Rebuilding Fictions: Violence and the Aesthetic in Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth

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M.Litt. Dissertation in English Literature
Corpus Christi College, Oxford

Abstract

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M.Litt. in English Literature, Michaelmas Term, 2014

49,700 words excluding abstract and bibliography

Critical accounts of postmodern fiction, with its inconclusive plots and fractured psyches, typically hinge on tropes of entropy, decentering, and the evacuation of meaning. Recent philosophical debates about ethics and religion, especially in their uptake by the literary academy as postsecular criticism and the ethical turn, deploy a similar set of concepts to emphasize ontological instability and radical deferral to the future as the basic structure of belief and attempts to behave ethically toward others. Focusing on such questions of belief and ethics, *Rebuilding Fictions* argues for an alternative understanding of postmodern fiction that hinges on tropes not of disintegration but of reconstruction and reintegration. A major strand of postmodern fiction epitomized by the U.S. and Canadian novelists Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth obsessively depicts both the violent collapse of lives and societies and the often post-traumatic process of trying to put those lives back together and start over again. Especially in their novels from the early 1990s to the present, McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth repeatedly describe their characters' lives through metaphors of wounded trees growing back or ruined buildings being rebuilt. *Rebuilding Fictions* frames this emphasis on reconstruction in the historical period stretching from the tail end of the Cold War through the inter-war 90s to the present global formation of the War on Terror: reconstruction takes center stage in novels concerned with what it means to act in a post-war moment (post-1945, post-1989) or within a war that seems repetitively stuck in previous violence (World War II, the Second Gulf War). *Rebuilding Fictions* works out the mechanics by which literary characters placed in such violent situations reconstitute their identities, worldviews, and communal ties with others, typically by reading and writing. And these reconstructive acts of reading and writing also rebuild ethical relationships and religious beliefs, portraying belief and ethics not as radically deferred but as simultaneously present and reinventing themselves.

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We have art so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

What afflicts the adult is not so much the illusion of hope as, no doubt among other things, the grotesque illusion of looking down from some supposedly higher vantage-point, free from illusion, upon the illusions of the young…. They lie or invent, both of them.

-Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*

Preface

In this study, I argue that a significant vein of postmodern American fiction, particularly in the contemporary period stretching from the tail end of the Cold War to today, takes as its dominant theme the act of rebuilding lives after failure. Failure takes various forms in the novels I analyze: from the external violence that wrecks and often ends characters' lives in the work of Cormac McCarthy and Michael Ondaatje, to the brutality of racism and internecine conflict that routinely rends apart families and neighborhoods in Toni Morrison's fiction, to the self-imposed series of mistaken, ruinous life choices invariably made by Philip Roth's characters. In contrast to standard critical accounts of the inconclusiveness, multiplicity, open-endedness, and entropy of postmodern fiction—and, indeed, of these four authors—I show that a major strand of contemporary writing, epitomized by McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth, concerns itself centrally with how its characters can survive and recover from such violent failure and begin their lives again. For all four novelists, characters rebuild their lives through literature—reading, writing, listening to, and telling stories—so that literary value rests in its capacity to reimagine new lives after things, to quote Achebe quoting Yeats, fall apart. I contend that this emphasis on rebuilding in contemporary fiction arises as a response to the serial warfare in the 20th and early-21st centuries, and the mass devastation enabled by nuclear technology, as novelists work to refigure their own cultural and ethical role in a world that keeps trying to snuff itself out.

Throughout this study, I draw upon Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, in which art, and literature in particular, works to create our selves. As I read McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth, I refigure Nietzsche's view in order to argue that for these novelists, literature functions to re-create always already broken selves. In the chapters that follow, I trace three broad types of such literary self-re-creation: the way that literature recreates the world, defined expansively as a worldview that phenomenologically shapes perceptions of

external reality; the way that literature reconstructs selves, by working to repair psychic trauma and fragmentation; and the way that literature rebuilds communities, reestablishing broken bonds between neighbors and resisting violence. As I move through these three modalities of literary self-re-creation, each of which receives a chapter, I pay special attention to questions of ethics and belief, examining how literature rebuilds the self in an intertextual, intersubjective ethical relationship with an embodied community of others, and how this community and its ethics are always cathected with questions of belief and religious practice.

At times, my argument becomes decidedly overdetermined and overburdened. At certain constricted junctures in my account of contemporary fiction, concepts like community, self, world, history, ethics, belief, storytelling, and literature, as well as writers from Nietzsche to a host of novelists, literary critics, and philosophers, pile up in a logjam (much like this sentence itself). I can only ask for readerly patience. I work synthetically, even syncretically, tracing the resonances between a wide range of novelists, critics, philosophers, and philosophical problems in order to reconstruct them as my own theory of literary self-re-construction. Instead of a jumbled-up logjam, then, I hope that my method in this study manages to take the shards—to borrow an image from Ondaatje that becomes key to my analysis in chapter 3—of many different writers and thinkers, and reassemble them in my own critical kaleidoscope. The resulting image of contemporary fiction may remain jagged and fractured—the *bricolage* of a philosophical magpie—but I hope that its kaleidoscopic colors coalesce into something bright enough to justify the reading.

The echoes of many previous projects also reverberate across this study. Its most basic themes date to my undergraduate thesis at Haverford College, on Nietzsche's Shakespearean aesthetics of the self, and I thank Kathleen Wright, Tina Zwarg, Kim Benston, Joel Yurdin, and Maud McInerney for incubating those ideas. The question of ethics took on a vital role in my thinking the year after I left Haverford, and I also thank Laura McGrane for providing

work as a research assistant on her book project, and for serving as a sounding-board for my writing and ideas, that year. My chapter on McCarthy began as my master's thesis at Oxford, advised brilliantly by Reena Sastri, and I thank the Rhodes Trust for financial support, and the Rhodes community for social support, during the writing of my master's thesis and this study. And I thank Lloyd Pratt, who has so incisively and patiently guided this piece to a perhaps unexpected completion.

1. Introduction: Faith in Fiction

Near the beginning of *Millennium Approaches*, the first half of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-winning play *Angels in America*, which premiered in San Francisco in 1991, Harper, a neurotic, hallucinating, drug-addicted Mormon housewife married to Joe, a closeted gay Mormon man who clerks for the 2nd Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals and is mentored by Roy Cohn, declares that "people who are lonely, people left alone, sit talking nonsense to the air imagining… beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart" (6). Harper then begins conversing with the air, specifically an imagined travel agent named Mr. Lies, who tells Harper, "It's the price of rootlessness. Motion sickness. The only cure: To keep moving" (8). With Roy Cohn as a central character and Ronald Reagan as a kind of ghostly presence haunting all of *Millennium Approaches*—Louis, the play's resident gloomy Democrat, laments to Joe, "Maybe we are free. […] Reagan's children. You're scared. So am I. Everybody is in the land of the free. God help us all" (54)—the "old fixed orders spiraling apart" most immediately evoke the Soviet Union's dissolution, the breakup of a Cold War order that structured forty-five years of American experience, a disintegration brought titularly front and center when *Perestroika*, the second half of *Angels in America*, premiered in Los Angeles in 1992. But Harper's vertigo in the face of "systems dying" resonates in a number of other registers in the play as well, from the political to the philosophical: social upheavals around sexual politics, both feminism and queer ways of being; the oozingly embodied and also communally existential terror of AIDS; the hole in the ozone layer and environmental catastrophe; Harper and Joe's troubled faith in Mormonism and their multiply split identities; and the ethical question Louis raises, of what to do with total freedom in a world where the closest thing to a universal father is a film-star cowboy with a *Star Wars* program for deterring nuclear apocalypse. "God help us all," indeed.

In this study, I take up Harper's theme of collapse, decentering, and rootlessness as it emerges in North American fiction from the middle of the 1980s, when the action of *Angels in*

America occurs, to the present day. Previous studies, like Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, Daniel Grausam's *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War*, and John McClure's *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, have explored the aesthetic, ethical, ontological, and political responses to "systems dying" articulated by novelists of this period. But where those studies focus, ultimately, on depictions of a state of collapse—what Hungerford calls "belief in meaninglessness" (xiv)—I emphasize the way that North American fiction after World War II, especially in the period of my study, from the tail end of the Cold War to the present, compulsively, perhaps overridingly meditates on how we can try to put things back together after they have spiraled apart. Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth, I argue, epitomize a strand of postmodern fiction centrally concerned not just with entropic destruction but with reconstruction, the act of rebuilding our lives in the wake of violence. Like the multiple registers of Harper's vertigo, McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth imagine in their fiction three broad types of rebuilding, which structure my chapters to follow: acts of reconstruction that attempt to repair individual coherence, ethically responsible community, and even quasi-religious worldviews. For all four novelists, I argue, literature becomes—and literature becomes functionally defined as—the activity by which we so rebuild, a defense of literary value predicated on its capacity to reimagine new forms for failed ways of seeing and being in the world. McClure writes that *Angels in America* "models the structures and themes of a surprising number of contemporary literary narratives" (3), and I want similarly to begin my own account of reconstruction in contemporary fiction by teasing out how Kushner's characters representatively strive to recover from collapse.

Harper's unfixed orders and Mr. Lies' motion sickness evoke a broad modern and postmodern concern with decentering. Friedrich Nietzsche's madman in *The Gay Science*, for example, as he announces the death of God, asks, "What were we doing when we unchained

this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? […] Are we not continually falling? […] Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing?" (§125). For Nietzsche, whose thinking guides my readings and analysis throughout this study, the death of God—the loss of what Jean-François Lyotard would later call "grand narrative" (37)—decouples individual lives from a unifying transcendental principle, disintegrating any monolithic system of meaning and so setting things contingently adrift. Jacques Derrida elaborates the point eighty years later in his seminal "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences." Derrida argues that while "the concept of centered structure" has heretofore allowed "anxiety" to be "mastered" (279), in both culture more generally as well as structuralist philosophy specifically, we have now reached the point of "decentering" (280), in which radical play replaces God or any other stable transcendental signified. Harper's "anxiety" in *Angels in America* would then be symptomatic. More recently, James Wood has echoed Mr. Lies' language of "motion sickness" to describe contemporary fiction. In "Hysterical Realism"—originally published in 2000 as "Human, All Too Inhuman," a review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* with conspicuous reference to Nietzsche—Wood says, "a genre is hardening. It is becoming easy to describe the contemporary idea of the 'big, ambitious novel.' [It is] a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have embarrassed itself into velocity" (178). "One is reminded of Kierkegaard's remark that travel is the best way to avoid despair" (179-80), Wood writes, arguing that "hysterical realists" like Smith, Salman Rushdie, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and Thomas Pynchon pursue ever wilder plot twists in order just to keep their novels going, operating on the same insight offered by the hallucinatory travel agent Mr. Lies, "The only cure: to keep moving."

