibín 106). She embodied the "American spirit who was fresh and free, ready for life and certain only of her own great openness to others and to experience" (107). See also "The death of Minnie Temple," from *Notes of a Son and Brother*, where James recalls the life and death of Minnie Temple, with many excerpts from her letters.

¹⁸ James alludes to this rite of passage in the opening scene of Book Ninth, *The Wings of the Dove*, where the character Morton Densher recalls a "cluster of pleasant memories" which have been linked to James's epochal spring of 1865. In his memoir, James referred to the several "fusions" he achieved in that spring as "various climaxes . . . that lifted the moment in the largest embrace. All the fusions—including his first cash payment for an article and the receipt of Hawthorne's and Lincoln's deaths—are described as occurring in his bedroom at Ashburton Place (*Portable* 404-07, 430; cf. Novick 471).

¹⁹ The controversial passage describing what James calls "an obscure hurt" is embedded in a lengthy meditation on the Civil War, in *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). Here James reflects on the "queer fusion and confusion established in my consciousness during the soft spring of '61 by the firing on Fort Sumter, Mr. Lincoln instant first call for volunteers and a physical mishap, already referred to as having overtaken me at the same dark hour, and the effects of which were to draw themselves out incalculably and intolerably" (*Portable* 498).

²⁰ In the three decades that followed the war, James “seemed bent on assuming” the stance of a warrior: he adopted a “stern and robust air,” developed an avid interest in books on soldiers and fighting, especially Napoleon, and came even to “equate his own desire for success and fame as a writer with the martial glories of old empires” (Auchincloss 37, 38).

²¹ This further reminds me of the prayer Stephen Dedalus’s mother made on her deathbed, namely, that her son “learn in [his] own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels” (Joyce, *A Portrait* 252).

²² James’s first stop was on the French Riviera, where he visited with Paul and Minnie Bourget. Surrounded by the Bourgets’ luxury and exquisite taste, he felt that he could see through his friends’ vanity and snobbery, which were “small matters” compared to “the core of his selfhood which he so easily revealed” (213). From France, he traveled to Venice, the city whose “violence and cruelty,” which “matched its beauty and grandeur,” continued to remind him of Constance’s life and death (214).

²³ Edel has described these letters as “the saddest and strangest perhaps” in his correspondence up to this time (314). One of the elements that strike James’s biographer as “unusual” about these letters is the sheer “quantity of physical, tactile language” expressing James’s desire to embrace his friend, in what seems to be more than a “well-known demonstrative Jamesian hug,” suggesting instead a “quality of passion and possession” (314).

²⁴ Haralson aligns *Roderick Hudson* with other American works—such as Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*—“in which other kinds of difference (across axes of gender and race, as well as sexuality) are similarly punished by ambiguous deaths in which the dominant culture itself seems to be the real villain” (44).

²⁵ For more on the modernists’ anxieties in the cultural marketplace, see Richard Salmon’s lucid, rigorous analysis in *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* (1997) and Paul Delaney’s

Literature, Money, and the Market: From Trollope to Amis (2002). Both critics see James's distaste for publicity as symptomatic of his cultural moment and an aspect of his (need for) exclusive distinction, but they also point out the alleged, or inevitable, complicity of James's fiction with the culture of consumption.

CHAPTER VII

STORIES WITHIN STORIES: VIRGINIA WOOLF AMONG OTHER ARTISTS

“I should say a good deal about *The Hours*, & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humor, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment.”

(Woolf, *Diary 2*: 263)

“There are some stories which have to be retold by each generation” (“Not One of Us” 20). Virginia Woolf is referring here to the life-story of P.B. Shelley, but the statement holds true for her own tragic life and, to a great extent, for the life she imagined for Clarissa Dalloway. Indeed, both “stories” have continued to fascinate and inspire readers, writers, biographers, and moviemakers, whose re-invention of these figures has remapped the boundaries between life writing, on the one hand, and literary and biographical history, on the other. Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* (1998), which received a host of awards, including the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and was subsequently turned into a movie by Stephen Daldry, offers a complex tribute to Virginia Woolf and her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, originally titled “The Hours.” Beautifully crafted as a variation on this classic opus of high modernist fiction, *The Hours* alternates between three narrative strands that chronicle a single day in the lives of three women: Virginia Woolf herself, in 1925, as she channels her creative energies towards writing *Mrs. Dalloway*; Laura Brown, a young housewife and avid reader of *Mrs. Dalloway* in post WWII Los Angeles; and a modern day lesbian New Yorker named Clarissa Vaughan, but renamed “Mrs. Dalloway” by Richard Brown, an acclaimed writer who is dying of AIDS. Laura's small son,

Ritchie, we eventually realize, has grown up to become the Richard in Clarissa Vaughan's story, and as the hours pass, the three disparate plots intertwine, expanding and enriching one another.

The self-conscious echoing of *Mrs. Dalloway* that runs through all of these fictional narratives is emblematic of postmodern representation, the effect of which is to make readers aware of the controlling presence and thus manipulating power of the allegedly absent author. Cunningham's accomplishment in *The Hours* is that not only does he transform Woolf's notoriously difficult text into a more accessible and engaging one, but he also remains true to her vision of what it means to be alive. As he suggests, *Mrs. Dalloway* reaches and resonates with the common reader because of Woolf's "unparalleled" ability to "convey the sensations and complexities of the experience known as being alive" (Introduction xx). Cunningham transposes the quotidian events of Woolf's novel to an American setting and, like Woolf, has a fine manner of putting these events into a poetic cast, but the reader's flashes of recognition situate his novel in a playful relationship to the "original." In an interview with James Schiff, Cunningham described his project as less a reinvention and more an improvisation: "What I wanted to do was more akin to music, to jazz, where a musician will play improvisations on an existing piece of great music from the past—not to reinvent it, not to lay any kind of direct claim to it, but to both honor it and try to make other art out of an existing work of art" ("Interview" 113)

If structurally the novel illustrates Woolf's conception of life as something that eludes the narrative sequencing of "gig lamps," thematically it expresses with lyrical intensity the characters' awakening to the exhilarating possibilities of love, life, and creativity on the one hand, and to the painful intimations of suffering and mortality on the other. Illness and death form a kind of dark shadow to the main characters' search for beauty, order, and meaning, forcing them to "look life in the face and know it for what it is," as the movie script has it, or, to quote Samuel Beckett, for "how it is." But since to look at anything, one must be somehow apart from it, I will

argue that it takes a peculiar, Pater-like aesthetic sensibility—an intuitive apprehension of the beauty *and* terror of life—for the novel’s protagonists to arrive at a clear, albeit bittersweet recognition of how they live. My primary concern with the story of Mrs. Woolf notwithstanding, I will also examine the configurations of the artist present in the other two narrative sequences insofar as they bear on and give special poignancy to Cunningham’s portrait of Virginia Woolf. As he pointed out in an interview, he conceived of Laura Brown, Clarissa Vaughan, and Richard as characters driven by the same timeless impulse to create something meaningful—a book, a cake, or a party—in a world that seems to have been stripped of meaning. In taking up the challenge of creation, these artists respond to what, in Woolf’s terms, are epiphanic “moments of being” laden with life-sustaining significance. By the same token, creativity represents for her an expression of “the power which adds supreme flavor to existence—the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly in the light” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 59).

Throughout this chapter I highlight some of the intertextual and intratextual elements pertaining to theme, characterization, and imagery that are inscribed within the larger framework of Cunningham’s rewriting of *Mrs. Dalloway*. In so doing, I call attention to a more complex form of rewriting that also characterizes other pseudo-biographies treated in my dissertation. More to the point, this form involves the cross-pollination between fictional representations of real authors—the rewriting of their life stories—and the rewriting of these authors’ works in dialogue with our own time’s culture and concerns. As I show in the first section of this chapter, Cunningham’s story of Virginia Woolf (referred throughout as Virginia) captures the awakening of the creative spirit to those “moments of being” that shape the protagonist’s identity as a distinctly woman writer, as opposed to the “impersonal scribe” of modernist aesthetics, and that infuse her work with intellectual and lyrical fervor. *The Hours* demystifies both the author and the creative process by jarring readers into conscious contemplation of a work’s mode of production

and of the inner experience that brought it forth. Furthermore, like Geoff Dyer, Peter Ackroyd, and Penelope Fitzgerald, Cunningham repositions the author-character closer not only to her work in progress but also to the world of clearly defined—“common,” as Woolf called them—readers, who, as already indicated, emerge as artists in their own right. Subsequent sections of this chapter focus on the continual seesawing between ecstasy and despair, self-absorption and self-extension, self-repression and self-assertion in the lives of these artist-figures. What their stories ultimately reveal is the subtle but profound influence that Virginia Woolf has exerted over succeeding generations of readers and writers, as well as the extent to which humanity and creativity implicate, rather than exclude, each other.

The Will to Create: The Story of Mrs. Woolf

The only way I keep afloat is by working. . . . Directly I stop writing I feel that I am sinking down, down. And as usual, I feel that if I sink further I shall reach the truth.

(Woolf, *Diary* 3:235)

As with the other writers discussed in my dissertation, the enduring appeal of Woolf’s art and thought is inseparable from her life-story—a fact that the writer herself recognized in *Orlando*: “In short, every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works, yet we require critics to explain the one and biographers to expound the other” (103). Though critical dogma sometimes tries to sever text from life, the inmost personality from the daily self, the experience of readers and biographers is that

acquaintance with an author's life cannot but enhance the understanding of fiction. *The Hours* presents us with an interesting case, for when asked about "how much Woolf should the moviegoer read before going to see it," Cunningham said that he intended for the book as well as the movie to be "entirely accessible to people who know nothing at all about Virginia Woolf and are not even entirely sure *if she was a real person* or just somebody Edward Albee made up" (emphasis mine). As he explains, "I don't think you need to know anything about Woolf in order to be able to understand her compulsion to create something beautiful, which is one of the things that I think make the human species most interesting and most worth preserving" (2).

It seems then that behind Cunningham's rather stylized portrait of Virginia Woolf lies the same impulse that motivated Harold Bloom to conceive of his recent book, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (2002) as a reaction against "historicizing and contextualizing the imagination of genius."¹ But to call someone a genius is to put him/her beyond the reach of analysis and thus understanding. Penelope Fitzgerald is right in observing that, especially where a writer like Woolf is concerned, life writing is indeed almost inevitably bound up with the "process of mythmaking" (197). Why do people want to read so much about Woolf? She wonders in her 1996 review of Hermione Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf. "Not, it seems, to identify with her, rather to feel how much she was 'other'" (198).

Both movie and book reviewers have questioned, with some justification, Cunningham's de-contextualizing approach, which, they claim, gives an inaccurate representation of Woolf's life. Gloria Steinem, for instance, worries that "the absence of even a hint of the sexual abuse and isolation that left Woolf with childhood flashbacks and a lifetime of trauma—beyond what society was willing to talk about then, but inextricably left out of Cunningham's novel and this film—may make her depressions seem a personal fault" (1). Thus, Cunningham leaves out the fact that the character who commits suicide in *Mrs. Dalloway* was a shell-shocked veteran of the

First World War to whom “Woolf herself would have felt personally linked” (1). Indeed, *The Hours* contains only a few passages that link the newly imagined but as yet unnamed character, to Virginia: this deranged figure, endowed with “a touch of genius, of poetry,” “ground under by the wheels of the world, by war and government, by doctors” (211), will eventually “turn away from the seductions of the world” (154). Another reviewer, Roberta Rubenstein, is troubled by the “false Woolf” created by director Stephen Daldry: “In endeavoring to present a more personal view of the writer, Daldry’s film—even more than Cunningham’s novel—ultimately domesticates, even trivializes his subject” (3). A more favorable review comes from Moira Macdonald, according to whom, “in both on paper and on screen, we get the tiniest glimpse of that rarity, a true writer’s life” (3).

In defense of Cunningham, we should note that while he may be de-contextualizing Woolf’s history of mental illness, he is forging a new, deeply affecting connection with the “other” that Woolf arguably embodies. For one thing, *The Hours* foregrounds and at the same time re-contextualizes elements, such as Clarissa’s lesbian desire for Sally and Septimus’s homoerotic attraction to Evans, that Woolf’s novel only implies. Furthermore, Cunningham recasts the danger of military conflict looming large in Woolf’s time as a wasting disease like AIDS or cancer in our time. The novelist’s obsession with her dead mother is displaced onto the AIDS-stricken Richard, whose work is haunted by the figure of the woman who abandoned him when he was a child. Richard’s story then brings to the surface one of those “invisible presences,” or forces that shape subjectivity. For just as Julia Stephen was central to everything in Woolf’s life, so Laura Brown haunts Richard’s elegies, described as “offerings of love and fury” (225).²

In a more general sense, Woolf uses the phrase “invisible presences” to refer to “the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think; all those magnets which attract us this way to be like that, or repel us the other and

make us different from that” (“A Sketch” 80). Besides Julia Stephen, these “presences” also included the turmoil of the war, the suffrage movement, Edwardian fiction, and last but not least the bourgeois milieu of the Bloomsbury group. Cunningham alludes to the intellectually stimulating atmosphere of this coterie towards the end of *The Hours*: as Virginia is anticipating her stay in London, she feels certain that “She will remain sane and she will live as she was meant to live, richly and deeply, *among others of her kind*, in full possession and command of her gifts” (209; emphasis mine).

More importantly for my purposes here, Cunningham’s novel instills in its readers a genuine appreciation of Woolf’s “highly individual mode of genius”—a genius constituted by her “extraordinary insights into consciousness and the darkness just outside its limits” (Bloom 326). Through Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan, the author shows us yet two other facets of Woolf’s conflicted and complicated personality, a volatile self attuned to and modified by the flux and multiplicity of experience. As Katherine Dalsimer writes, “In spite of her terrible darkness, Woolf had a capacity to be vibrantly engaged with the world around her—the simple pleasures of the day as well as the great human moments and human absurdities” (xvii). To be sure, Cunningham has understood the challenge of capturing the truth of human personality in which genius resides, just as Woolf understood the memoir writer’s difficulty in giving “an account of the person to whom things happen” (“A Sketch” 69).³ Woolf insisted that the most important things making up her own memoir were “those instincts, affections, passions, attachments—there is no single word for them, for they changed month by month—which bound me, I suppose, from the first moment of consciousness to other people” (79-80).

To the extent that *The Hours* gives us a strong sense of these “instincts, affections, passions, and attachments,” it certainly bears out Cunningham’s intimate acquaintance with Woolf’s life as recorded in her diaries, collected letters, and late memoir. Weaving the facts of

her daily life—her marriage, her servant problems, her relationship to her lively sister—along with the inner depth of that life, her struggle with mental illness—into the fabric of his fiction, Cunningham succeeds in fleshing out a compelling portrait of Woolf’s genius and madness, a portrait that illuminates her literary sensibility, the intricate workings of her mind, her susceptibility to depression, and her original creative methods.

Virginia’s suicide by drowning serves as a prologue to the book (and as a framing device to the movie), suggesting that death alone can give proper perspective to all that has gone before in her life, a significant part of which is being reconstructed by Cunningham. This section dramatizes the difficulty of letting go, for while Virginia’s pockets are filled with stones, her own thoughts fill with the presence of those she loves (Leonard, Vanessa and her children, Vita, and Ethel) and for whom she is “suddenly, immensely sorry” (5). It is for their sake that she could “perform that final kindness”—that is, go back to the house, destroy the notes addressed to her husband and her sister, respectively, and restore herself to their care. Deciding against it, she lets the stones pull her in the yellow river and the current engulf and carry her with what feels like the muscular force of “a strong man” who has “risen from the bottom, grabbed her legs and held them to his chest” (5). It is as if not even death could liberate Woolf from the patriarchal world she had sought to transcend through her imagination. The same sentence, however, can be taken as a subtle commentary on Cunningham’s method of delicate artistry: he is telling us an apparently simple story about ordinary people, yet with a richly poetic, philosophical undercurrent. Even in death, Virginia looks “as if she is dreaming” the life that goes on without her—the boy and the mother crossing the bridge and waving at the soldiers in uniform. The story of Richard and Laura Brown—whom we encounter in the next chapter—is already taking shape.

We next encounter Virginia on a June day in 1923 when, following two suicide attempts, she is undergoing a rest cure in Richmond, a quiet south suburb of London. Drawing on Woolf’s

correspondence and diaries, Cunningham takes us into the intricacies of the book's creation and makes us privy to Woolf's self-questioning about her ability to translate her vision into words. Having awakened from her dream of Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia picks up the pen and writes the famous opening sentence: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." But she cannot help worrying that this beginning might be considered "a little too ordinary," since it reflects her concern with the "small" things, like going on an errand, rather than "big things," like going to war. Later she wonders whether "a single day in the life of an ordinary woman be made into enough for a novel" (69).

When "sleep takes her again," the writer has a vision of an old woman dozing on a bench in a park that is "at once homely and the seat of mystery," a metaphor for the world at large and, implicitly, for life (29). The earlier image of Virginia's earthliness—evoked by her shoes sinking "slightly in the soft mud"—is here replaced by an image of etherealness, as she moves through the park "not quite walking," but floating. Her thoughts gravitate towards the other park she senses "beneath this one, a park of the underworld, more marvelous and terrible than this" (30). Cunningham is describing here one of those "moments of being" that, as Harold Bloom astutely observed, "are not so much privileged (as in Walter Pater, and in James Joyce) as they are fatal, poised upon the verge where perception and sensation yield to dissolution" (326). After reaching down into the recesses of her subconscious, Virginia realizes that what matters is not the actual line she has dreamt of but the feeling left behind it, which allows her to begin writing:

It is an inner faculty that recognizes the animating mysteries of the world because it is made of the same substance, and when she is very fortunate she is able to write directly through that faculty. Writing in that state is the most profound satisfaction she knows, but her access to it comes and goes without warning. (35)

When this second self takes over, Virginia is following the dream logic instead of a pre-ordained route. The result, however, is never completely satisfactory, making the writer aware of the gap

between conception and representation: “One always has a better book in one’s mind than one can manage to get onto paper” (69). Her fear that the writing may be “devoid of true feeling” (163) raises the same questions about representation that Woolf pondered in her diary: “But now what do I feel about my writing?—this book, that is, *The Hours*, if that’s its name? One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoevsky. And do I? Or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do?” (2: 248).

Hence Woolf’s experiments with narrative, characterization, and style, which were meant to express precisely her unique vision about those “moments of being” that represent “the token of some real thing behind appearances” (“A Sketch” 72). Woolf compares these moments to “sudden violent shocks,” to “sledge-hammer blows” that jolt her out her “non-being”—the “cotton wool of daily life”—and that, at least in her case, are followed by the desire to explain them. “The shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer,” she notes in her autobiographical sketch. At the time she was writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, in the early 1920s, Woolf was still reeling from the blows dealt by the deaths of her mother, her half-sister Stella, her father, and her brother. Her frequent bouts of mental instability have been linked with these shattering family losses, with the sexual abuse she endured from both her stepbrothers, Gerald and George Duckworth, as well as with the strain of writing. As Hermione Lee put it, Woolf “was close, all her life, to a terrifying edge, and she creates a language which faces it and makes something of it, in a life of writing wrestled from illness, fear, and pain” (234).

Woolf’s own introduction to the American Modern Library edition of *Mrs. Dalloway* underscores the inextricable connection between writing and illness. As she writes, “books are the flowers or fruit stuck here and there on a tree which has its roots deep down in the earth of our earliest life, of our first experiences” (qtd. in Lewis 35). In other words, writing is a therapeutic exercise that uncovers and in the process transmutes the deepest experiences of its creator, those

aspects of her mental life that Woolf encountered from the time of her mother's death in 1895 till her suicide. It is a commonplace of Woolf criticism that the novel reads as a psychodrama, in which the original Clarissa is "split" into a public self (the party hostess) and a private self embodied by Septimus, to whom Woolf ultimately transferred Clarissa's suicidal impulses.⁴ Two diary entries from June 1923 reveal her intentions in writing the novel:

I want to give the slipperiness of the soul. I have been tolerant often. The truth is people scarcely care for each other. They have this insane instinct for life. But they never become attuned to anything outside themselves.

I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticize the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense. (2: 244, 248)

The first entry poses the question of whether the suffering of the other can penetrate the thick shield of human narcissism, whether as Septimus thinks, "human beings have neither kindness nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment" (66). *Mrs. Dalloway* shows not only how fractured human connections can be, how fraught with pain and disappointment, but also how slippery the soul is. Likewise, through Virginia, as well as through the other artist figures in *The Hours*, Cunningham dramatizes a conception of the self and of gendered identity as fluid and unstable, endowing each of these characters with the elusiveness and complexity of figures in the real world. Thus the author "rediscovers" Woolf's "tunneling process" of character-making, by which he, too, excavates and then tells the past "by installments," inviting readers to see the characters' inner worlds as caves that stand behind the characters and give depth to each moment (*Diary 2*: 272).

If what Woolf liked about writing the novel was probing the depths of the character's psyches ("going from one lighted room to another") and finding ways to connect them ("and the walks in the field are corridors"), what she liked about reading it through, in December 1923, was that it "seems to leave me plunged deep in the richest strata of my mind" (*Diary 2*: 323). Not

surprisingly, then, in *The Hours*, that is, in the narrative sequence that features Woolf as a character, her mind is at once the stage and the protagonist of an existential drama that plays out the tension between life and death, sanity and insanity, necessity and free will, social persona and private self. These pages recreate the intimate presence of a compulsive writer with a sparkling intellect bolstered by unflagging industry. “She works, always, against the fear of relapse” (70), writing to ward off the splitting headaches that plunge her into a “realm of relentless brilliance” (70, 71). Virginia’s perception of everything being “infected with brightness” brings to mind the “heat of the sun” motif associated with the terror of life experienced by both Clarissa and Septimus. This state is also necessary, for eventually she “emerges bloodied, trembling, but full of vision and ready, once she’s rested, to work again” (71).

Hence the ambivalent meaning of the phrase “sinking under water,” used by Woolf as a metaphor for succumbing to depression but also for discovering “sea pearls of truth.” A passage from Borges that Cunningham has chosen as the first epigraph of his novel, shows how rare, if ever genuine, such “pearls of truth” really are: while hunting for the tiger, Borges knows that it “will be a form of what I dream, a structure of words, and not the flesh and bone tiger” that “paces the earth,” the beast that will not be found in verse. Yet “some force keeps driving me in this vague, unreasonable, and ancient quest,” which he continues to pursue “through the hours.”

The terrible fear that accompanied her breakdowns and the possibility of their recurrence lurk beneath most of Woolf’s writings. While alluding to this fear, Cunningham also shows its profound bearing on both Virginia’s sense of self and on her emotions about her work and its reception. Thus, as she washes her face, Virginia is afraid of catching sight of herself in the mirror: “The mirror is dangerous; it sometimes shows the dark manifestation of air that matches her body, takes her form, but stays behind, watching her, with porcine eyes and wet, hushed breathing” (30-31). Later, her sister’s neat appearance makes Virginia even more ashamed of her

disheveled housedress and lank hair: “Vanessa will be her mirror, just as she’s always been” (114). The words “fear” and “frightened” occur repeatedly in “A Sketch of the Past,” as when she remembers her childhood vision of a horrible face appearing over her shoulder in the glass.