As it wrestles with "rootlessness," though, *Millennium Approaches* seeks something more than the mere survivalism of "perpetual motion," with its attendant "motion sickness." Like Harper, Louis also thinks through the loss of grand narratives, and he uses it, as he speaks

with his rabbi, to justify abandoning his lover Prior, who has contracted AIDS. Louis pleads,

> Maybe because this person's sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to these forces, moving uphill all the time… maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit… and sores and disease… really frighten him, maybe… he isn't so good with death. (14-15)

"The Holy Scriptures have nothing to say about such a person," Rabbi Chemelwitz responds (15). Louis's Hegelian system of purposeful, constant progress toward the Absolute confronts the reality of human embodiment, its "sores and disease," and these festering failures of "perfection" sever Louis from his optimistic connection with the "forces" of "historical progress"—as well as from his religion—casting him, like Harper, adrift, moving without a teleological loadstone. But just as Louis pines for his lost Hegelian faith, Harper wants more than never-ending motion. At the end of *Millennium Approaches*, she hallucinates that she is pregnant in Antarctica, and she imagines giving birth to a baby, "covered with thick white fur" (79). She thinks, "if it gets really cold [my baby will] have a pouch I can crawl into. Like a marsupial. We'll mend together. That's what we'll do; we'll mend" (79). Harper cannot avoid the question of failure the way Louis tries to—her marriage is collapsing around her, mirrored by her ontologically schizophrenic reality—and so she must confront and heal from the rubble of her life—though that healing itself involves a pouch-like hiding from failure, too.

In *Perestroika*, Harper begins exploring how to mend. "*Perestroika* proceeds forward," Kushner writes in "A Note about the Staging," "from the wreckage made by the Angel's traumatic entry at the end of *Millennium*. A membrane has broken; there is disarray and debris." The descent of an Angel onto the stage wreaks a cosmic form of disarray, and Kushner frames *Perestroika* as a "forward" movement that repairs these ruins. *Perestroika*'s epigraph, from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "On Art," asserts that, "Because the soul is progressive, it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and

fairer whole." Kushner thus refigures Louis's foreordained Hegelian "historical progress" into a "progressive" Emersonian self that only ever "*attempts*" to make itself whole. Critics have recently contested whether Emerson sees the self as a coherent whole or as an entity always already in flux. In Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe's collection *The Other Emerson*, they argue against a long line of critics, from John Jay Chapman to Stephen Whicher to Sherman Paul, who "claim that Emerson conceived of the self as an enclosed and willful individuality" (x). Such a reading of Emerson has been advanced more recently in Christopher Newfield's *The Emerson Effect*, which argues that Emerson's "individualism defines freedom as submission to unmodifiable law," so that Emerson's strong view of the individual creates and underwrites corporatist structures of domination (7). But Arsić and Wolfe, following Stanley Cavell, argue for an Emerson of movement and self-transformation, one who celebrates "a universal fluctuation and instability that includes the self" (xi), what Arsić identifies in her book *On Leaving* as a nomadic self (ix). Kushner deploys an Emerson more like Arsić and Wolfe's. As part of her attempt to "mend," Harper asks an automaton in a diorama on the history of Mormonism, "In your experience of the world. How do people change?" (48). "Well it has something to do with God so it's not very nice," the automaton of a Mormon Mother replies,

> God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he *insists*, he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching. (48)

"And then get up. And walk around," Harper says (48). "Just mangled guts pretending," the Mormon Mother replies (49). Here the self, rent apart, stitches itself back together and pretends to everyday coherence, hiding in a pouch that can only ever try to mask a more basic wreckage. If this represents "a new and fairer whole," it remains profoundly scarred.

Angels in America explores a politics, ethics, ontology, and psychology of such scarred mending. Toward the end of *Perestroika*, Prior, sick with AIDS, asks the Angel to let him keep

living, despite his failing, sore-infested body: "But still. Still. Bless me anyway. I want more life. […] We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do. It's so much not enough, so inadequate, but… Bless me anyway. I want more life" (90). Prior's disease does recede when he inherits Roy's medication, as if by divine intervention, but even so, Prior remains fundamentally broken, the retrovirus "still" lurking in the very DNA that constitutes him, as some of his friends are "still" dead from AIDS, as the epidemic "still" ravages marginalized communities, from the U.S. to Africa, today. Living "past hope," Prior works to stitch up his "tangled and torn" self, but he recognizes that this is a fantasy, a blessing of life he wants "anyway," despite his decay, rather than a miraculous substitute for his sickness. Jonathan Freedman argues that Kushner ultimately embraces "the mythography of rebirth and the inevitability of miracle" in order to carve out a political place for "queer citizenship" in America's "Christian-centered culture" (91-2). This turn to resurrection, for Freedman, writes out "the questions of Jewish identity [the play] has bravely raised" (92), ultimately subordinating Louis, the lone remaining Jewish character, "to Christian emplotment," and rendering him a typological forebear superseded by Prior's queered Puritan narrative of rebirth based on the Jewish blessing "more life" (100). To what he describes as Kushner's assimilationist utopia, Freedman opposes Walter Benjamin's angel of history in "Theses on the Philosophy of History"—itself one of Kushner's sources—in which the angel is blown forward in history by winds from heaven, "what we call progress," while looking backward on a serially increasing pile of catastrophes (100). Freedman's argument that "the questions of Jewish identity" evaporate later in *Angels in America* rings incisively true, as Roy dies and his monstrosity is thematically repressed. But the play decidedly does not rest on a Christian model of rebirth. Its epilogue may mime a kind of Christian salvation, replete with Prior's regeneration, but the play has done anything but imply that we should believe in such salvation. This is "just mangled guts pretending": like the deadly retrovirus lurking

inside Prior's cells, the play's hopes remain always also haunted by their own persistent ruin, gazing backward on catastrophe. "Progress" is only ever so-called.

McClure cuts closer to the play's worldview, and points the way toward my own argument about contemporary fiction in this study, when he sees, as he puts it in his title, only ever a partial religious faith contained in and advanced by Kushner's work. For McClure, religion enters *Angels in America* "as a complex field of enigmatic apparitions, assertions, and counterassertions" (3), never settling on a Christian, or any other, worldview—especially not eternal resurrection. Like the ontological "membrane" broken by the Angel's descent to the stage in *Millennium*, contemporary postsecular literature, McClure argues, deploys religion to disrupt "secular constructions of the real" (3), while simultaneously "weakening" religiosity (13). McClure identifies a major vein of fiction, in what he calls "the age of Pynchon and Morrison," that centrally negotiates the fault line between theism and secularism, avoiding either dogma and remaining instead "dramatically partial and open-ended" (ix). This partiality and futurity structures an ethics of communal hybridity oriented toward constantly shifting, basically flexible ethical relationships. The futurity McClure describes echoes, explicitly, Derrida's "desert-like messianism" (*Specters*, 28) and Derrida's claim in *Of Grammatology*'s epigraph that the future "can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger." According to McClure, then, the postsecular novelists he analyzes—especially, for my purposes, Morrison and Ondaatje—like Kushner in *Angels in America*, radically defer the possibility of communal, ethical, or ontological presence into an unimaginable future *à venir*.

But like Benjamin's angel of history looking backward, Kushner offers a model of simultaneous presence and transformation, a self progressing toward "a new and fairer whole," yet bearing within it the lingering reality of its own devastation and debris. Far from radically deferring to the future, *Angels in America* attempts to imagine a stitched-up self and social fabric here and now, even while maintaining the drive toward recreation and refusing

to forget pain, one's own or another's, in the past or the present. This model of fragmentary coherence, of scarred reconstruction, emerges as well, it is my contention in this study, in the work of Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth. Confronting urgent questions of concrete historical and contemporary violence like the AIDS epidemic in *Angels in America*, these novelists struggle to articulate a strategy for reassembling things, for resisting, recovering, and rebuilding from the devastations of war, racism, terrorism, colonialism, misogyny, nuclear threat, interpersonal brutality, and environmental contamination. To put it as broadly as possible, their novels consistently depict, theorize, and enact a paradoxical, Möbius-strip-like dialectic in which various forms of ruination become also the ground from which to rebuild. And for all four authors, as my study teases out in different ways, literature becomes the imaginative activity by which to so rebuild. The strand of postmodern fiction I describe articulates an aesthetics of reimagination—a blending of what John Barth calls "the literature of exhaustion" and "the literature of replenishment"—that seeks to accomplish ethical work in the world by recreating individual coherence and responsible social ties in the face of sometimes unimaginable violence and destruction. The novelists in my study imagine what it takes to maintain faith in fiction as the way we hold things together when they spiral apart.