Woolf’s extreme sensitivity to criticism derived in part from her fear of being thought a merely “gifted eccentric” who claims originality for a prose that is sentimental, incoherent and/or unintelligible (3, 69-70). As her own critical essays show, however, originality presupposes “an inventiveness that also reinvents the author, and to some degree her readers as well” (Bloom 332). In *The Hours*, this conception of originality can be inferred from Virginia’s attitude towards the censorious voices she sometimes hears in her head, voices which Cunningham describes as “undeniably masculine, obscenely old. They are angry, accusatory, disillusioned” (71). This description brings to mind a passage in *A Room of One’s Own* in which Woolf gives both Jane Austen and Emily Brontë credit for having ignored the “perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that. They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone” (75).

Cunningham takes up the theme of the double and applies it specifically to authorship, as when Virginia dissociates her writing self from the everyday self that poses as Virginia Woolf: “She has learned over the years that sanity involves a certain measure of impersonation, not simply for the benefit of husband and servants but for the sake, first and foremost, of one’s own convictions” (83). She often hides the extent of her illness from Leonard, in whose presence she “acts more firmly healthy than she sometimes feels” (71) and whose judgments about her work she both fears and trusts. Similarly, it is only when she “feels fully in command of the character who is Virginia Woolf” does she address Nelly, her servant, knowing, however, that she cannot easily fool her either (84). We learn that unlike her mother and sister, Virginia finds it difficult to

deal with servants, to command their respect and their love. To make up for this failing on her part, she resolves to give Clarissa Dalloway “great skills with servants, a manner that is intricately kind and commanding” (87). Clarissa’s most precious gift, “to kindle and illuminate,” enables her to create a work of art out of social occasions: “there is art in this, this command of tea and dinner tables; this animating correctness” (83).

One of the questions that preoccupied Woolf in the early stages of composing the novel was how to make Clarissa’s suicide “convincing, tragic instead of comic[?]” (82). To resolve this question, she shows us that Clarissa’s real drama goes on internally, that the veneer of conventionality and respectability covers a seething world of doubt and unfulfilled longing. Clarissa’s passion for a girl she knew in her youth—“when love and ideas seem truly to be one’s personal discovery, never before apprehended in quite this way” (81)—will make her “believe that a rich, riotous future is opening before her, but eventually (how, exactly, will the change be accomplished?) she will come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man” (81-82). The irony of this passage is inescapable, for even though marriage to a “suitable man” brings Clarissa to reason, it also leads to dissatisfaction with the emptiness about the heart of her life. Since for Clarissa “domestic defeats are every bit as devastating as are lost battles to a general,” her “painfully susceptible sensibilities” would render her suicide inevitable (84, 83).

The “brash and captivating” girl that Clarissa loved reminds Virginia of her sister Vanessa, who used to “scandalize the aunts” by decapitating flowers and floating them in bowls of water (82). But marriage and motherhood have tamed Vanessa’s wild spirit, just as they have changed Sally Seton. The scene in the garden, where Vanessa’s children, Julian, Quentin, and Angelica are making a funerary bed for a dying thrush, acquires a special significance in the context of Cunningham’s novel. Like her young niece, Virginia is both frightened by and fascinated with this handful of gray feathers. And much like Clarissa, who, in the middle of her

party, hears of Septimus's suicide, Virginia is thrown off by this intimation of death "just before tea." For "What, exactly, does one say to children, or to anybody?" (116). Vanessa, on the other hand, has resigned herself to the fact that "this is the bird's time to die" and that "we can't change that" (116). Vanessa, her sister reflects, "does not harm her children but she does not lie to them either, not even for mercy's sake" (117).

While secretly noticing Julian's regal deportment and self-confidence, Quentin's soldier-like manner, and Angelica's fragile beauty, Virginia cannot help admiring her sister's "true accomplishment," in comparison to which her own creative endeavors seem to pale: "this will live after the tinselly experiments in narrative have been packed off along with the old photographs and fancy dresses, the china plates on which Grandmother painted her wistful, invented landscapes" (118). We learn that years ago, when the two sisters were thinking of names for children and for characters in novels, Virginia had suggested that Vanessa name her future daughter Clarissa. Virginia was then in a mental home recovering from her emotional breakdown, one of the consequences of which was that she was persuaded not to have children (*The Flight* 1: 430). Cunningham alludes to this in a parenthetical reference: "Vanessa's, of course, all Vanessa's; there are none of Virginia's, and there will be none" (116).

Julian's teasing of Angelica—who wants to find the bird's eggs and hatch them—triggers reflections on gender roles: "Even now, in this late age, the males still hold death in their capable hands and laugh affectionately at the females, who arrange funerary beds and who speak of resuscitating the specks of nascent life abandoned on the landscape, by magic or sheer force of will" (119). Quentin's gentle handling of the bird throws into question the rigid distinction Virginia has already made between the sexes: "Oh, if men were the brutes and women the angels—if it were as simple as that" (120). Kneeling beside Angelica, who is absorbed by her own creation, a deathbed of yellow roses for the bird, Virginia feels drawn to the frail lifeless

creature in which she sees a version of herself, a “bird-sized Virginia”: “She would like to lie down in its place. No denying it, she would like that” (121). The scene is filled with a sense of foreboding, presaging the moment—already captured in the prologue to the novel—when Virginia’s own body will come to rest on its own “funerary bed.”

The garden constitutes a fitting setting for one of those “moments of being” that Virginia both fears and loves. “Some force flows between [Virginia and her niece], a complicity that is neither maternal nor erotic but contains elements of both.” But what for Angelica is only “a game,” with which she is growing impatient, for Virginia, it is something more serious, a painful reminder of the death-in-life to which she feels condemned there, in Richmond: “She is better, she is safer, if she rests in Richmond; if she does not speak too much, write too much, feel toomuch; if she does not travel impetuously to London and walk through its streets; and yet she is dying this way, she is gently dying on a bed of roses” (169). As she discovers after Vanessa leaves, these moments are fleeting, leaving one stranded in an illusory world—the “cotton wool” hiding the transcendent oneness of the universe: “the smell of Nelly’s beef boiling . . . all the clocks in the house about to strike the half hour,” the streetlamps lighting up all over Richmond, and her own reflection in the window-glass (164). Virginia tells herself that this world of “non-being” is “enough,” but the other realm lures her with its “promise of release and slumber” (90). Frightening as it is, this “cemetery feeling” is not “entirely disagreeable” simply because “it is real,” and thus more bearable and nobler than the contingent reality of the beef and the lamps (165).

The story of Virginia’s awakenings sets forth what Gabriel Liiceanu has referred to as “the collapse of the system of illusions” that sustains and comforts life. In the face of illness and death, everything else seems irrelevant: “Beauty and dignity were illusions fostered by the company of children, sustained for the benefit of children” (166). Yet in *A Room of One’s Own*,

Woolf allows for the possibility that beauty partakes of what is generally meant by “reality”—“something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun” (114). She believes that whatever reality touches, it “fixes and makes permanent,” and that the writer “has the chance to live more than other people in the presence of this reality.” From reading *King Lear*, *Emma*, and *La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, she infers that it is the writer’s business “to find [reality] and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us” (114) so that we can see “more intensely afterwards” (114). Echoing Rilke, she points out that, “our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women” (118).

During her walk through the garden, at the close of day, Virginia’s thoughts turn to the ultimate reality revealed in and by death:

She thinks of how much more space a being occupies in life than it does in death; how much illusion of size is contained in gestures and movements, in breathing. Dead, we are revealed in our true dimensions, and they are surprisingly modest. Hadn’t her own mother seemed to have been removed surreptitiously and replaced by a little version made of pale iron? Hadn’t she, Virginia, felt in herself an empty space, surprisingly small, where it seemed strong feeling ought to reside? (165)

Along the same lines, Woolf noted in her memoir that:

The tragedy of her [mother’s] death was not that it made one, now and then and very intensely unhappy. It was that it made her unreal; and us solemn and self-conscious. We were made to act parts that we did not feel; to fumble for words that we did not know. It obscured, it dulled. (“A Sketch” 95)

Virginia believes that “there is somewhere else,” a place she associates with London, and that has to do “neither with boiled beef nor with the circle of roses” (166). But the threatening headache puts this place out of reach and Virginia face to face with “a lethal, intolerable truth” (167). Her failed attempt at “an escape of sorts,” even for a few hours, leaves her straddling “an invisible

line, one foot on this side, the other on that. On this side is stern, worried Leonard. . . . On the other side is the train. On the other side is London, and all London implies about freedom, about kisses, about the possibilities of art and the dark sly glitter of madness” (172). All that Virginia desires in Richmond is to “return to the dangers of the city life” (83). That is why, though grateful to Leonard for having “nursed her through her worst periods,” she cannot help thinking of him as her keeper.⁵

Woolf’s own experience of the city satisfied her need to hold on to external reality as well as her longing for solitude, privacy, and anonymity. As Anna Snaith has pointed out, Woolf’s journeys from city to country and back again map out “the larger pattern of her life,” which in turn “parallels the smaller daily oscillations between society and solitude, or public and private” (41). When her mind was “full of *The Hours*,” she wrote about how London “takes up the private life and carries it on, without any effort. Faces passing lift up my mind; prevent it from settling as it does in the stillness at Rodmell (*Diary* 2:301). The frequent trips between London and Sussex typified the “strain” of trying “to live in 2 spheres: the novel; & life” (*Diary* 4: 172).⁶

Equally strenuous was the novelist’s attempt to balance the male and female perspectives, to render artistically a unifying apprehension of the male-female opposites. In *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf recounted seeing from her London window a man and woman getting into a taxi. This scene, she feels, symbolizes the two sexes that reside within each of us, and that must be harmonized for the act of creation to be possible: For fiction to “grow in the minds of others,” “some marriage of opposites” must be consummated” (108). Cunningham makes the same point through a similar scene: on her way to the railway station, Virginia passes a couple, “a man and a woman younger than herself, walking together, leisurely, bent toward each other” (166). Their quiet happiness contrasts with her acute sense of isolation and alienation, which had been momentarily relived by the chaste, but also “ravenous” kiss she gave Vanessa at the end of the

latter's visit, and in which she perceives "a manifestation of the central mystery itself" (210). Clarissa, she decides, will also carry the memory of a kiss with the woman she had loved all her life. She will be "bereaved, deeply lonely, but she will not die. She will be too much in love with life, with London" (211).

Throughout *The Hours*, Cunningham follows Woolf in celebrating the redemptive possibilities of same sex intimacy and the cathartic effect of uncensored feelings. In the second narrative, which I discuss next, Laura kisses her neighbor, Kitty, on the lips, in an attempt to feel connection, and, possibly, out of repressed lesbian longing. By having his characters experience such moments of ecstasy, the author is doing justice to the complexity of the relationships between women, a reality to which Woolf herself calls attention in the last chapter of *A Room of One's Own*, where she analyzes Mary Carmichael's novel, *Life's Adventure*. What strikes Woolf about this book is not so much its uneven style, but its ambitious theme—the author's treatment, however tentative, of an emotional bond between two women: "Chloe liked Olivia. How immense a change was there! Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature" (82). For so much, Woolf explains, "has been left out, unattempted" in previous novels (86).⁷ Almost invariably, women had been shown only in their relation to men, which accounts for "the peculiar nature of women in fiction; the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror, her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity" (86).

Having just exposed the fatal gap between a woman's economic reality and her artistic creation, Woolf is now mounting a trenchant critique of traditional male fiction that has imposed a limited conception of woman as either the "angel in the house" or the "madwoman in the attic." For Woolf this conception is as inhabiting a force for women's writing as those stentorian masculine voices commanding women to "write that, think that." Hence, throughout *A Room of One's Own*, she has been testing out various representations of women and insisting that women

have important lives outside of their domestic roles. But in order to record and explore women's "infinitely obscure lives," as Woolf herself does in *Mrs. Dalloway*, a writer must illumine her own soul "with its profundities and shadows, and its vanities and generousities" (93). This quote bears directly on Cunningham's portrait of Woolf as a female artist committed to rescuing women's lives from obscurity, for throughout her story, Virginia has been sounding the depths of her own soul, pondering the meaning of reality and the mystery of identity, relishing each burst of creativity, and searching for a spiritual continuum behind the appearance of fragmentation.

A touching portrayal of how the creative mind comes to accept life on its necessary conditions, as well as on those of a visionary aspiration, Mrs. Woolf's narrative exposes the tragedy of the mental illness, the anguish of everyday living, and the transcendence of the writing life. In deciding that "a deranged poet, a visionary," and not Clarissa, will be the one to commit suicide, the writer is, in a sense, tempting her fate, even as she is looking forward to filling herself up with stories on the streets of London (209).⁸ The metaphor of "sinking under water" contained in the epigraph to this subchapter and beautifully developed in the prologue to *The Hours* becomes even more poignant if we read it knowing that ultimately this is the way Woolf would seek her death at the age of fifty-nine: walking into the River Ouse with stones in her pockets.

On the other hand, Cunningham's conclusion to the story of Mrs. Woolf can also be read as another beginning, in the same way that we read the open ending of *Mrs. Dalloway*, or of *The Hours*, for that matter. Indeed, to borrow Helen W. Wussow's words, *The Hours* is like *Mrs. Dalloway*, a "text that at once completes and repeats itself" (xiv) through each of its plot lines. As such, the story of Mrs. Woolf is completed in the prologue and repeated, with variations, in the stories of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway, as well as in the very book she has been working on. The fate that Virginia has in store for Clarissa and Septimus suggests that, half in love with life and half in love with death, she will continue to pursue the truth but delight in the illusion, cherish

the day but wait for the night to fall. And as the other stories within *The Hours* testify, after her death, Virginia Woolf will live on in the imagination of others, her works touching “common” readers (Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan) and inspiring other writers (Cunningham and his stand-in, the poet-character Richard).

A Will of Her Own: The Story of Mrs. Brown

“There is comfort in facing the full range of options; in considering all your choices, fearlessly and without guide.”

(Cunningham 152)

J. Hillis Miller’s statement that “narration is repetition as the raising of the dead” (81) applies to Cunningham’s reconstruction of scenes from both Woolf’s life and *Mrs. Dalloway*. As the author confessed in an interview, after first playing around with the idea that Woolf might be “some kind of ghost haunting my attempts to rewrite *Mrs. Dalloway*,” an idea he soon dismissed as “not sufficiently interesting,” he added a third character, Laura Brown, whom he patterned upon his own mother. Only then did everything seem to fall into place: “there was a writer, a reader, and a fictional character (3). Of course, Laura Brown is also a fictional creation, and in fact, by calling her “Mrs. Brown,” Cunningham evokes Woolf’s shorthand for the idea of character in the novel, and, on a deeper level, for “the spirit we live by, life itself.”⁹ In the author’s words, both Laura Brown and his mother shared with Woolf “the desire to create something greater than a human being could possibly create. The only difference was one of them was trying to make a perfect cake and one of them was trying to write a great book. But if we

remove that from the equation, it's the same impulse, and they are equally entitled to their ecstasies and their despair" (3).

If Virginia is trying to keep afloat by writing, Laura is trying to steady herself by reading, which she considers "the first task of the day, the only viable way to negotiate the transit from sleep to obligation" (38). Moreover, if, as Woolf made clear in *A Room of One's Own*, how women write is tied up with how they live, Laura's story illustrates that women's daily lives are intimately bound up with what they read. Laura cherishes these private moments when fiction spills over into her life, creating a parallel world and causing her bedroom to feel "more densely inhabited, more actual" (37). Through Laura, then, Cunningham traces a reader's awakening to the potentialities of being suggested by her favorite book, *Mrs. Dalloway*, with whose main character she seems to identify. Indeed, Laura is fascinated "by the idea of a woman like that, a woman of such brilliance, such strangeness, such immeasurable sorrow" (42). Reading imparts some kind of poetry to Laura's dreary life of domesticity, saves her from complacency, and reconnects her with the core of her being.

For over the years, especially since her marriage, Laura has acquired an armor that has distanced her from her true emotions. In the aftermath of WWII, she has become one of those women who have excelled in the difficult "art" of family life: "making home, having and raising children, creating not just books or paintings but a whole world—a world of order and harmony where children are safe (if not happy), where men who have seen horrors beyond imagining, who have acted bravely and well, come home to lighted windows, to perfume, to plates and napkins" (42). Like Mrs. Ramsay, Laura embodies the Victorian ideal of woman, the Angel in the House, ministering to the needs of others. Dan, Laura's good-hearted yet uncomprehending husband is himself a war hero who seemed to "to have returned from the realm of the dead" (39). Baking him a "perfect birthday cake" is Laura's token of love for him, for their lovely boy, Richie, and

for the child that is on the way. Like an artist, she “imagines making out of the humblest materials, a cake with all the balance and authority of an urn or a house. The cake will speak of bounty and delight the way a good house speaks of comfort and safety” (76).

Ironically, while making this cake, Laura is undergoing “a subtle but profound transformation,” catching up with herself, as it were (79). Like Virginia, she is characterized by an acute self-consciousness: despite her determination to “rise and be cheerful,” Laura still feels “possessed” by a “dreamlike feeling, as if she is standing in the wings, about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed” (43). Although it is easier for Laura than for Virginia to “act” in her husband’s presence, when alone with Richie, Laura tends to feel “unmoored” because he is “so entirely, persuasively himself” and “wants what he wants so avidly.” For Richie, Laura is what Mrs. Ramsay was for James, or what Julia Stephen was for Virginia: “the animating principle, the life of the house” (47). Ever since he was a child, Richie has been “devoted, entirely, to the observation and deciphering of her, because without her there is no world at all” (192).

In Laura, the desire to love and be loved clashes with the desire to find and maintain the autonomy of selfhood. For, as she comes to realize, while love binds her to her family, it also threatens to infringe on her inner freedom. What Laura really wants is to be “free, blameless, unaccountable” (78), which is why, by the end of the day, she breaks the promise she made to herself in the morning—namely, that “she will remain,” she “will do what is required, and more” (48). But the very impulse to do “more” than “what is required” sets Laura up for disappointment. Thus, the cake she has baked for her husband is merely cute instead of beautiful, as she had imagined it to be (99). Longing for something more, she cannot settle for the ordinary, unlike her husband, who desires nothing, “really, beyond what he’s already got. He is impenetrable in his ambitions and satisfactions, his love of job and home” (100).

Laura also wants something different from what was expected of women at the time. As already noted, she also feels a strong emotional bond with another woman, in this case her friend and neighbor, Kitty. Upon learning that Kitty suffers from cancer, which prevents her from having children, Laura is filled with “sorrow and tenderness”; the woman who until then has seemed “heroic,” “a figure of bright and tragic dignity—a woman standing by her man,” is suddenly revealed to her as common—yet another ordinary human being that has been playing her part and known her share of suffering: “They are both afflicted and blessed, full of shared secrets, striving every moment. They are each impersonating someone. They are weary and beleaguered; they have taken on such enormous work” (110). As she embraces Kitty, Laura urges her to “forget about Ray” (who worries Kitty more than her condition does) and seize the moment—the moment when they are about to kiss. Between the two, Kitty is the conventional “docile body,” while Laura is “the dark-eyed predator,” the “odd one, the foreigner, the one who can’t be trusted” (110). Brief as it is, this moment of intimacy breaks down the duality of self/other, drawing out a side of Laura’s personality that she has been repressing all along.

Terrified by the thought of “going morbid” (101), Laura prepares another cake, but again unsatisfied with the outcome, she decides to leave, not before she makes sure that her son is in Mrs. Latch’s good care and that she has taken a copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* with her. She convinces herself that reading can help her escape the nagging sense of failure and helplessness. Woolf’s novel becomes Laura’s companion and guide, leading her on a journey into her deepest self. No sooner has she immersed herself in the novel than Laura finds that she’s “accompanied by an invisible sister, a perverse woman full of rage and recriminations,” an unfortunate sister in dire need of “comfort and silence” (149). In spatial terms, this journey of self-discovery is envisioned as an escape from her suffocating domestic surroundings to a room of her own. Indeed, the hotel room functions as a womb-like enclosure that opens to disclose freedom.

The world Laura enters through reading is neither the realm of the dead nor that of the living. It is instead a dream world, where silence prevails and where she feels safe. Laura embodies the ideal reader, who intuitively recognizes the truth that the writer is trying to get across to her: “But this is what I have always felt and known and desired!” (*A Room* 75). Reading about Mrs. Dalloway gives Laura “a sensation of deep and buoyant release” (150). Shakespeare’s lines that leap out at her—“Fear no more the heat o’ the sun / Nor the furious winter rages”—are the ones that conclude Clarissa’s own musings on “the ebb and flow of things,” and that now open up a new, more serene, perspective on death: for Laura, dying no longer seems “quite so strange.” “It could,” she thinks, much like Virginia in the garden scene, “be deeply comforting; it might feel so free, to simply go away.” Laura also senses a “dreadful beauty” in death, “like an ice field or a desert in early morning” (151-52). But whatever beauty lies in death, it is overshadowed by the beauty of life, with which Laura is “hopelessly” in love, “at least at certain moments.” Furthermore, she reflects, by taking her own life, she “would be killing her son, her husband, and the other child, still forming inside her” (152). Laura decides against suicide for the simple reason that it would be “evil,” but the question arises: in eventually abandoning her family, isn’t she committing an evil act, at least towards others?

Cunningham refrains from judging his character, as he seems to emphasize not so much the brave choice she makes in the end, but the autonomy of the act of choosing. The choice itself can only be understood in the context of Laura’s struggle to take charge of her life and invest it with meaning. On her way back home, “full of what she’s read,” Laura experiences a sense of dislocation she shares with the character about which she has been reading: she “occupies a twilight zone of sorts; a world composed of London in the twenties, a turquoise hotel room, and of this car, driving down this familiar street. She is herself and not herself” (187). Her personality combines now both halves of the typology that dominated male fiction and that Woolf challenged

in her feminist manifesto. In the hotel room, Laura forgot, albeit for a moment, “the other woman”—the “angel in the house” type of woman—but at home, she is painfully reminded of her: “She herself is trapped here forever, posing as a wife,” stuck with both what is required and what is expected of her: “She must please; she must continue” (205).

And so she does, by dutifully setting up the table for Dan’s birthday celebration. The scene brings to mind the ending of *To the Lighthouse*, with Laura “making of the moment something permanent,” just as Lily Briscoe is trying to order her experiences into a satisfactory, coherent visual form, a form analogous to Woolf’s own ordering and structuring devices: “it seems she has succeeded suddenly, at the last minute, the way a painter might brush a final line of color onto a painting and save it from incoherence; the way a writer might set down the line that brings to light the set patterns and symmetry in the drama” (207). Laura is having her own defining moment, when she also becomes conscious of the aliveness of the past, the richness of the present, and the openness, if not the promise, of the future: “The room seems almost impossibly full: full of the lives of her husband and son; full of the future. It matters; it shines. Much of the world, whole countries have been decimated, but a force that feels unambiguously like goodness has prevailed” (207). This force, we infer, is the will to life, which throughout *The Hours* is tied up with the courage to face the unexpected, and implicitly, with the challenge to create, to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Thus the more urgent the need to create—to actualize a vision of beauty—the more intense are the thoughts and feelings pressed into the hours.