Literature as self-re-construction

Storytellers, readers, and writers abound as characters in the novels I analyze in this study. McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth all repeatedly depict acts of reading and writing, and they all depict the activity of reading and writing as the primary process by which their characters try to repair selves, communities, and worldviews broken by violence. (I elaborate on these three forms of reparation—self, community, and world, which structure my chapters—at the end of this introduction.) McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth's characters, that is, are defined by their struggle, like Harper in *Angels in America*, to mend, and

it is through literature that their characters strive to stitch themselves back together. These novelists' metafictional emphasis on literature as a tool for remaking leads critics to discuss their texts as endeavors to negotiate the particular forms of a kind of always already literary being-in-the-world. On these critical accounts, literature becomes the site and activity in and by which McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth's characters—and, according to some critics, the authors themselves—construct their subjectivity, their communal bonds, and their beliefs about the world. In this study, I seek to intervene in this critical picture by showing how the novelists I analyze see literature not as a means for constructing selves, communities, or beliefs, but as always already an act of self-re-construction. The repetition signaled by the prefix *re-* is, I will demonstrate, key. Responding to the repetitive violence of their historical moment, particularly the newfound human capacity to bomb entire cities into rubble, these novelists reimagine fiction as a means of rebuilding from destruction. The temporality of such reconstruction mixes the steady-state stability of what Hungerford calls "belief in meaninglessness" (xiv) with the radical futurity of an outlook that McClure labels as "dramatically partial and open-ended" (ix). Reconstruction, as I will describe it, involves simultaneous presence and opening onto the future, a fluid presence that I ultimately name, in a revision of Gilles Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, an ontology of the becoming of being.

Like the confluence of Harper's loneliness and her sense of systems dying in *Angels in America*, an overlapping, intertwining set of themes having to do with religious belief and ethics emerges in critical accounts of McCarthy, Morrison, and Ondaatje's fiction, and forms the twin thematic focus of my study. Indeed, Hungerford and McClure's examinations of postmodern religion overlap in their mutual discussion of Morrison—as Hungerford pairs her with McCarthy and McClure pairs her with Ondaatje—so that I am in some sense triangulating Hungerford and McClure's analysis. Roth, however, seems at first to fall outside the frame of the critical picture with which I am engaging. Like my other authors, Roth

emphasizes how literature constructs the self, but he at least superficially avoids questions of religious belief or ethics, focusing instead on individual subjectivity as something "to play around with" (*Counterlife*, 325). Hungerford, consequently, sees Roth as the epitome of an entirely separate strand of contemporary writing from the one that she explores (137). I will argue, though, that Roth not only concerns himself with the same issues of literary reconstruction as McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison, but advances a perspective on literary value of central importance to understanding fully Morrison, McCarthy, and Ondaatje's literary projects. Like the Mormon Mother's claim about "mangled guts pretending" (49), Roth crucially indicates that any literary reconstruction is just that: a story.

Despite a general consensus about their consistent thematization of ethics and belief, critics differ over literature's precise relationship with religion and ethics in my novelists' work. Hungerford identifies a drive toward coherent, tightly-controlled authority, the return of grand narrative. For Hungerford, McCarthy and Morrison both labor "to imagine contemporary fiction as something like scripture—supernatural, transcendent, imbued with ultimate authority" (105). What Hungerford calls "belief in meaninglessness" or "belief without meaning"—doctrinally unspecific belief, which Hungerford says arises historically, as "a hedge against the inescapable fact of pluralism"—here takes the form of belief "in literature" itself (xiii). McCarthy and Morrison's texts mimic the sound of scripture in order to endow themselves with quasi-Biblical "literary authority" (105). McClure, as we have just seen, takes the opposite tack. He identifies in Morrison and Ondaatje's work a metafictional deployment of reading and writing specifically aimed at destabilizing any form of authority in order to imagine more open communities. Ondaatje and Morrison both, for McClure, create a form of "spacious, creolized spirituality" (106), Morrison by hybridizing "African and Christian traditions" (106), Ondaatje by envisioning a syncretic, "communitarian space" at "the edges of Catholicism and Buddhism" (25). In *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism,*

Religion, and Literature, Manav Ratti likewise sees in Ondaatje a deployment of literary aesthetics as "a form of reconstruction and healing" (103), a mending that balances multiple religious and secular traditions, but which negotiates an always only deferred "ethics yet-to-come" (106). My model of reconstruction, as I said above, mixes the opposing readings proposed by Hungerford and McClure and Ratti, yielding an account of a literary form that aims always for authority and coherence—"a new and fairer whole" that does not merely defer to the "yet-to-come"—yet remains also always flexible, self-critical, and changing.

This simultaneously present yet flexible model of reconstruction seems especially important in the realm of ethics, where action must be taken, here and now, yet must also be open for reevaluation, for recalibration toward a better, more sensitive and responsible relationship with others. Echoing McClure and Ratti's interest in portrayals of community in Morrison and Ondaatje, Derek Attridge connects McCarthy with the ethical task of opening ourselves to the others around us. In *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge argues that "ethical responsibility for the other" lies "at the heart of creativity" (128), and he asserts that for readers, the "apprehension of otherness" represents the "peculiar pleasure" of literature (131). In "Once More with Feeling: Art, Affect, and Performance," Attridge applies this idea to McCarthy, claiming that McCarthy's work inspires "a pleasure we feel as our familiar horizons open up to an otherness that we, as products of our culture, had excluded from consciousness" (338). Attridge emphasizes how literature offers "the possibility of a repeated encounter with alterity" (*Singularity*, 29), so that, as he says of McCarthy, "we can always read it once more, with feeling," reopening ourselves again to creativity, newness, and new others ("Feeling," 340). This ethics-as-rereading comes close to the reconstruction I will describe, as the novelists in my study explore how literature works to recreate new ethical relationships. But, again, I combine the radical futurity of Attridge's model of ethics—elaborated at the end of this section—with a sense of stability, of embodied interpersonal relationships and ethical

actions here and now, not deferred to their rereading in the unreachable future.

The multiplicity of Attridge's "repeated encounter with alterity" could serve as well to describe selfhood in Philip Roth's writing. Roth's critics frequently focus on the plethora of alternative selves Roth creates as he "plays" (325) with his own subjectivity. Patrick Hayes, in particular, in "'The Nietzschean Prophecy Come True': Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and the Aesthetics of Identity," reads Roth alongside Nietzsche in order to argue that Roth combines a "celebration of performative vitality with a rich evaluative intelligence" (510). Roth, for Hayes, uses literature to construct myriad potential alternative selves, performing flexibly as each, and then also uses literature to evaluate and judge those selves. In this way, according to Hayes, Roth "wins a new form of credulity for the longstanding idea that literature is the most rewarding way of thinking about the self," defending literature's value through its capacity for judgment of possible lives (510-11). I will argue that what Roth really accomplishes in his fiction, though, is to show that any form of self or community, including the reconstructed ones portrayed by McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison, is merely a necessary fiction, fundamentally no different from Harper's hallucinatory dream-worlds in *Angels in America*. Our selves, communal ties, and basic beliefs about the world, Roth says, are mere stories, what the Mormon Mother in *Angels in America* calls "just mangled guts pretending" (49). This very fictionality generates the flexible form of presence I have been describing: a stable fictional façade, in which my novelists and their characters place their faith, that simultaneously undermines itself, cracks open, and allows itself to be recreated as a new, potentially opposing fiction, a rebuilt façade.

In describing such reconstruction in this study, I take my theoretical cue, like Hayes, from Nietzsche's view of literature as the means by which we contingently construct our selves once "this earth" has been "unchained" from "its sun" (§125). My close readings of contemporary fiction pursue basically Nietzschean concerns, and through these readings, I

refigure Nietzsche's analysis of literary self-construction to account for the need to rebuild after violence. I tease out in contemporary North American fiction a latter-day, refigured and augmented Nietzschean view of literary self-*re*-construction, formulated primarily in response to serial warfare in the 20th century and the potential for nuclear devastation. Nietzsche lurks in all of my novelists' intellectual contexts. Roth and Ondaatje explicitly reference Nietzsche in their novels, repeatedly, in both central and minor ways. McCarthy similarly refers to Nietzsche with fine-grained detail in his letters, and critics have repeatedly used Nietzsche as a heuristic lens for reading Morrison. Equally importantly, the critical accounts of postmodernism typically applied to McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth bear strong family resemblance to Nietzsche, inheriting his aesthetics through the genealogy of German hermeneutical and French post-structuralist philosophy. I aim, then, to intervene in critical accounts of contemporary fiction via Nietzsche, and, reciprocally, to intervene in Nietzsche's philosophy and its philosophical and critical successors via contemporary fiction. Working out my own quasi- or perhaps para-Nietzschean view of literary self-re-creation, as it appears and is theorized in a major strand of North American postmodern novels, I articulate a theory of fiction as a tool for repairing always already fractured lives, communities, and worlds.

Over the course of his career, Nietzsche famously contradicts and rewrites his views, framing Socrates, Christ, and Wagner variously, for example, as archetypal role models or bitter archenemies. But despite this variation, which most critics and commentators take at face-value, Nietzsche's central claim remains remarkably consistent from the beginning to the end of his writing: he argues persistently and fundamentally that art defines, protects, and energizes human life. In *The Hamlet Doctrine*, to take a recent instance from Nietzsche criticism, Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster describe what they see as Nietzsche's "self-estrangement" later in his career (186). Focusing on the new preface Nietzsche wrote in 1886 for *The Birth of Tragedy*, which was originally published in 1872, Critchley and Webster say

that Nietzsche "reads himself with a hammer," landing brutal body blows against his younger writing self (186). "Most Hamlet-like," Critchley and Webster write, in the 1886 preface, entitled "Attempt at Self-Criticism," Nietzsche "turns against himself" in order to create, by contrast, his more mature philosophical persona (188). But Critchley and Webster miss a key detail, having to do with their own analysis of Nietzsche's relation to Hamlet, that establishes Nietzsche's late philosophy not as a turning against himself, but rather as a continuation and expansion of his own earliest thought. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche argues that Greek tragic drama perfectly blends Dionysian vitality and tragic insight with Apollonian images and rationality. At a crucial moment in his explanation of this Dionysian insight, though, Nietzsche swerves from analyzing Sophocles to speaking on Shakespeare. He writes,

> In this sense Dionysiac man is similar to Hamlet: both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have *acquired knowledge* and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things […] Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion—this is the lesson of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom about Jack the Dreamer. (§7)

Tragedy reveals the amorality and absurdity of the world, Nietzsche says, the fact that all action is mere "straying as though through an infinite nothing" (*Beyond*, §125). To act, indeed to survive, requires the artistic "veil" of Apollonian beauty, the "illusion" that action might achieve something in the world: thus Nietzsche declares, "art saves him, and through art life saves him—for itself" (§7). At the end of his career, Nietzsche's reading of *Hamlet* remains surprisingly and powerfully unchanged. In *Ecce Homo*, his last complete work, Nietzsche asks, "Is Hamlet understood? Not doubt, *certainty* is what drives one insane" (246). Moreover—and this is what Critchley and Webster crucially miss—in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche depicts himself *as* Hamlet. Nietzsche writes that his *Untimely Meditations* are "certainly warlike," and "prove that I was no Jack the Dreamer, that I take pleasure in fencing" (276). Instead of turning against himself in a simply "Hamlet-like" manner, then, Nietzsche thinks of himself as consistently playing, as *being* Hamlet by writing. And to play Hamlet is to reveal that action, fencing,

requires the saving veil of art, an illusion of worldly efficacy woven together by writing.