Laura’s encounter with “the extraordinary” has occurred by means of a book bearing the imprint of a genius she has, to some degree, creatively absorbed. As Bloom would put it, Laura has learnt to “identify” with what she feels in a greatness that “can be joined to the self, without violating the self’s integrity” (3-4). To the extent that *Mrs. Dalloway* has invigorated and

inspired Laura, it has thus served its life-enhancing purpose. Hence willing herself back into life is not enough for Laura, and neither is the privileged moment she has just awakened to, for “what if you decided to want more?” (214). When, at the close of day, Dan calls her to bed, her body is there, but her mind is “far away,” venturing “across an invisible line, the line that has always separated her from what she would prefer to feel, who she would prefer to be” (78). We suspect that Laura will channel her life-affirming energy towards something more, something that accords with what is true within her, even if that means breaking the “circle of love and forbearance” (74). After all, this is exactly how Woolf envisaged her Mrs. Brown: “at once very frail and very heroic,” leading “a fantastic and secluded life” until, “faced with a dreadful revelation” that presumably involves Mr. Smith, “takes a heroic decision” and leaves him (“Mrs. Brown” 101).

The Will to Live: The Story of Mrs. Dalloway

“For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up,
building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh.”

(Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 4)

The Hours is essentially true to the core of themes and ideas found in *Mrs. Dalloway* at the same time that it reveals nuances and depths of meaning only suggested in Woolf’s novel. The narrative sequence involving Mrs. Dalloway resurrects Woolf’s famous protagonist as the fifty-two year old Clarissa Vaughan, an editor in a publishing house who is planning a party for her best friend and lost lover, Richard, to celebrate his major award for a lifetime of poetic achievement. Clarissa intends the party to be her gift to Richard and her tribute to his “courage to

create”: “She will give Richard the best party she can manage. She will try to create something temporal, even trivial, but perfect in its way” (123). For fifteen years Clarissa has lived with her partner Sally, but their low-key relationship, we soon realize, contrasts with the vitality Clarissa can still feel with Richard, whose imminent death awakens her to the painful realization that the world she so deeply loves may be one of superficial appearances, that her own life is smothered under triviality, and that the intense moments hovering in her memory are just that: snatches of the past that will never be relived. If death is the only promise that life fulfills, these moments are, like happiness, a gift to delight in, rather than to be expected. By the same token, Clarissa’s story reminds us of the Indian inscription that stands on the gateway to Nietzsche’s autobiography, *Ecce Homo*: “There are so many daybreaks that have not yet dawned” (65). Living as she does in a present that contains the past and the future, Clarissa ultimately embodies the Nietzschean stance—the will to life—that makes of *The Hours* a hymn to “the eternal joy of becoming.”¹⁰

Emulating Woolf’s painterly style, Cunningham evokes the poetry of the quotidian, the imperfect yet exquisite manifestations of beauty, and the inchoate rush of impressions falling upon “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day.” Clarissa’s vivid memories have a compelling urgency and immediacy, suffusing the present with the radiance of the past. “The thrill, the shock, to be alive on a morning in June” casts up thoughts of another fine morning, when, at eighteen, Clarissa fell for Richard, and when she felt “destined to charm and to prosper” (11). She reflects that if it hadn’t been for Richard’s attraction to Louis and her own erratic nature, they could have stayed lovers. With Louis between them, she did not consider the end of their “experiment” as a betrayal: “it was simply an expansion of the possible.” The *ménage a trois* felt “simply right at the time,” binding Louis and Clarissa to Richard, whom they both loved (96).

As much as she loves Richard, however, Clarissa “loves the day slightly more” and is moved by the “intricacy” and “endless life” of New York City on an ordinary summer morning

(14). Whereas a poet like Richard “would move sternly through the same morning, editing it, dismissing incidental ugliness along with incidental beauty, seeking the economic and historical truth behind these old brick town houses,” Clarissa “simply enjoys without reason” everything she sees around her. Her responses to the outside world are “voluptuous,” “undisciplined,” “indiscriminate,” “as if everything in the world is part of a vast, inscrutable intention, and cannot be conceived in language but is simply the sight and feel of the thing itself” (13). Her soul is defined by this “determined, abiding fascination” (13). She assumes that, “no matter how compromised, how harmed,” we all “want desperately to live”—a sweeping generalization qualified by Richard’s plunge into death.

Much like Virginia and Laura, Clarissa hides her intuitions and feelings behind her social persona. During her morning walk to the flower shop, Clarissa meets her friend, Walter Hardy, whom she is reluctant to kiss on the mouth, a moment that makes her extremely self-conscious. Thirty-years ago, Richard recognized that “under her pirate-girl veneer lay all the makings of a good suburban wife, and she is now revealed to herself as a meager spirit, too conventional, the cause of much suffering” (16). Richard has remained Clarissa’s “most rigorous, infuriating companion, her best friend” (19) who still believes that her decision to settle for a life of tranquil domesticity with Sally represents “a weakness on her part,” a self-denial he associates with the “gifts and frailties of her entire sex” (19).

While despising Walter for making a fortune writing shallow romance novels, Clarissa appreciates his “greedy innocence,” his insatiable thirst for “more youth, more pleasure,” as well as his affection for his friend, Evan, another AIDS sufferer (17). After all, she thinks, these days “you measure people first by their kindness and their capacity for devotion” (18), and therefore, Walter’s novels are not ultimately that bad, as they uphold “courage in the face of adversity.”

Passing a bookstore, Clarissa considers buying Evan a book, one that will speak to him on a personal level: "You want to give him the book of his own life, that book that will locate him, parent him, arm him for the changes" (21-22). But then, she fears, books may in the end fail to comfort and sustain, as they also belong to the world of objects condemned to dissolution. The childhood memory of a tree branch tapping against her bedroom's window and of the faint music playing on a phonograph matters more to her than all the books in the store window," evoking the moment when "she began to inhabit the world, to understand the promises implied by an order larger than human happiness, though it contained human happiness along with every other emotion" (22-23).

Clarissa has also carried the vague memory of a kiss with Richard when she was eighteen, but what she distinctly recalls is the argument that ended their "little experiment": for "Clarissa wanted her freedom and Richard wanted, well, too much, didn't he always?" And so did, in Woolf's novel, Peter Walsh, with whom "everything had to be shared, everything gone into." This Clarissa Dalloway found "intolerable" (6). Peter's vision of the "solitary traveler" shows the extent to which he searches, in waking life, for a perfect relationship with a woman who gives and soothes as, in the past, he has sought one with Clarissa. The traveler, who looks for the spectral presence in women, is left only with the landlady, who serves him in menial ways. Upon awakening from his vision, Peter can hear himself say out loud, "The death of the soul" (44)—a recurring phrase he attaches to the moment in the past when Clarissa rejected him in favor of Richard Dalloway. Peter's dream points then to the same gap between ideal and actuality that Clarissa Vaughan senses in Richard's view of her: "Wasn't it, really, just another poetic conceit, Richard's idea of her?" (52).

Clarissa realizes that for Richard she is a fictional character he "has invested with "nearly limitless capacities for tragedy and comedy" because, as an artist, Richard "needs to live in a

world peopled by extreme and commanding figures” (61). The following passage registers not only Richard’s penchant for turning life into fiction, but also the powerful impact his writing has on his readers, his first and most devoted one being, of course, Clarissa. Thus

if he insists on a version of you that is funnier, stranger, more eccentric and profound than you suspect yourself to be . . . it is all but impossible not to believe at least in his presence and for a while after you’ve left him, that he almost sees through to your essence, weighs your true qualities (not all of which are necessarily flattering—a certain clumsy, childish rudeness is part of his style), and appreciates you more fully than anyone else. (60-61)

Unlike other friends of his, Clarissa has come to “enjoy the sense of hyperbole” he brings to her life (61) and feels flattered knowing that she is the subject of Richard’s much anticipated book. She has often thought that had she remained with Richard, her life would have been “as potent and dangerous as literature itself” (97). Hence, the sense of missed opportunity relieved, however, by the recollection of that singular moment when she and Richard kissed beside a pond more than thirty years before. As Clarissa has come to understand, that moment was not merely the beginning of happiness, it *was* happiness (98).

In a sense, the kiss is still happening, absorbed by the present moment and revived every time she visits with Richard. Where the latter is concerned, however, the present lacks the sense of possibility Clarissa still feels. In his bitterness, suffering, and isolation, Richard mirrors Septimus and, implicitly, Woolf herself. Like Septimus, Richard has relinquished ordinary care taking to such an extent that “the difference between insanity and hopelessness is difficult to pinpoint” (58). He also hears voices, some of which speak in Greek, and seems to “have fallen out of time,” as if the party has already happened (62). Believing that he has failed to achieve his artistic vision, Richard scorns the award as a consolation prize for his illness and incipient madness. Clarissa tries to dispel Richard’s misgivings by insisting that he need not “put on a performance. These people have believed in you for a long, long while” (64). For Clarissa, the

award means that “literature itself (the future of which is being shaped right now) seems to feel a need for Richard’s particular contribution: his defiantly prolix lamentation over worlds vanishing or lost entirely” (64-5). As we will see shortly, this acute sense of loss is traced back to Richard’s childhood, more exactly, to the trauma of having being abandoned by his mother.

Richard is consumed by the regret that he could not write about “the lives we might have had” and about “all the ways we might die” (67). All he wanted was to have told “part of the story of part of you,” and although he wrote an entire book, he still feels that “everything’s left out of it, almost everything” (66). Here Cunningham has Richard voice the same concerns that Woolf expressed in May 1923 when she began writing *Mrs. Dalloway*: “But how does one make people talk about everything in the whole of life, so that one’s hair stands on end, in a drawing room? How can one weight and sharpen dialogue till each sentence tears its way like a harpoon and grapples with shingles at the bottom of the reader’s soul?” (*Flight* 3: 36). Not surprisingly, Clarissa’s portrait of Richard reads like a portrait of Woolf herself: “Richard the dense, the wistful, the scrutinizing. Richard who observed so minutely and exhaustively, who tried to split the atom with words, will survive after other, more fashionable names have faded” (65). The prediction is particularly true in the case of Virginia Woolf, whose impulse to “look within” and trace “the atoms as they fall upon the mind” led her to develop an impressionistic realism based on a saturation of the detail rather than an accumulation of details.

Cunningham’s rewriting of *Mrs. Dalloway* relies on a similar method, by means of which he also explores the surfaces and depths of each of his characters’ consciousness and constructs patterns of imagery that connect different moments in the novel. One such pattern is created by the flower imagery featured in three related scenes: Virginia’s young niece places yellow roses around the dead thrush; Laura Brown and her son pipe yellow icing roses onto Dan’s birthday cake; and Clarissa is buying yellow roses for Richard’s party. In each case, the revelation of

beauty and order inherent in the ordinary alleviates, albeit temporarily, the fear and prospect of death.

Another pattern of imagery involves the shifts of light and darkness to which these characters' minds become attuned in the course of their search for the truth behind the shadows of everyday experience. Worth mentioning in this regard is the moment when, finding the shades drawn in Richard's room, Clarissa asks if she can let some light in. Across the alley she sees a peevish old widow (58), who brings to mind the old woman that Clarissa's namesake sees from her own window and who embodies the privacy, mystery, and elusiveness of the soul. Returning to her apartment building, Clarissa has the strange feeling that the hallway "feels like an entrance to the realm of the dead" (90). Aside from the dust rising and the brown light, "something more precise comes along, as the actual odor of age and loss, the end of hope" (90-91). Sadness overcomes her as she realizes that Richard will "not accompany her, as planned, into old age" (91). Richard, who has seen through the "defects of her own soul," will no longer see her through.