If art steps in to heal those who have recognized the radical contingency of human life, and Nietzsche conveys this insight by casting himself intertextually as a dramatic character, then literature comes, in Nietzsche's philosophy, to constitute and shape the self. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche says that we should learn from artists how to devise inventions and artifices in order to alter the world (§299). But he says that for artists, such artifice typically ends where art ceases and life begins. In contrast, Nietzsche writes, "*We*, however, want to be poets of our lives," shaping our very identities and perceptions of the world through art (§299). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he expands this theme of cloaking the self and the world in artifice. Nietzsche declares that "everything profound loves masks," and asserts that "every profound spirit needs a mask" (§40). This echoes his claim in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "the Apolline quality of the mask" is "the necessary result of gazing into the inner, terrible depths of nature—radiant patches, as it were, to heal a gaze seared by gruesome night" (§9). For Nietzsche, as "poets of our lives," we construct ourselves as personae, artistic masks that protect us from the truth of our own contingency and form our interpretations of the world.

In his study *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Alexander Nehamas draws out the way that being "poets of our lives" means, for Nietzsche, that poetry provides the basic philosophical model for all phenomena, from the psychological to the epistemological to the ontological. Nietzsche argues for what he calls "perspectivism," the idea, as he says in *The Will to Power*, that "facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations" (§481). Reality depends on one's perspective, from which one uniquely interprets the world. Perspectivism is "the fundamental condition of all life," Nietzsche writes in the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, paradoxically asserting as a fact the idea that there are no facts. Nietzsche's "position undermines itself," as Nehamas lightly puts it (1). Consequently, Nehamas says, "Having claimed that there is no objective truth about the world," Nietzsche "devotes himself to fashioning a way of life that is

part of such a world and acknowledges it for what it is" (232). Nietzsche seeks in his philosophical writing to invent a style of life that honors and responds to contingency, and according to Nehamas, Nietzsche's very writing *is* that style of life. "Nietzsche's model for the world, for objects, and for people," Nehamas writes, "turns out to be the literary text and its components; his model for our relation to the world turns out to be interpretation" (91). And if the literary text models the way that "people" are in the "world," Nietzsche's books become his self. "Nietzsche wants to warn others against dogmatism without taking a dogmatic stand himself," Nehamas says, and "his unparalleled solution to this problem is to try consciously to fashion a literary character out of himself and a literary work out of his life" (137). Nietzsche's play-acting as Hamlet, then—like Stephen Greenblatt's description in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* of the literary "self-fashioning" by which Shakespeare shapes himself (1 & 4)—signifies the fundamental literary textuality, and the intertextuality, of the self. To have a self and to relate to the world through interpretation is to construct the self through literature.

More recent interpretations of Nietzsche, along the lines of Nehamas's reading, have explored the ethical and religious terrain I thematize in my argument about contemporary fiction in this study. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty draws on Nehamas's analysis to flesh out a picture of selfhood as literary self-construction and ethics as an equally literary phenomenon. Rorty writes that just as we create new selves by inventing new interpretations of the world, "novels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job" of creating moral feeling, opening us up to new interpretations of the world from the perspective of others, and so militating for an ethical resistance to cruelty (94). Rorty argues, though, that "the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange" (xiv). Nietzschean self-creation, for Rorty, is an irrevocably different process from literary-ethical attention to others' pain. In

a more religious vein, Peter Sloterdijk argues in *You Must Change Your Life* that religion has always functioned as a set of self-shaping practices, and that Nietzsche is the great thinker of such practice. Sloterdijk sees practice as an activity that seeks primarily to improve its own execution: we meditate, for example, in order better to meditate the next time we do it (4). Sloterdijk thinks of practice in terms of vertical tension, an upward pull toward self-improvement, so that "the extreme athlete is raised aloft as the spiritually empty counterpart of the saint," both ascetic lifestyles unswervingly focused on their practices (57). Emphasizing athletic practice as a model for religious and secular life alike, Sloterdijk turns to the tightrope walkers and mountain climbers who people Nietzsche's philosophy, arguing that Nietzsche offers a theory of "generalized acrobatism: a doctrine of the processual incorporation of the nearly impossible" (123). As Adam Kirsch points out in "Against Cynicism," though, Sloterdijk never says what happens when acrobats fall. And in Nietzsche, sometimes they do.

In the course of my readings of contemporary fiction in this study, I will argue that Nietzschean self-creation is best understood as literary self-re-creation, capable of recovering from acrobatic falls, and that just as Nietzsche intertextually draws on Hamlet to write himself, the ethical relation to others through literature that Rorty describes is bound up inextricably with our individual literary self-re-creation, a fundamentally intersubjective individuality. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Gilles Deleuze writes that if, for Nietzsche, everything is interpretation, then "the world is neither true nor real but living," changing ceaselessly along with our ever-shifting interpretations (184). Nietzsche therefore, according to Deleuze, affirms "the being of becoming itself," affirms that protean becoming is itself the being of the world (48). The model of literary self-re-creation that I will tease out in the novels of Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth points instead, I will argue, toward something like the becoming of being: our self-creation always already recreates a pre-existing, often fractured self, and always emerges in intersubjective conversation with a

community of others. McClure and Ratti read contemporary fiction as negotiating, in the domains of ethics and religion, what Ratti calls "an anti-communitarian communitarianism signaling a community yet-to-come" (106). Attridge similarly argues in *Reading and Responsibility*, following Derrida, that because all relationships necessarily exclude some others, ethical action is impossible, evacuated, always deferred (62). "The impossibility of ethics does not, cannot, inhibit action," Attridge declares, but we act "out of responsibility toward and in affirmation of the future" (*Reading*, 73 & 71). Hungerford's description of "belief in meaninglessness" (xiv), in a different way, likewise sees contemporary fiction as evacuating the contents of belief, while Daniel Grausam reads temporality in American Cold War fiction as an inability to imagine conclusions (*On Endings*, 5), leading to the empty "perpetual-motion machine" Wood diagnoses (178), a formally entropic inconclusiveness—"The only cure: To keep moving" (*Angels*, 8). What I see in McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and Roth's fiction, though, is a consistent drive to reimagine how literature might help us recreate selves, communities, ethics, and belief, here and now, while also leaving them open to change in the future, a present, embodied being that becomes. This temporality not only confronts and depicts conclusions, but responds fundamentally to the problem of conclusions, of how to begin again, serially, after the many endings that make up the fabric of a human life—of how to "get up. And walk around," like Harper, in *Angels in America*, trying to mend (48).

Reconstructed worlds, selves, and communities

While I have been articulating a general theory of literary self-re-construction in this introduction, I have also identified three more specific modalities of self-fashioning: the literary recreation of the world, of the self, and of community. In my account, these represent three distinct forms of self-fashioning, each shaping a different aspect of life, but all three intertwine inextricably—the self I describe is always already intersubjective and cathected vitally with questions of belief that shape perceptions of the world. My next three chapters

each focuses primarily on one of these modalities—indeed, each of my authors privileges one of these modalities—though each chapter touches necessarily on all three. In chapter 2, I discuss how storytelling phenomenologically recreates characters' worlds in Cormac McCarthy's novels; in chapter 3, I read how Michael Ondaatje's characters kaleidoscopically reassemble their traumatically broken psyches by reading and writing; and in chapter 4, I analyze how Toni Morrison's characters fight to repair their violently shredded communities through oral and written narrative. As I move from chapter to chapter, I work out the mechanics of each particular form of literary self-re-creation, and I recursively revisit and expand on the issues raised in the previous chapters. In chapter 5, I conclude my account of rebuilding in contemporary fiction by showing how Philip Roth's characters, by ceaselessly writing and rewriting themselves, ultimately indicate that literarily shaped worlds, selves, and communities, no matter how efficacious, remain always merely fictional façades, "mangled guts pretending." Roth's writing, I argue, demonstrates the necessity of what Nietzsche calls a "veil of illusion," a story we tell ourselves to survive and act in the world. Contemporary fiction, I claim, self-consciously takes as its special task the constant reweaving of this veil.

Cormac McCarthy's fiction revolves around the twin poles of an all-consuming violence as hungry as a black hole and acts of dreaming and storytelling that evoke entire worlds into being, as if recapitulating God's *fiat lux*. This apparent doubleness divides criticism of McCarthy between descriptions of a dreamer of luminous hope and a devastating bard of nihilism. In chapter 2, I look closely at McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and The Border Trilogy, four cowboy novels set in Mexico and the American Southwest, in order to argue that instead of oscillating between optimism and nihilism, McCarthy works hard to envision destruction and rebuilding as one and the same thing. In *The Crossing*, the second novel of The Border Trilogy, one of McCarthy's signature anchoritic sages, this one a heretical priest, dreams of God, "Weaving the World. In his hands it flowed out of nothing and in his hands it vanished

into nothing once again. Endlessly. Endlessly" (457). I read McCarthy's use of "world" through Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg Gadamer, and Elaine Scarry to claim that for McCarthy, telling stories—as the priest speaks of his dream—phenomenologically recreates characters' violently unwoven worlds. Storytelling further, to borrow ethical vocabulary from Gadamer and Attridge, opens the horizons of characters' worlds by connecting them with others. Confronting histories of American expansion and warfare, nuclear devastation, and environmental catastrophe, McCarthy demonstrates that the world and its ethically opened horizons are tenuous texts, and he imagines the act of storytelling as a phenomenological tool to rebuild the world and reopen its ethical horizons, phoenix-like, out of their own ashes.

Expanding on the question of ethics, in chapter 3 I examine how Michael Ondaatje's characters use literature to rebuild their individual selves through an intertextual, intersubjective, but profoundly embodied relationship with others. Ondaatje frequently depicts post-traumatic wanderers, displaced characters whose bodies and minds bear the scars of unspeakable savagery committed against them. Ondaatje's characters are also typically obsessed with art, usually literature, but also music, painting, and sculpture. Drawing on trauma theory, I read *The English Patient* and *Divisadero*, both centrally concerned with warfare, in order to show how Ondaatje's characters read and write to mediate themselves with other people and with their own past, as if it too were another person. *Divisadero*'s narrator Anna says that "with memory, with the reflection of an echo, a gate opens both ways. We can circle time. A paragraph or an episode from another era will haunt us in the night, as the words of a stranger can. […] It is the hunger, what we do not have, that holds us together" (280). Like McCarthy's depiction of the "endlessly" woven and unwoven world, Ondaatje envisions individuals who recreate their own coherent subjectivity precisely through its fragmentation, the absence that Anna calls "hunger." Faced with serial warfare in the 20th and 21st centuries, the violent legacy of colonialism, and the human and environmental wreckage of

conventional and nuclear bombs, Ondaatje's characters use art to mediate embodied relationships with others, holding themselves together through "the words of a stranger."

In chapter 4, I shift emphasis from the individual's relationship with others to the entire community as an entity trying to hold itself together and repair itself from violence. Toni Morrison depicts individuals' intersubjectivity and phenomenological experiences of the world as manifestations, ultimately, of communal dynamics. Reading *A Mercy*, I argue that reestablishing coherent worldviews—McCarthy's focus—and healing from personal trauma—Ondaatje's focus—depend primarily on literary efforts to rebuild communal ties. Florens, who narrates much of *A Mercy*, opens the novel by cautioning, "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you," and says, "One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?" (3). Florens connects telling and reading with helping or harming, and with the ethics of responsibility. Her second-person address incorporates readers into her community as stand-ins for the blacksmith whom she is asking to reenter her life. Simultaneously, Morrison raises the problem of literacy for blacks in colonial and antebellum America—the blacksmith, though free, cannot read—demonstrating how savagely uneven resources determine communities' capacities to recover from violence—Hurricane Katrina comes to mind. bell hooks has asked, "Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the 'subject' when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time" (28), and argued that "postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding" (31). Morrison, I argue, reimagines the self as decentered yet intrinsically part of a community, establishing the priority of that community as a locus from which to resist racism, sexism, and colonialism, and yet depicting community as an ever-shifting tapestry literarily recreated by the self-re-making individuals, with their protean worldviews, who constitute it.

Morrison also powerfully stands out from the obsessive returns to WWII in novels by Ondaatje, McCarthy, and Roth written during what has turned out to be the interwar period of the 1990s between the Cold War and the War on Terror. Where Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and McCarthy's *The Crossing* return to the origin of potential nuclear omnicide at the end of WWII as they negotiate the post-Cold War world, School Teacher's sudden, violent arrival in Morrison's *Beloved* demonstrates how radically un-novel the potential for flash violence was and remains in the African-American experience. The constant but diffuse and unpredictable threat of nuclear brinksmanship or terrorist attacks from the late 1940s to today differs little, in Morrison's depiction of violence, from the random lightning-strikes of lynchings and whippings. This indicates the limited scope of Grausam's view that nuclear fear shapes the form of "American postmodern fiction," the inability of nuclear fear to account meaningfully for what hooks calls "postmodern blackness." The serial violence Morrison portrays, then, inheres not so much in the abstracted technological and political formations of modernity and postmodernity—it doesn't map onto the standard story of U.S. cultural epochs—but in the particular structures and attitudes of given communities, whether the racist Ohio society in *The Bluest Eye* in which Pecola Breedlove yearns to have blue eyes or the patriarchal black community of *Paradise* that slaughters innocent women. Morrison thus articulates a view of communal belonging and literary recreation finely attuned to trace and resist the networks of domination that run through the fabric of a local community and point away from that community toward larger structures of violent power like the transatlantic slave trade in *A Mercy* or the Korean War in *Home*.

I conclude this study in chapter 5 by reading Philip Roth's novels, autobiographies, and essays to show how the literarily reconstructed worlds, selves, and communities that McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison portray are, in the end, mere fictions by which to mask the contingency and existential vulnerability of human life. In "Juice or Gravy? How I Met

My Fate in a Cafeteria," Roth explains how, as a young man, he set out "to manufacture a future" for himself by writing, but soon realized that forces beyond his control ineluctably shape his life, so that "it could well be the future that would be manufacturing me" (3). Roth (allegedly) recovers his ability to write himself when he discovers a piece of paper that inspires each of his nineteen books to date, but Roth cannot settle on a description of the piece of paper: "this document—this gift—this burden—this prank—this incomprehensible whatever-it-was—this *nothing*" (22). Reading Roth alongside Nietzsche—but against Hayes's reading of Roth and Nietzsche—I explore how Roth repeatedly rewrites "*nothing*" into something, reframing the contingent selves he creates as the "gift" of fate. Following Nietzsche, I identify this as a will to ignorance in Roth's work, a drive to cover up the world in artifice, like the invented piece of paper, and then cover up that artifice's artificiality. We use literature, Roth implies, to forget that our selves, our communities, and even our worlds are self-made fictions, are, to repeat my frequent quotation in this introduction, "just mangled guts pretending" (*Angels*, 49).

I do not mean this as a nihilistic final note, reducing the ethical communities that McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison aim to recreate through literature to mere fantasies. Rather, by pointing out that even these efforts to remake subjective and communal coherence are at most illusions and self-delusions, I aim to argue that literature remains utterly indispensable, the means by which we convince ourselves that we are able to start over again and remake new selves, communities, and worlds after various forms of violence have destroyed them. This is a pessimistic affirmation of literary value, admittedly, but it is also a wholehearted one, framing literature as "*nothing*" in order to affirm that it is a vital something, the faith in fiction that allows us to act at all. And that makes the idea of literature itself the most important fiction we have.

2. Fictions of the World: Cormac McCarthy

In 1962, Cormac McCarthy submitted the manuscript of what would become his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, cold to Random House. Shortly afterward, he traded a lively, sometimes testy series of letters with his editor Lawrence Bensky over revisions to the text. Bensky's commentary focuses on the way that McCarthy's writing style obscures action, character, and motivation, and in a representative exchange, Bensky identifies a number of "jarring" shifts in tone in the book, "essentially unidentifiable incantation[s]" (10/9/62, pp. 2 & 3). McCarthy responds that the passages Bensky identifies are "recorded out of the <u>spiritus mundi</u>" (undated, p. 5), and Bensky writes back that "<u>every</u> point which you make to me in your letter is an explanation which should be unnecessary," and that revision by correspondence simply isn't going to work (1/25/63). A month later, Bensky, not having heard back from McCarthy, wrote to ask if he was still working on the novel, or if McCarthy was planning "to work on other books, or go to work in a hydrogen bomb factory" (2/19/63). Bensky clearly intends the barb as an exasperated joke, but the disturbing nearness, even intimacy between literature and nuclear weapons anticipates what would come to be one of McCarthy's central themes: how characters relate discursively to the "<u>spiritus mundi</u>" of the world around them, and how violence, especially of a nuclear kind, utterly deconstructs that world. Over the course of his career, McCarthy depicts increasingly destructive forms and acts of violence, eventually reaching apocalypse. But halfway through his career, McCarthy also turns to an examination of how telling stories might help characters recover from this violence. Continuing to portray violence unflinchingly, McCarthy shows how his characters rebuild their phenomenological relations to the "<u>spiritus mundi</u>" out of that world's very deconstruction by trying, once more, to tell stories. This chapter unfolds the process of rebuilding the world by telling stories again as it is represented in McCarthy's fiction.

McCarthy himself received a second chance to tell the story of *The Orchard Keeper*.

Despite his frustrations with McCarthy, in August of 1963 Bensky informed McCarthy that Random House would publish the novel, and that because he, Bensky, was leaving for England, a new editor would take over. That new editor was Albert Erskine, Faulkner's old editor, who not only indulged McCarthy's ripostes about his work, but would come to engage in almost gleeful debates on grammar and the meanings of archaic words that McCarthy had culled from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In his second letter to McCarthy, Erskine presses McCarthy about his sparse Faulknerian punctuation, worried that though it is "well-digested influence," it might be read by some as "mere imitativeness" (11/14/63, p. 2). McCarthy responds with a strident apologia for minimalist punctuation, declaring,

> The prime symbol of the Faustian soul is limitless space, so says Spengler. It is reflected in the unbroken lines of his architecture, in the simplicity and unobstructedness of his art-forms. So too then with his printed page. For the same reasons—such as they are—I really cant say yes to quotation marks. (12/63, p. 2)

That McCarthy defends his punctuation with an obscure German philosopher of history, and switches so mercurially from the sublime rhetoric of "the Faustian soul" to the colloquial "I really cant say yes to quotation marks," will strike no one as out of character. And the intense spatiality of McCarthy's aesthetics, idealizing the printed page as a "limitless space," will likewise elicit no surprise: McCarthy's texts often seem to be about the landscape more than anything else, as if characters are mere manifestations of the land, modes of Spinoza's God—in *Blood Meridian*, the brutally murderous Glanton Gang rides across Mexico, "Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock […] in a time before nomenclature was and each was all" (182). Characters here merge with the "spiritus mundi," one with "all," and McCarthy's aesthetic ideal of limitlessness clashes with the limitless savagery the Gang perpetrates in the wide-open, unregulated spaces of Mexico and the American Southwest. The "printed page" and the annihilation of hydrogen bombs then represent paradoxically intimate antipodes, extreme polar ideals of art and violence as equally, perhaps even coevally, "limitless."