Once inside her apartment, Clarissa is "suddenly filled with a sense of dislocation" for she is unable to recognize her kitchen. Her thoughts turn to a time and place where neither Sally nor Richard exists, but where "there is only the essence of Clarissa, a girl grown into a woman, still full of hope, still capable of anything" (92). The "ghost" of her self seems to Clarissa more real than the present self because it stands for "the part of her at once most indestructibly alive and least distinct; the part that owns nothing; that observes with wonder and detachment, like a tourist in a museum." (92). For a moment, solitude seems an exhilarating prospect, something to look forward to, because it means she will be able to preserve her innermost self (92). However fleeting, this recognition lends meaning to her life: "You try to hold the moment, just here, in the kitchen with the flowers. You try to inhabit it, to love it, because it's yours and because what waits immediately outside these rooms is the hallway" (94-95).

The hallway is an objective correlative for those unsettling depths and uncomfortable truths about herself and the world around her from which Clarissa would rather turn away than confront and acknowledge: “Over the years she has gotten used to ignoring the mirror” (57). Hence, the tendency to project her own vanities, jealousies, and inadequacies onto others, with whom she consequently fails to establish satisfying relationships. Thus Clarissa’s attempts at communicating with Julia, her college-age daughter who was conceived by artificial insemination, are thwarted by the girl’s friendship with queer activist Mary Krull. A contemporary version of Miss Kilman, the latter is perceived by Clarissa as “too despotic in her intellectual and moral intensity” (23). Clarissa is also jealous of Sally, who has been asked to lunch by a controversial actor. Feeling left out bothers Clarissa just as much as “the embarrassing fact” that “fame” still matters to her a great deal: “I am trivial, endlessly trivial, she thinks” (94).

Like her namesake, Clarissa exemplifies a more universal human fascination with “the aura of fame—and, more than fame, actual immortality” implied, earlier in the day, by the presence of a movie star, namely, Meryl Streep.¹¹ In anticipation of Richard’s party, Clarissa admits to “her desire for an ordinary life (neither more nor less than what most people desire), and to how much she wanted him to come to her party and exhibit his devotion in front of her guests” (203). One of her deep-seated anxieties is that even though people will want to read Richard’s elegies, his books “will vanish along with almost everything else. Clarissa, the figure in the novel, will vanish, as will Laura Brown, the lost mother, the martyr and fiend” (225). In much the same way, when asked if she liked “becoming famous,” Woolf replied: “The truth is I am being pushed up, but many people are saying that I shan’t last, and perhaps I shan’t. So I return to my old feeling of nakedness as the backbone of my existence, which indeed it is” (*Diary 2*: 420).

Whether she is aware of it or not, Clarissa does exert a relatively strong hold over the other characters, being seen through their eyes, thoughts, and memories by turns. Thus she is both

the observer and the observed. As already noted, Richard resents Clarissa's worldliness, the fact that "Clarissa has, at heart, become a society wife" (20), in the same manner that Peter, along with Miss Killman, condemn Mrs. Dalloway's safe conventionality. To Walter, Clarissa appears as "a deposed aristocrat, interesting without being particularly important" (16). To Louis, Richard's former lover, she seems older, although she has retained that "rigorous glamour" (127). Mary Krull sees her as a "smug, self-satisfied witch" who "believes that by obeying the rules she can have what men have" (160). Sally, although angry with Clarissa for her self-deluding optimism, finds that she cannot bring herself to tell her "something more" than the "almost ordinary" "I love you":

What she wants to say has to do with all the people who've died; it has to do with her own feelings of enormous good fortune and imminent, devastating loss. If anything happens to Clarissa she, Sally, will go on living but she will not, exactly, survive. She will not be all right. What she wants to say has to do not only with joy, but with *the penetrating, constant fear that is joy's other half*. (182-83; emphasis mine)

The implication is that emotions are too deep for words, that profound human connections elude language. Sally is not alone in her predicament, a variation of which can be discerned in both Richard Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay's failure to say what they really feel to their spouses. In having these characters refrain from making open declarations of love, Woolf manages to avoid the danger of sentimentality (Lee 230). A visit from Louis provides the occasion for further reflections on love and the fear attendant upon its loss or absence. Richard's novel, we learn, focuses "exhaustively" on a woman who resembles Clarissa, whereas Louis has a short scene in which "he whines about the paucity of love in the world" (126). The latter is puzzled by the book's content, or rather lack thereof ("nothing happens") and by its shocking ending (the mother's sudden death). Cunningham alludes here to the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*,

which confronts, indeed shocks, readers with Mrs. Ramsay's abrupt disappearance from the narrative.

By contrast, *The Hours* surprises us with the reappearance of the mother, following, it is true, her son's suicide. Kneeling at Richard's side, after he has jumped from the window, Clarissa realizes that she is the only one who "has seen or heard Richard fall." In this moment of crucial epiphany, Clarissa sees herself and the lonely future to which she has been sentenced. She would like to shout up to the old woman whom she imagines at home, by herself, and who now feels like "a family member" (202). As in Woolf's novel, death is both defiance and "an attempt to communicate," to reach out to people: loneliness notwithstanding, "There was an embrace in death" (134).

The scene in which Laura Brown shows up at Clarissa's apartment gathers together all the strands of the novel:

Here she is, then, Clarissa thinks; here is the woman from Richard's poetry. Here is the lost mother, the thwarted suicide; here is the woman who walked away. It is both shocking and comforting that such a figure could, in fact, prove to be an ordinary-looking old woman seated on a sofa with her hands in her lap. (220-21)

It is equally comforting for readers to realize that Cunningham has succeeded where Richard thought he had failed: in *The Hours*, Cunningham has created "something alive and shocking enough that it could stand beside a morning in somebody's life. The most ordinary morning" (199). The book, like the party Clarissa has planned but never made it to, is an offering "for the not-yet-dead; for the relatively undamaged; for those who for mysterious reasons have the fortune to be alive" (226). All three narratives end on a positive note confirmed by Virginia's decision about her character: "sane Clarissa—exultant, ordinary Clarissa—will go on . . . loving her life of ordinary pleasures, and someone else, a deranged poet, a visionary, will be the one to die." Whereas Richard has chosen death to escape the merciless succession of the hours, Clarissa

yields to the here and now, embraces the beauty of the commonplace, and immerses herself in the ebb and flow of city life. Over and against the painful “sense of an ending” foreshadowed by Woolf’s suicide and reinforced by Richard’s own plunge into death, Cunningham pits the “the eternal joy of becoming” celebrated through his Mrs. Dalloway: for indeed, “Heaven only knows why one loves it so” (226).

To be sure, *The Hours* does not attempt to explain away the iconic character of her novel but it does at least help us understand how much of the novelist’s “real life” went into her creation. Like many of his contemporaries, Cunningham has brought one of the “illustrious dead” back into “the land of the living,” allowing Virginia Woolf to “enter time once more—which means to enter the realm of audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change” (Atwood 178-79). Thus, *The Hours*, like *Chatterton* and *Out of Sheer Rage*, does not bespeak a nostalgia for a dead past, but rather the need to assert the inescapable presence of the human in both literary production and reception. The potential meanings of *Mrs. Dalloway* which are actualized and constituted anew within the meaning-realm of Laura Brown’s and Clarissa Vaughan’s stories reinforce Jean Starobinsky’s claim that, “every work contains a true life in the past and an imaginary life in the future” (qtd. in Simion 76). Neither the historical nor the virtual life can be understood in the absence of the other. Similarly, my conclusion shows, the story of postmodernism contains the past, i.e. the historical and aesthetic aspects of previous “stories,” just as the latter conditions the present, i.e., our own cultural moment.

Notes

¹ Arguing that literary genius is “both of the age and above the age” (11), Bloom purports to be more interested in discussing “the influence of a work upon its author” than the presence of “the man or woman in the work.” His emphasis falls on the “contest” these great minds, Woolf among

them, “conducted with themselves” (6). From Margaret Atwood’s perspective, however, “the word ‘genius’ and the word ‘woman’ just don’t really fit together in our language, because the kind of eccentricity expected by male ‘geniuses’ would simply result in the label ‘crazy,’ should it be practiced by a woman” (100).

² Laura “knows she has been worshipped and despised; she knows she has obsessed a man who might, conceivably, prove to be a significant artist” (221).

³ Bloom writes that, “If genius is a mystery of the capacious consciousness, what is least mysterious about it is an intimate connection with personality rather than with character” (5). Similarly, Woolf has stated in “The New Biography” (1927) that, “the life which is increasingly real to us . . . dwells in the personality rather than in the act” (155).

⁴ In her introduction to the Vintage edition of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1992), Angelica Garnett, Woolf’s niece, has pointed out the parallels between Septimus’s insanity and Woolf’s own manic-depressive illness.

⁵ Following Hermione Lee, whom he considers Woolf’s “best biographer,” Harold Bloom has argued that “her marriage kept Woolf alive far longer than she might, on her own, have allowed herself to live” (332). Indeed, her suicide note is filled with gratitude for Leonard’s patience and kindness, at the same time that it projects the deep-seated frustration with being no longer able to read and write, which she considered as necessary as the air she breathed (Cunningham 6-7).

⁶ In her childhood, Virginia relished the moves from 22 Hyde Park Gate to St. Ives, Cornwall, each summer, and then from 1911 onwards she either owned or rented a house in Sussex. Little Talland House, Asham, and then Monk’s House were the three houses to which she journeyed from London.

⁷ We might remember, though, that at the time she was writing her feminist manifesto, Woolf was deeply involved with Vita Sackville-West. *Orlando* (1928), Woolf’s fanciful biography of her

close friend had been published a little before she delivered the lectures that would become *A Room of One's Own*. Moreover, in chapter four of *A Room*, Woolf mentions the obscenity trial for Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, which she herself had defended.

⁸ During the process of composing the novel, Woolf introduced Septimus on October 14, 1923. With the addition of Rezia, in November, the writer transferred Clarissa's death to Septimus and imagined the convergence of their destinies in the party scene at the end.

⁹ In her famous essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), Woolf articulates a modernist aesthetics grounded in a new conception of human nature, one that is elusive, mysterious, and therefore fascinating. Its quintessence is embodied by the so-called Mrs. Brown whom Woolf imagines as an ordinary woman sitting in the corner of a railway carriage.

¹⁰ As Nietzsche writes, "This ultimate, joyfullest, boundlessly exuberant yes to life is not only the highest insight, it is also the profoundest, the insight most strictly confirmed by truth and knowledge" (50).

¹¹ During her morning walk through Soho, Clarissa's attention is caught by the passing of a car with a celebrity in it—a scene that relates intertextually to the second section of Woolf's novel. As Cunningham said in his interview, a pop culture icon seemed to him "the nearest equivalent" to "that sense of the human form exalted, the life made fabulous simply by who and what the person is" (3). Incidentally, Meryl Streep appears in Daldry's movie as well, starring as Clarissa Vaughan.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION:

THE SENSE OF A BEGINNING, OR THE FUTURE PAST OF POSTMODERNISM

“*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).”

(Lyotard)

“Postmodernism is not about the end of the story but, rather, about the story of story.”

(Fokkema 48)

The full-scale analyses offered in the previous chapters have led me to a tantalizing conclusion: in *reprising* the past with a difference, postmodernism has also *reappraised* it so as to make it a precedent. More to the point, not only have late twentieth-century writers seized on the legacy of canonical authors to legitimize the origins of postmodernism, but in so doing, they have also succeeded—through cultural revisionism—in making those origins a source of their own originality. Author fictions allow us to see how postmodernism and preceding “-isms” illuminate one another's forms, aesthetic strategies, cultural logics, or continued relevancies. From a broader perspective, the re-readings, revisions, and revaluations enabled by author fictions take their place in the ongoing process of historicizing postmodernism. They resurrect an old ghost within literary theory—the author—viewing it with a historical sense that harkens back to the opening of modernity as well as to its “shadow

self,” postmodernity. Haunted by their subjects’ posthumous voices, author fictions attest to the “fundamental spectrality of postmodernism,” which “becomes an *apparition* and *apparent*, discernible” (Moraru, *Memorious* 35).