Despite his early attraction to the "limitless space" that Oswald Spengler identifies historically and philosophically with modernity, McCarthy's first four novels explore increasingly deadly enclosure. *The Orchard Keeper*, finally published in 1965, begins with a prologue in which three men in rural Tennessee can't cut up a tree because it has "growed" completely around a wrought-iron fence pole (3). The iron survives by its organic enclosure, but *The Orchard Keeper* concludes by asserting that no connection with the local woods can last. John Wesley Rattner confronts his mother's grave after years away from home, and the narrator's final words muse on the now-exterminated Native Americans who lived there:

> They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone. Over the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses. No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust. (246)

The land endures, but it is an enfolding space of human extinction, a theme intensified in McCarthy's next novel, 1968's *Outer Dark*. Rinthy circles through the dense, dark Tennessee woods hunting a tinker who has her baby, but a trio of nameless killers hangs the tinker and cannibalizes the infant in a clearing. Rinthy finds the clearing soon after—potentially the same one where the baby was first taken—and discovers a tiny ribcage "calcined" in the ashes of the fire, but she does not recognize her child and continues her repetitive wanderings (246). The novel ends with a blind, itinerant preacher following a road that leads only to a swamp, "a landscape of the damned [...] that tended away to the earth's curve," the "spiritus mundi" rendered as hell on earth extending to the horizon (251). In *Child of God*, from 1973, the mass murderer Lester Ballard fills his cave with his victims' bodies and climbs into their clothes, enshrouding himself within the dead. And in *Suttree*, after serial degradations in Knoxville, Suttree hitches his way out of town, but his Kerouac-like freedom at the novel's end remains claustrophobically haunted by an almost ontological hell, "in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman [...] his work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not. [...] Fly them" (568).

McCarthy's interest in "limitless space" could finally express itself thematically when

he moved to El Paso in 1976 ("Introduction," 5) and began writing what he described to Erskine as simply "the western" (9/12/78)—what would be *Blood Meridian* in 1985. Like Suttree hitchhiking, *Blood Meridian*'s first chapter concludes with its unnamed central character, "the kid," lighting out "along the old road west" (15). This journey initiates a classic tale of manifest destiny that McCarthy twists into a revisionist historical portrait of unbridled violence in the West, replete with huge mass scalpings of Mexicans and Native Americans and a mesquite bush ornamented with mutilated infants. The various forms of violence earlier in McCarthy's career, from Native American genocide to infanticide to serial killing, apotheosize in *Blood Meridian* in the Glanton Gang, who destroy everything as they ride through the desert, "ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished" (182). The Gang divides and orders the world through slaughter, paradoxically leaving it "devoid of order" (182), and their unchecked brutality echoes the narrator's cosmological intonations: "If much in the world were mystery the limits of that world were not, for it was without measure or bound" (145). The Gang's genocidal savagery uses the "Faustian" boundlessness of Mexico and the Southwest to become itself limitless, a picture of destruction McCarthy advances in his subsequent cowboy novels in The Border Trilogy. In 1993's *The Crossing*, the Trilogy's second novel, Billy Parham witnesses the first nuclear test at Los Alamos, "that place where acts of God and those of man are of a piece," as the kind of holocaust the Gang enacts suddenly acquires global, even cosmic potential (354). And in *The Road*, published in 2006 and so resonating with terrorist attacks too, McCarthy envisions a man and his son trekking through a post-apocalyptic wasteland, their Kerouac-like journey down the road rendered utterly nihilistic in a devastation more complete than any atom bomb Billy might have seen.

Even as he steadily increases the scope and degree of violence in his fiction, from his first novel to his most recent, by the time of The Border Trilogy McCarthy also begins trying

to imagine limitlessness not as boundless destruction but as a space for freedom and reparation. At the beginning of the Trilogy, in 1992's *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole walks the prairie of his recently-deceased grandfather's ranch, and feels his world closing in, "Dark and cold and no wind and a thin gray reef beginning along the eastern rim of the world" (3). The "eastern rim" inaugurates a series of limits on John Grady's "world," succeeded by prison walls, social classes, and the fencing in of the West: "to the west a mile away ran a wire fence strung from pole to pole like a bad suture across the gray grasslands" (39). *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue insinuates that its riders' "measureless" world in 1850 is soon to be fenced in, as a man moves "over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground" (355), and John Grady lives in that circumscribed future world. Running away to Mexico after his grandfather's ranch is sold, John Grady and his friend Lacey Rawlins have to circumvent the fences and highways that regulate the land in the 1940s. "How the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country," Rawlins asks, and John Grady replies, "They dont" (31). In Mexico, in contrast, the boys find work at la Purísima, a verdant cattle ranch surrounded by seemingly infinite space. Its lakes and plains teem with "species of fish not known elsewhere on earth and birds and lizards and other forms of life as well all long relict here for the desert stretched away on every side" (99). When Rawlins asks, "How long do you think you'd like to stay here" at la Purísima, John Grady declares, "about a hundred years" (98). John Grady's paradise—identified as an American Eden by Barcley Owens (67) and Gail Morrison (181-2)—collapses into the hellish violence of prison when la Purísima's owner takes revenge on John Grady for sleeping with his daughter Alejandra. But the ranch's boundlessness at least temporarily revitalizes cowboy pastoralism, replacing the "bad sutures" of fences with the starry desert sky's "ten thousand worlds for the choosing" (31).

McCarthy also, however, shows the necessity of limits and boundaries in order to dwell in the West. Even perception constructs the world by creating boundaries, as John

Grady watches as "the country rolled away to the west […] in a frail last shimmering restraint alike of the earth and the eye beholding it" (227). Observation phenomenologically shapes the observed, so that the horizon line delimits the world that characters can come to know. Though the world itself is "without measure or bound" in *Blood Meridian*, characters' sight also orders it, "The earth fell away on every side equally in its arcature and by these limits were they circumscribed and of them were they locus" (311-12). In *The Crossing*, Billy nomadically wanders most of northern Mexico and the West, but he cannot escape the prison represented by the horizon, "impounding the visible world. He came to the remnants of an old fence and dismounted and twisted out the staples from some of the spindly posts and made a fire" (656). Billy fierily resists the fencing in of cowboy life, but he remains as powerless to overcome this "impounding" as he is to exceed his own field of vision—in *Cities of the Plain*, the Trilogy's final installment in 1998, the ranch where Billy and John Grady work inexorably disappears as the military buys weapons testing grounds. At the same time, though, Billy's fire, which keeps him warm in the snowy night, creates an anthropic pocket of light, as sunrise "make[s] the world again from darkness" (499). And John Grady, even as he freely roams la Purísima, returns to the ranch house's domiciliary order, "the yellow squares of windowlight gave warmth and shape to an alien world" (97). Limitlessness thus breeds freedom in McCarthy's oeuvre, but also devastating violence, and boundaries both constrain and comfort McCarthy's characters.

McCarthy's aesthetics of "limitless space" can be seen to operate, on a thematic level, paradoxically, both enabling self-determination and nihilistically extinguishing life. Critics, though, consistently reduce this paradox to binary oppositions. Hungerford writes of

> the twin engines of McCarthy's art: on the one hand, McCarthy loves the endless universe [of] words—sensual, concrete words that can describe and name and build every possible thing, that can create a world out of nothingness; and on the other, he is enchanted by the transcendent, numinous space of nothingness (of death, of desert, of a destroyed world, of a child not fully come into language). (135)

Offering "ten thousand worlds for the choosing," McCarthy's fiction portrays storytelling as

an almost divine creative effort, at the same time that McCarthy repetitively portrays apocalyptic violence, romancing the numinousness of nothingness. Similarly, for Dianne Luce in "The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*," the numerous inset storytellers in McCarthy's work suggest "that rather than any physical sense, the human capability for narrative […] is our primary means of accessing and perhaps communicating the thing itself: the world which is a tale" (208). Luce also argues, though, that when Billy's family is murdered, he loses his "innate capacity for narrating the world" (211), lapsing into nothingness as he tells his final interlocutor in The Border Trilogy's epilogue, "I think you just see whatever's in front of you" (1015). Like Hungerford's "twin engines" and Luce's disjunctive division of storytelling and silence, critics take sides over McCarthy's optimism or pessimism. Vereen Bell sees McCarthy's novels as "brutally nihilistic," filled with violence "without design or purpose" (*Achievement*, 34 & 38), while in contrast, Edwin Arnold finds in McCarthy "a profound belief in the need for moral order" ("Parables," 46). Owens takes both sides, splitting them along periodic lines, claiming that "McCarthy's West is divided between the stark, unforgiving brutality of *Blood Meridian* and the primitive-pastoral visions of the Border Trilogy" (xvi). Steven Shaviro can thus identify in *Blood Meridian* "a stalled dialectic" of human agency and crushing fate (152), and even Bell's "nihilism" is "ambiguous" and "dialectical," yet merely "suspended between contraries" ("Ambiguous," 37 & 38).

What I want to argue in this chapter is that rather than an oscillation or "suspended" dialectic powered by the "twin engines" of nihilism and hope, McCarthy's work comprises a deep formal and conceptual integrity. McCarthy works to imagine violent destruction and narrative creativity as one and the same thing, locating the capacity to "build every possible thing" precisely in the devastated rubble of "nothingness." This reframes the world-making act of narrative Luce describes as an endeavor to re-narrate and so rebuild the world out of its own destruction and silencing. Narrative, in fact, paradoxically both empowers McCarthy's

characters to shape themselves and their world, and at the same time threatens their very lives in the form of violent master-narratives and postmodern pastiche. Holding together both paradoxical sides of narrative, the destructive and the generative, like the two sides of a Möbius strip, then, McCarthy articulates a view of retelling as an act of regeneration. In teasing out this doubly creative and destructive understanding of storytelling in McCarthy, I draw on Elaine Scarry's theory in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* that art works to "make" the world in opposition to acts of violence that "unmake" it (128). But where Scarry sees "making" and "unmaking" as "not simply distinct but mutually exclusive" processes (13), I argue that McCarthy tries to envision creative making arising intrinsically out of violent unmaking, offering a form of reconstruction to respond to a fundamentally violent historical reality. Following McCarthy's fondness for the word "world" and his emphasis on spatiality, horizons, and the "spiritus mundi," I likewise work with Martin Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer's claims that poetry and hermeneutic interpretation create our worlds—that they resolve the "world" against the "horizon" of interpretation—but I show how McCarthy explores how these worlds remain always vulnerable to destruction, and how they can be literarily rebuilt. Gadamer thinks of our relations with others as the fusion of the horizons of one person's world with another's, a fusion that generates understanding, so I conclude this chapter by analyzing how narrative in McCarthy's fiction ethically reopens characters' horizons again and again when their interpersonal relationships fall apart.

Making, breaking, and remaking the world

Blood Meridian and The Border Trilogy both rely on metafiction for substantial portions of their plots, from *Blood Meridian*'s demonic judge Holden telling parables and holding forth on the nature of narrative to the itinerant storyteller in the Trilogy's epilogue riffing on the nature of dreams. At one point, judge Holden gives the Gang an impromptu geology lecture, to which his listeners respond with scripture, and the judge says, "Books lie"

(123). Later, in contrast, as he's drawing pictures of rocks and human artifacts in his ledger, the judge says, "What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it's writ. How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no book at all" (148). In *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, David Holloway argues that the judge's contradictory claims for the absolute truth and falsity of books represent both an Enlightenment belief in master-narratives and a skeptical postmodernist deconstruction (23 & 34). Echoing the standard critical account of McCarthy's oscillation between hope and nihilism, Holloway says that "switching between" these views of books as true and false "emerges as the deep formal structure of McCarthy's western quartet," without "any new, third, or higher dialectical position" (40). Instead, though, I want to argue, in his characters' metafictional discourses on storytelling, especially in The Border Trilogy, McCarthy envisions narrative's failure—its lies—as precisely the way in which characters try to make sense of their world by telling stories about it. The judge might just be immortal, an apotheosis of violence that Harold Bloom calls "the most frightening figure in all of American literature" (1), and so his ledger book can impose itself on the world by destroying anything that "deviates" from it. But McCarthy's other characters are decidedly mortal, and the stories they tell serially try and fail and try again to make their world, re-narrating, paradoxically, out of the very violent failure of narration.

McCarthy frames storytelling as a pursuit of knowledge that connects characters with external reality. In the Trilogy's epilogue, an old, homeless Billy meets a fellow wanderer under a freeway overpass—he at first takes the wanderer, perhaps correctly, for Death—and the wanderer tells Billy about a dream he once had, a story he's apparently told frequently before (1015). As he narrates his dream, the wanderer also discusses the act of narration itself:

> This story like all stories has its beginnings in a question. And those stories which speak to us with the greatest resonance have a way of turning upon the teller and erasing him and his motives from all memory. So the question of who is telling the story is very consiguiente [consequential].
>
> Every story is not about some question.
>
> Yes it is. Where all is known no narrative is possible.

> Billy leaned and spat again. Ándale [go on], he said. (1022-3)

I'll return to the question of the teller's erasure, but the wanderer fundamentally describes narrative as a response to ignorance that generates knowledge. Billy objects, demanding that the wanderer just "go on" with the story, but the wanderer points out that Billy himself is "the one with the questions" (1023), including the "consiguiente" question of the wanderer's identity—Billy says, "I thought at first you might be somebody else" (1012). By seeking to answer questions through stories, the wanderer claims, we order all of our perceptions, for,

> The events of the waking world […] are forced upon us and the narrative is the unguessed axis along which they must be strung. It falls to us to weigh and sort and order these events. It is we who assemble them into the story which is us. Each man is the bard of his own existence. This is how he is joined to the world. (1028)

We are thrown existentially into physical reality, and the external world gains its meaning only when we order it, shaping our "own existence" the same way "the yellow squares of windowlight" at la Purísima "gave warmth and shape to an alien world." When he described himself to Bensky, McCarthy concluded by claiming that "a person could describe himself in keeping with any number of different images until he had portrayed a dozen dissimilar people. The person described here is not necessarily me; it is a brief outline of my activities to date" (summer 1963, p. 3). Narrative contingently constitutes the reality of the events it arranges from a given person's perspective, and so it reciprocally, equally contingently makes the narrator's life, phenomenologically joining the teller "to the world" around him or her.

Judge Holden marks the limit case of narrating in order to answer questions. As he sketches in his notebook, the judge says that simply pursuing knowledge gives him mastery:

> These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. […] This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation. […] that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread

> of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (209-10)

Following his title, the judge denies autonomy to anything or anyone but himself—he will decree *nomos* for all, as he names the unnamed kid "Blasarius" (99), a legal term for "an incendiary" (*Black's*) that judges the kid's earlier arson (14). Holden thinks that merely undertaking "the task" of so ordering the world—pursuing questions about the world, as the wanderer in the Trilogy would put it—gives him "limitless" suzerainty over all. The judge ultimately makes his interpretations absolute by destroying the things he represents, killing the kid he's named and incinerating everything he sketches in his notebook: "He gathered up the artifacts and cast them also into the fire [...] Then he sat with his hands cupped in his lap and he seemed much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation" (147-8). The judge refuses to have events "forced upon" him, instead recreating and then destroying the things he encounters so that the "world" which remains is as if created by him. Holden claims immortality, "He says that he will never die" (353), and *Blood Meridian* gives us no reason to doubt him. His ordering of the world through seemingly limitless violence and the totalizing representation it enforces therefore "does not end" (327), and nothing can "erase" Holden as the suzerain "teller" of the world he inhabits.

The Trilogy's characters likewise strive to be "bards" of their "own existence." In *All the Pretty Horses*, Rawlins and John Grady explicitly conceive of their journey to Mexico through cowboy tales of the Old West back in the days of *Blood Meridian*: they threaten another boy named Blevins, pretending to be bandits, "It aint fair, said Rawlins. You shot the last three" (42); they look for work in an area of Mexico that sounds "like the Big Rock Candy Mountains" (56); and they buy "black boots," because Rawlins "always wanted to be a bad man" (124). Similarly, in *The Crossing*, when Billy and his brother Boyd rescue an unnamed girl from highwaymen, in the kind of classic heroism that eventually gets Boyd killed, the

narrator says, "they had the look of storybook riders conveying again to her homeland some stolen backland queen" (523), like the kid in *Blood Meridian* when he fights sailors in New Orleans, "like some fairybook beast" (4). Finally, in *Cities of the Plain*, Billy and John Grady both work at the same ranch, as their cowboy lifestyle faces extinction. The novel opens with Billy calling John Grady "the all-american cowboy" (745), and closes with Billy "working as an extra in a movie" sometime "in the spring of the second year of the new millennium" (1009-10). Arnold points out that because of the timeframe, the fact that *Cities of the Plain* originated as a screenplay, and because McCarthy had already sold the movie rights to *All the Pretty Horses* and *Blood Meridian*, Billy could very well be "performing in the filming of one of McCarthy's own works," even *Cities of the Plain* itself ("Last," 239). "Joined to the world" through stories, Billy and John Grady guide their actions and perceive themselves, each other, and external events through the Western's narrative tropes—but they also risk being subsumed into that mythos, mere "extras," their cowboy stories "erasing" them as tellers.

Moreover, Billy and John Grady, unlike the judge, can die. "Good writers," McCarthy said in 1992, must "deal with issues of life and death," because "there's no such thing as life without bloodshed" (Woodward). Following this logic, deadly knife fights terminate John Grady's cowboy paradises in *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*, while in *The Crossing* a dogfight that kills the wolf he is returning to Mexico snuffs out Billy's world—"doomed enterprises divide lives forever" (437). Facing the serial collapse of the narratives by which they perceive their worlds and live their lives, Billy and John Grady lapse into pastiche. Drawing on Fredric Jameson, Holloway claims that *Cities of the Plain* reads "less like a concluding volume than a further self-conscious pastiching of narratives (themselves pastiches) that have already been told" (77). Jameson describes pastiche as "the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language […] a neutral practice of such mimicry without any of parody's ulterior motives" (65). On Holloway's Jamesonian reading of *Cities of the Plain*, Billy

and John Grady uncritically mimic the "dead language" of the cowboy roles they already uncritically mimicked in the Trilogy's previous two volumes. World-weary, Billy seems to agree: he too exuberantly declares, "I love this life" (752), and he later mocks his wolf-trapping ability from *The Crossing*, "I'm a tracking fool. I can track lowflyin birds" (915). Despite periodic parodic energy, Billy generally acquiesces to the degradation of modern cowboy life, telling John Grady that he wouldn't go back to "the old days," though he wanted to as "a kid" (820), because "when you're a kid you have these notions about how things are goin to be […] You get a little older and you pull back some on that. I think you wind up just tryin to minimize the pain. Anyway this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everthing" (821). And so Billy resigns himself to trading wolf-hunting and cow-roping for massacring wild dogs—"Dogropers, called Billy. I knew it'd come to this" (908). The pimp Eduardo, as he fights John Grady over John Grady's lover Magdalena, herself perhaps just a pastiche of a prostitute with a heart of gold, says, "What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story. Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of" (878). Judge Holden tells the Gang, "The order in creation which you see is that which you have put there" (258), but Eduardo points out that John Grady lacks the judge's immortal power to enforce exactly the order he wants in the world. His story of Magdalena's redemption turns upon and kills him.