In the introduction to this study, I have called upon arguments showing the critical, revisionist function of rewriting, and, implicitly, of contemporary writers’ consciousness of the literary past. Here I shift gears and tease out the deeper implications of this process—the most telling of which is postmodernism’s “cultural indebtedness” (Moraru 25)—by locating the “memorious discourse” fostered by author fictions within an ongoing tradition of aesthetics and philosophy. The author figure emerges as the main protagonist of an intriguing, speculative narrative that recurs across literary texts and cultural theories, from the modern to the postmodern. As Patricia Waugh has recognized, “[i]f theory is in some sense always conceptualization after the event (as much as a mode of prediction), it may be interesting to return to the literary text precisely as an ‘event’ and to see how the ‘postmodern’ has always, perhaps, inhabited the modern” (7). What follows is an overview of those theories most relevant to my argument about the retrospective construction of postmodernism—as a style of thought, a creative sensibility, and a literary form—enabled by late-twentieth century author fictions. Put another way, author fictions illuminate the very issues debated in theoretical postmodernism, making explicit what is implied in the aesthetic paradigms (romanticist, realist, symbolist, and modernist) with which their subjects have been traditionally aligned.

The casting of the author as character can be best viewed in terms of the concept of the posthumous. The trope of the posthumous is central to the discourse of postmodernism, which, as Diane Elam states, is “concerned with practically nothing but the problem of trying to think historically, or trying to understand history” (10). In the popular imagination, the return to history, or the “return of past ages” figures as the “return of the living dead”

(Readings 2). For Jeremy Tambling, “the posthumous” represents a “way of thinking about the pastness of the past, and about our own present” (ix). But, he wonders, “[i]f past and present are caught up in the mutuality of the posthumous, is the past/present distinction workable? Which is living? Can we talk about the texts of the past?” (23). The posthumous functions as a counterweight to the debates about the so-called “end of history,” “the death of the subject,” and the “death of art” that became prevalent in the late twentieth century. The critical vocabulary of postmodernism seems to revolve around these terms, just as that of Modernism depended on such terms as the “autonomy of art,” “dehumanization of art,” and “the death of the author” (Boym 3).

As the prevailing cultural paradigm in the wake of liberal humanism, postmodernism made “the antihumanist, anti-idealist claim that man (including the author) and unitary meaning are dead” (Haney 17). In Elana Gomel’s words, postmodernism “has assimilated the death of the author to the more general death of the subject” (90-91), already prefigured in Nietzsche’s pronouncements on the “death of God.” For Peter Ackroyd, as for Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, aesthetic humanism is based on a false, because essentializing,¹ notion of the self: “the emergence of LANGUAGE as the content of literature . . . has already determined . . . the death of Man as he finds himself in humanism and the idea of subjectivity” (*Notes* 9). Many postmodern novels seem to abolish the individual subject, reducing the characters’ names to letters (Robbe-Grillet’s *A*, Pynchon’s *V*), omitting them altogether, as in Sarraute’s novels, or flaunting their fictional status, as do Barthelme’s *Snow White* and Acker’s *Don Quixote*. Similarly, “[t]he removal of the author,” Nancy K. Miller points out, “has not so much made room for a revision of the concept of authorship as it has . . . inhibited discussion of any writing identity in favor of the (new) monolith of anonymous textuality” (*Subject* 104). Under the influence of cultural studies, the “self” has been replaced with the

“subject,” a term that retains the inevitable sense of individual perspective, need, or desire, as well as the moral dimension that is built into language. “Language,” Margaret Atwood is right to point out, “is not morally neutral because the human brain is not neutral in its desires” (111). Barthes himself acknowledges the “persistence of the subject” (Miller 197) in the preface to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971): “For if,” he writes, “through a twisted dialectic, the Text, destroyer of all subjects, contains a subject to love—*un sujet à aimer*—that subject is dispersed, somewhat like the ashes we strew into the wind after death” (qtd. in Miller 197). In Nancy Miller’s interpretation, this passage reflects Barthes’ notion of “the subject as the presence in the text of perhaps not *someone* to love in person, but the mark of the need to be loved, the persistence of a peculiarly human(ist?) desire for connection” (197).

The return of the author to recent imaginative productions is therefore intimately bound up with the so-called return of the subject as an entity traversed by history, culture, nation, politics, and sexuality—an identity “restored metaphorically to a body through love” (Miller 197). My examination of these narratives has revealed the tendency to problematize the available paradigms of authorial subjectivity rather than doing away with them altogether. In them “authorial signature” no longer identifies a coherent, unified, and stable self, but rather a subject disseminated across a broad range of discourses and reducible to none. This is because the artist’s freedom, individuality, and originality are limited, but not eliminated, by cultural factors, such as period, ideology, and nationality. Thus the “deeper” stories of Chatterton, Dickens, Wilde, James, Woolf, and Lawrence have led us to the “secret repository” lodged in the unconscious, as well as in “the active mind,” their imagination being “a capacious, critical store of language and literature” (Haffended 453). The author’s name shows that the self is “fundamentally relational, intertextual, that there is historical and social depth to it” (Moraru, *Memorious* 117). As Seán Burke has stated, authorial signature

binds the text respectively to the still-living author, to the legacy and legatees of the dead author, to whatever traditions might have been established *in nomine auctoris* and to the posthumous reconstructions of authorial intention, biography and any system of oeuvre effects which might influence the ethical rereading of the text in question. (*Authorship* 289)

This brings me to another charge leveled at postmodernism, which, at its worst, has also been said to uphold what Graham Good has referred to as “presentism,” i.e. “the belief in the primacy of the present, and the refusal to be guided either by a version of the past or of the future.” Since, according to presentism, “the past cannot be known at all,” it follows that, “[a]ll versions are equally valid” (287), a view put forth in *Chatterton*. Here Charles Wychwood’s nostalgia for the modern (romantic-inspired) myth of authorship, with its “dream of wholeness, and of beauty,” is opposed by Ackroyd to the cynical voice of Andrew Flint, a successful postmodern writer, that taunts, “There is no history anymore. There is no memory. There is no standard to encourage permanence—only novelty, and the whole endless cycle of new objects” (150). Equally important, presentism “rejects visions of the future,” i.e., of “teleology (in philosophical terms), human destiny (in religious terms), and of overall human progress (in political terms)” (288). The most influential version is Lyotard’s repudiation of Grand Narratives that have been invoked to justify liberalism, humanism, individualism, realism, and science. In Ackroyd’s fictions, incongruous juxtapositions of various historical styles and practices undermine the understanding of history as progress. But, Good is right to observe, “without a narrative linking the present to the future and the past, there can be no development, only repetition” (289). It is precisely this narrative that author fictions supply through their recycling of past lives and texts. This phenomenon is symptomatic of *and* conducive to cultural regeneration, for “writing is the chance of continuation, of inheritance,

and survival” (Gibson and Wolfreys 69). Postmodernism, Moraru believes, often conveys a sense of “originality and authenticity, literary, cultural, as well as political” (*Memorious* 14).

As I argue, late twentieth-century author fictions speak to the postmodern need to belong, and thus be related to a beginning, rather than an end. They represent a token of the desire not to eliminate history, but to rewrite it according to the postmodern author’s own cultural positioning and agenda. These writers revisit the lives and works of their predecessors to reconnect with a past that has not really passed and to come to grips with what it means to be an author in postmodern times. They invoke but also question the authority of their illustrious predecessors in order to, ultimately, authorize themselves. For “[t]o narrate means to speak here and now with an authority that derives from having been (literally or metaphorically) there and then” (Atwood 179).

Whereas for the Romantics art was the original expression of a unique individual, for modernists and postmodernists writing brings together a chorus, or rather cacophony of voices coming as much from the present as from the past. In “Tradition and Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot famously said that, “No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets, the dead artists” (48). Borges went a step further when maintaining that, “every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future” (236). Likewise, Roland Barthes has expanded the definition of intertextuality to include “texts which come after: the sources of a text are not only before it, they are also after it” (qtd. in Calinescu 53). Applied to author fictions, this means that either one of the two life-stories—the “real” and the invented biography—can become a point of departure, or frame of reference for re-reading the other.

Author fictions bring the past into the present in a way that can transform our perception of both, and the relations between them. My readings of *The Blue Flower*, *Chatterton*, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, and *Jack Maggs* build on the recent criticism which has been devoted to revisionist interpretations of eighteenth and nineteenth century works as crucial in the emergence of modernity, or as foreshadowing postmodernist and poststructuralist views of language, identity, and history. It thus becomes possible to view postmodernism as a “late-flowering Romanticism” (Waugh 3), and interpret, for instance, the linguistic indeterminacy of Novalis’s unfinished novel as a determined condition of postmodern existence. For contemporary theories of art are heir not only to late nineteenth-century aesthetics, as David Williams has shown, but to late eighteenth-century aesthetics as well. Novalis already anticipated the tendency to “represent open-endedness, unrelatedness, and endlessness as facts of experiential reality” (Iser 19) that Williams identifies as a staple of decadent aesthetics and that allows him to claim Walter Pater as a proto-postmodernist who moved “in essay form away from ‘fixed products’ to open-ended processes” (35). The same holds true for Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* and *Wilde*, who accept, indeed celebrate fragmentation, contradiction, imitation, indeterminacy, and contingency as aesthetic standards. *Wilde*’s current popularity has been ascribed to his postmodernism due to “his ability to place himself, whenever possible, into the systems of exchange brought about via technology, advertising, and the canniness of posing. His subsequent fame says more about us than him and mirrors our desire to look into the past for the present” (Waldrep 62). Just as *Chatterton* invented the medieval world in eighteenth-century terms, so Ackroyd invents *Wilde*’s “last testament” in postmodern terms. As Hutcheon writes, “The eighteenth-century concern for lies and falsity becomes a postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of time and culture” (“Pastime” 278).

Author fictions transcend historical and aesthetic boundaries; indeed they seem to inhabit two temporalities at once, conflating the past and the present into a “past become uncannily present” (Readings 15). This paradox crystallizes the sense in which postmodernism is itself a posthumous “event,” much like the other literary periods (Romanticism, Realism, and Modernism) with which it is in constant, uneasy dialogue, both playful and critical. Aesthetic paradigms shade into, rather than shift from one another, for each bears the traces of what came before as well as the seeds of what comes after. As George Steiner has explained, “Literary periods, literary and artistic movements together with the radicalism and reception of individual works, prepare for, indeed compel in style and in substance that which comes after” (183).²

Much like the various texts (biographical and literary) reworked by contemporary writers, postmodernism partakes of a historic continuum encompassing the other literary movements it has absorbed, but also transcended. John Barth’s “The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction” (1980) defines postmodernism as the new literary form arising out of the exhaustion of classic realism, on the one hand, and modernism, on the other. As Barth points out, anticipations of the “postmodernist literary aesthetics” have been traced through the great modernists of the first half of the twentieth century (T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf) through their nineteenth century predecessors (Alfred Jarry, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarmé, and E.T. Hoffmann) back to Laurence Sterne and Miguel de Cervantes (166). Graham Good concurs that, in the novel at least, everything that has been identified as postmodernism can be found in the first European novel, *Don Quixote* (290).

My effort to reclaim a humanist and culturally progressive function for contemporary literature situates this project in conversation with the work of any number of revisionary critics of Romanticism, Victorianism, and Modernism whose research has disclosed the hidden subtext of these paradigms, namely, postmodernism. For Brian MacHale, as for Jean-Francois Lyotard, Hayden White, and others, the main genre in which postmodernism is constructed, and thus made intelligible to us, is narrative (3). In *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), as in his earlier study, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian MacHale insists on the “discursive and constructed character of postmodernism,” and, by extension, on the “provisionality” of his claims about particular versions of postmodernism (xviii). The “stories” about postmodernism vary according to the competing definitions of “modernism” itself, the obvious one being the “metanarrative” of Enlightenment modernity, with its ambitious claims for aesthetic autonomy and the power of scientific and rationalist thought. Postmodernism cannot be defined in simple opposition to modernism, a point that Lyotard makes in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), where he states that postmodernism is “a series of problems present to modernism in its continuing infancy” (79). “A work,” he maintains, “can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (79).

Author fictions take their place along other texts that signal a “memorious turn” in postmodernism (Moraru, *Memorious* 103), countering the charges that have been leveled at the latter, namely, its lack of depth or substance, of historical awareness, and cultural memory. It is by claiming kin with their literary forebears, by casting them as “postmortem postmodernists” that late-twentieth century writers find “their meaning and justification” (Stephen Tyler qtd. in MacHale 5). By weaving the life-stories of celebrated authors into their re-writing of canonical texts, postmodern writers build a “foundational discourse” (MacHale

5) of their world. As such, these novels make us aware of both the “first articulation” and the “later reception or interpretation” of the postmodern discourse. According to Ernst Behler, “These long spaces between the first articulation of a discourse and its later reception and realization are what is meant by the terms contemporary and the posthumous” (3). To illustrate his point, Behler gives the example of Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of language which “in more recent interpretations led to a different view of his writing that insisted on the ambiguity of his statements and the impossibility of ascribing definitive meaning to them” (3).

Nietzsche’s related critiques of language and knowledge, of the discourses of humanism and metaphysic idealism, triggered significant reorientations in the field of aesthetics, problematizing its past and shaping its future. Along with Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche has been regarded as either a precursor of postmodernism or heir of romanticism (Waugh 19). Also, as we have seen, both played a key role in postmodern reconfigurations of authorship. After Nietzsche, true historical knowledge is no longer possible, given the chaotic plurality of discourses (life-styles, cultures, and political viewpoints). The implication, as Waugh explains, is that “truth” cannot be distinguished from “fiction,” and that the aesthetic “has actually incorporated everything else into itself” (5-6). Thus, it is interesting to note, in the same year that MacHale, endorsing Christopher Norris’s account of the “narrative turn” of postmodern theory, proposed a “narrative construction of postmodernism,” Waugh advanced a related claim about what I refer to as the “aesthetic turn” in the romanticist, modernist, and postmodernist movements—all three referred to as “modern” (17). In *Practicing Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (1992), Waugh proposes that,

Instead of accepting Postmodernism on its own terms as a radical break with previous Western modes of knowledge and representation, it may be more fruitful to view it as a late phase in a tradition of specifically aestheticist modern thought inaugurated by philosophers such as Kant and embodied in Romantic *and* modernist art. (3)

According to Waugh, postmodernism shares with Romanticism and Modernism a tendency to aestheticize experience, to re-present it as a fictional construct. As Nietzsche put it, the work “invents the man who has created it, who is supposed to have created it” (*Beyond* 218). This philosophy of “radical fictionality” informs, for instance, Harold Bloom’s assessment of Virginia Woolf, the “last of the high aesthetes” (439), “for whom human existence and the world are finally justified only as aesthetic phenomena” (435), as well the journal Peter Ackroyd invents for Wilde, in which the latter seeks to “connect” his past and future “with simple words” (3). *Chatterton* further reinforces the sense in which for Ackroyd, as for Nietzsche, the self “exists in its ability to work with the fragments [words, texts] available to it and from them to project on to the world new fictions by which to live” (Waugh 20).

While questioning literature’s referential relationship to the world, Ackroyd is not, however, severing the connection altogether. In a sense, the point Fokkema argues about Ackroyd—that he is “essentially a romantic writer,” profoundly aware of what separates the tangential from what endures, applies to all of late twentieth-century writers who fill “with a leap of the imagination the gap between the irrecoverable subject or referent” and “its representation or sign (the biography)” (44). Within all of the three aesthetic models, literature (art in general) holds a privileged place, promising to reintegrate what Cartesian rationalism has pulled asunder: mind and body, subject and object, self and other. But postmodernism has moved beyond both Romanticism and Modernism, for its aesthetic impulses “have spilled out of the self-consciously defined sphere of art and into the spheres of what Kant referred to as cognitive and scientific, on the one hand, and practical and moral, on the other” (3). In other words, the postmodern re-evaluation of the aesthetic has brought to the surface the ethical and cultural-political underpinnings of narrative discourse in general, and of past narratives in particular.

In fact, as Waugh points out, “autonomy” has functioned “as a critical label used to obscure important concerns of Romantic and modernist writers (such as their politics)” (17). In author fictions, as we have seen, these concerns return with a vengeance, exemplifying and, in the process extending, the logic of “situatedness” that informs the cultural critique predominating in the late twentieth-century postcolonial, feminist, and gender discourses. These theories “position themselves against, or as Other to, Western patriarchal modernity” (Elias xxiii). Readings and Schaber also conceive of postmodernism in psychoanalytic terms, as “other to modernism” (8). The postmodern inheres in the modern, just as the other inheres in, is a constitutive part of the self. According to them, “postmodernism comes before modernism rather than after it, in the sense that it is the other that the modern forecloses at its inception, in order for modernity to begin” (10). The massive rejuvenation of romanticist, *fin de siècle* and modernist studies was enabled precisely by postmodern theory’s confrontation with the predominant, i.e. conservative, notions of the literary, canon formation, high and low culture, progress, civilization, imperialism, and sexuality.

To give but one example, in a little-known essay for *Vogue* entitled “A Preface to Modern Literature” (1923), T.S. Eliot suggests that modern literature emerges out of the “vast background of death” epitomized by Wilde’s trials in 1895 (Ardis 47). Eliot’s attempt to “grant Wilde centrality in the genealogy of modern writing” was an “isolated” one, contrasting sharply with both the “silences of many public intellectuals at the turn of the century” and the “hostile denunciations of all things ‘effeminate’ that figure so prominently in literary modernism’s efforts to create chasms between the art it values and the Victorian *fin de siècle* ” (Ardis 47). Consequently, Ardis goes on to suggest, Oscar Wilde “haunts the modernist imaginary as an ambiguously gendered father-figure whose paternity is dangerous to claim” (Ardis 47). After Foucault’s polemical contention that homosexuality was created as a type of

being in 1869 and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's focus on "homosexual panic" in late-Victorian literature, Queer Theory has consistently turned to the 1880s and 1890s as perhaps *the* crucial moment of gay identity construction.³

In dismantling modernism's rigid binary oppositions (self/other, male/female, center/margin, culture/nature, etc.) that "conceal hierarchies" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 61), postmodernism reveals itself as already operative within the Romantic aesthetic. The latter sees in art "a model of existence as dialectic of immersion and detachment from world which allows one to shape the self but always in relation to the other (natural, human, divine)" (Waugh 8). Waugh claims that romanticism and postmodernism evince the same concern with "the unconscious, desire, the bodily and the material" (17)—what Nietzsche himself recognized as the "human all too human" wellsprings of both philosophy and literature. Postmodernism eschews a "full aestheticist position which conceives of art as entirely divorced from the historical world and having no bearing upon it whatsoever (17-18). Opposed to the mode of "radical fictionality" predicated upon aesthetic withdrawal and autonomy is therefore another postmodern orientation which produces what Waugh calls an aesthetic of "radical situatedness" (18). Waugh traces this philosophy back to William Wordsworth and then Heidegger, for whom the self was firmly grounded in the external world, dwelling there and disclosing its essence (Being) not through conceptualization, but through aesthetic language (18). As Burke has noted, Heidegger's phenomenological approach to art and the artist, being and time, rejected modernity's disengaged self, replacing it with a "situated subject, a historically full 'I' (*Authorship* xxvi).

Thus understood, the treatment of the author-as-character in late twentieth-century prose becomes the measure of a postmodern commitment to lived experience and to the particular contingencies of "Being-in-the world." But, Coetzee was right to ask, "What, if

anything, is left of the classic after the classic has been historicized, that may still claim to speak across the ages?"(10). Author fictions stand testimony to the greats' power to "speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions," an ability that Barth, in "The Literature of Exhaustion," also ascribes to what he calls "the technically up-to-date artist" (30), and on which hinges the literary greats' claim to be remembered by posterity.⁴ While recognizing that "human behavior and creativity change over time," Graham Good maintains that, "there is a continuing human condition which enables us to understand and learn from works very remote from us in time and culture" (294). Lytton Strachey poignantly stated as much in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*: "Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. They have a value which is independent of any temporal process—which is eternal and must be felt for its own sake" (qtd. in Holroyd 26). While all the narratives scrutinized above insist on the constructed and situated nature of our knowledge of their subjects, the unifying sensibility that informs them is a creative consciousness that all writers share by virtue of their "immersion in the fountain of being" (James qtd. in Matthiessen 148).

To a large extent, all author fictions articulate a view of human experience anchored in history, memory, desire, and the unconscious, showing how these shaped the lives of their subjects as writers and human beings. Hence the value of biography to literary aesthetics: art and life are no longer seen as mutually exclusive ways of being but as mutually constitutive. This is as much as saying that the postmodern, its anti-humanist stance notwithstanding, does not discount the human. Nor does it represent a wholesale collapse of values, for something valuable has remained. Taken together, these portraits of the artist are about nothing else than the continual investigation of literature as a human centered endeavor whose processes, aims, and values still matter in our post-literary age.

Notes

¹ The essentializing view rests on the assumption that “there is something that makes us all of a piece, something beyond the socially constructed personae we play out at our work, in public spaces, even, perhaps, with family and lovers—something ‘pre-linguistic,’ finally, that makes sense of our polymorphousness” (Levine 1). Thus recent consciousness studies suggest that “when viewed not psychologically as distinct from the Freudian or Jungian unconscious but rather ontologically as distinct from the nonconscious,” consciousness cannot be reduced to a cultural construct (Haney 15).

² In his turn, Gillian Beer recognized the sense of connection and continuity between ages, how relationships between literary periods can operate on more than one level. He argues that, “The parameters of reading periods are unstable and difficult to descry. Whereas we skein out literary productions into controllable periods—the Romantics, the Victorian age, modernism—reading periods are quite otherwise organized, trawling a variety of pasts and varying from person to person, though circumscribed by what is available within the community” (qtd. in O’Gorman 4).

³ Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) produced an avalanche of criticism on the trial and martyrdom of Oscar Wilde, the homosexual subtext of both Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Henry James’s fiction.

⁴ In his two later essays, “The Literature of Replenishment” and “Postmodernism Revisited,” Barth continues to insist on this necessary connection between life and literature.

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Abbreviations

- AN *The American Novel*
- CT *The Complete Tales of Henry James*
- CE *Collected Essays by Virginia Woolf*
- CW *The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton*

DP *De Profundis*
SP *Selected Poems of Thomas Chatterton*
TTL *To the Lighthouse*
GD “General Draft”
HJ4 *Henry James. Vol. IV. The Treacherous Years*
HO *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*
JI *Journal Intime*
L3 *Letters. Vol. III*
LaF “Last Fragments”
LC2 *Henry James: Literary Criticism. Vol. II.*
LFI “Logological Fragments I”
MO “Miscellaneous Observations”
SL *Selected Letters of Henry James*
TF “Teplitz Fragments”