At the same time, McCarthy works out in The Border Trilogy a picture of how characters can move on after violence. Alongside the boys' various violent encounters, World War II subtends the Trilogy, unsettling any order—"this war," an old man says to Billy in *The Crossing*, "There's no way to calculate what's to come" (659). John Grady's father, who survived the Bataan Death March (959), says in *All the Pretty Horses* that "people dont feel safe no more […] We don't know what's goin to show up here come daylight" (26), and *Cities of the*

Plain echoes with "wars and rumors of wars" (804). Judge Holden says that war is holy, because "the whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die […] War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god" (263). War orders the world with the total, unitary, "ultimate authority of the extant" (90), irrevocable in its chance determination of who will live. Only in its ruination can "the world they dream of" have any permanence for Billy and John Grady. Yet the boys persist. When Boyd dies in a shootout in Mexico, Billy forces his way to his brother's buried body. Like Billy's later moonlighting as a movie extra, Boyd has been coopted as a hero in Mexican *corridos*, or folk songs (700). Subsumed into myth, a friendly rancher named Quijada tells Billy that "even if the güerito [blond boy] in the song is your brother he is no longer your brother. He cannot be reclaimed" (701). Billy tersely replies, "I aim to take him back with me," and though Quijada says that "it will not be permitted" (701), Billy eventually "reclaim[s]" and inters Boyd in his hometown in the U.S. (737). John Grady similarly concludes *All the Pretty Horses* by retelling the novel's events "from the beginning" to a sympathetic judge (291), achieving absolution for killing a man in prison and reversing the scene in *Blood Meridian* when the kid tries to escape Holden's master-narrative by babbling to strangers in a jail, "with a strange urgency of things few men have seen in a lifetime" (321). Telling new stories provides some slim way to repair characters after violence, recuperating Boyd from a cowboy myth and launching John Grady on a new, if also doomed, adventure.

McCarthy theorizes such retelling as a paradoxical blend of creating and destroying the world itself. When he burns the fence posts in *The Crossing*, Billy watches

> the last few embers of his fire at their dying and the red crazings in the woodcoals where they broke along their unguessed gridlines. As if in the trying of the wood were elicited hidden geometries and their orders which could only stand fully revealed, such is the way of the world, in darkness and ashes. (438)

If narrative is "the unguessed axis" along which events "must be strung," then destruction also reveals "unguessed gridlines," as war orders the world for the judge. Don Arnulfo, an

aging Mexican heretic who advises Billy on catching the wolf in *The Crossing*, says, "the wolf is a being of great order [that] knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (352). Later in the same novel, as he wanders Mexico, Billy meets a blind man who claims that "the picture of the world is all the world men know and this picture of the world is perilous. […] For the world to survive it must be replenished daily. [The righteous] man will be required to begin again whether he wishes to or no" (605). Our phenomenological "picture of the world" repetitively comes undone, and so the world "must be replenished" out of its own destruction. With his sight, the blind man loses everything:

> Of all that once had been no trace remained. The look of the world. The faces of loved ones. Finally even his own person was lost to him. Whatever he had been he was no more. […] like every man who comes to the end of something there was nothing to be done but to begin again. […] he had indeed lost himself and all memory of himself yet he had found in the deepest dark of that loss that there also was a ground and there one must begin. (603-4)

Narrative's very failure to order the world here becomes the "ground" from which to begin narrating "again." Explaining how to catch the wolf, Don Arnulfo advises finding "places that God sits and conspires in the destruction of that which he has been at such pains to create" (354), and a heretical priest tells Billy about God, "weaving the world. In his hands it flowed out of nothing and in his hands it vanished into nothing once again. Endlessly. Endlessly. […] that tapestry that was the world in its making and in its unmaking" (457). McCarthy refigures *Moby-Dick*'s "weaver-god" (500), a literary allusion that was important to him by at least 1975 ("Screenplay," 74), as also an unweaver. Ishmael says that a whale skeleton "seemed the cunning weaver," so that "Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-headed glories" (500). McCarthy draws out how the vines weaving through the whale's skeleton will also die, return to the ground, and ground new life.

Beginning again, for McCarthy, means finding or telling new stories to perceive and shape oneself and the world. Thus the myriad inset storytellers in The Border Trilogy who repeatedly recite their own and others' histories in order to make sense of things: Luis (114),

Alfonsa (137 & 231), Señor Rocha (147), the captain (183), and John Grady (246) in *All the Pretty Horses*; Don Arnulfo (351), the priest (450), the blind man (596), and the gypsy (718) in *The Crossing*; and Mr. Johnson (807) and the blind piano player (936) in *Cities of the Plain*. Sometimes the boys learn from these stories, and sometimes they don't. John Grady ignores the piano player and winds up dead, while Billy heeds Don Arnulfo's advice to find "lugares donde ha quemado el fuego [places where the fire has burned]," trapping the wolf in an old fire pit, but nevertheless fails to return the wolf to Mexico (354). And Billy truly finds the place where the fire has burned, "where acts of God and those of man are of a piece," when he witnesses the first atomic bomb test at the end of *The Crossing* (740), so that Don Arnulfo's advice ultimately leads to divine devastation, where the "hidden geometries" of atomic structure are revealed. Jacqueline Scoones reads a moment in *Cities of the Plain* when Billy and John Grady use a simple machine to rescue puppies as a humble reversal of the Bomb, "harnessing technology in the aim of saving life, not destroying it" (151). The two scales are almost absurdly incommensurable, but I take Scoones' point that McCarthy is interested in how we remake the world, even after "limitless" nuclear catastrophe. The Trilogy's concluding "Dedication" turns to Spenglerian "limitless space":

> *I will be your child to hold*
> *And you be me when I am old*
> *The world grows cold*
> *The heathen rage*
> *The story's told*
> *Turn the page*. (1038)

Turning the page, we confront blankness, both the monstrous whiteness of the albino judge Holden—rapist and mass murderer, Ahab and Moby Dick in one—and a free space to write our own story, beginning again once "*the story's told*." When Billy emerges from Don Arnulfo's house, he sees "the snow on the north slopes so pale. Like spaces left for messages" (356), a space to write a new world into being when the violence of "*heathen*[s]" like Holden destroys the old one, when, aging, his "*world*" growing "*cold*" in the epilogue, Billy finds a new family.

Crossing horizons

The word 'world' occurs 28 unique times in the passages from McCarthy I've quoted so far in this chapter, and Google Books reveals that the word appears 44 times in *Blood Meridian*, 44 in *All the Pretty Horses*, 60 in *The Crossing*, 39 in *Cities of the Plain*, and 35 in *The Road*—an average of once every 7.5 pages. McCarthy has a thing for 'world.' In the last section of this chapter, I want to read McCarthy alongside another writer with a thing for the word 'world'—or at least '*die Welt*'—Martin Heidegger. Along with Spengler, in his letters to Erskine McCarthy mentions Nietzsche and Spinoza (3/11/68, p. 1), and *Blood Meridian* has clearly internalized Nietzsche's influence: judge Holden echoes and refigures Nietzsche's claim that "when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you" (*Beyond*, §146) when he tells the kid that "only that man who has offered himself up entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance" (349). Luce similarly tells us that McCarthy read Hegel "at least by Fall 1991," which influenced his ideas on "the role of narrative in our lives" and so shaped the metafictional portrayals of storytelling in *The Crossing* ("Tale," 202). Asserting that McCarthy also read Heidegger (and responds to him as he reworks Nietzsche?) would be purely speculative, but given this philosophical milieu, it would be unsurprising. Regardless, I think McCarthy can, at the very least, be read productively with and against Heidegger and his philosophical heirs. Heidegger's theory that poetry makes "the world" resonates with and draws out the ethical valence of McCarthy's fiction, and McCarthy's fiction shows that Heidegger's poetic world remains always vulnerable to violence, and that it must be repetitively, poetically rebuilt.

When the wanderer in The Border Trilogy's epilogue claims that "each man is the bard of his own existence. This is how he is joined to the world," he might easily be channeling Greenblatt's or Nehamas's descriptions of Renaissance self-fashioning or

Nietzsche's literary self-creation. We shape our very selves, according to the wanderer, by interpreting the "events" which are "forced upon us" in our lives. This means first that we order those events temporally—stringing them along the "unguessed axis" of narrative like so many pearls—to establish meaningful causal connections. We might think here of Paul Ricoeur's claim that plot "places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity" (167), as we use narrative to structure our experience of time, and also of Peter Brooks's argument, following Sartre, that death, as it concludes the plot of a life, retrospectively "structures the provisional meanings of the already read" by determining the causal consequences of events (23). The wanderer also thinks that we evaluate events, "weigh" them, determining something like moral import. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche asks, "is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis" (§481), and the wanderer likewise says that in weighing events we craft ourselves as the interpreters, so that the self exists insofar as it shapes the external world. In the next chapter, I examine how literature shapes the self in Michael Ondaatje's novels, but given McCarthy's radically de-psychologized fiction—Noah Gallagher Shannon details how McCarthy's drafts of *Blood Meridian*, for example, steadily expunge clues to characters' motives—it seems most important for McCarthy that we create "the story which is us" in order to be "joined to the world."

Where judge Holden takes a Nietzschean stance, emphasizing the individual's power to create himself and dominate as the *Übermensch*, McCarthy's view thus more generally approximates Heidegger's, emphasizing how interpretation makes the world. Much as the wanderer says that stories join us "to the world," Heidegger writes of poetry in "The Nature of Language" that "the word alone gives being to the thing" (62), while in "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger writes that art "opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force" (43). "In its standing there," Heidegger says in "The Origin of the Work of Art," the artwork "first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains

open as long as the work is a work" (42). Embodying a certain "view" of things, artworks determine how we see ourselves and the objects around us, and so open "a *world*." The "world" is not, Heidegger argues, "a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things"—objects are not given and then interpreted, as Kant would have it, noumena and phenomena—but rather, "the *world worlds*, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm […] World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject" (43). The world brings objects and ourselves into being for us, it is the nonobjective process of interpretation that "opens" any possible objectivity. This process by which "the *world worlds*" is basically spatial, bringing things into "nearness" with us (43), making them accessible and ready-to-hand, so that art, Heidegger writes, "makes space for that spaciousness" (44), enabling spatial relations that bring objects meaningfully into being for us. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's earlier magnum opus, Heidegger similarly spatializes human experience, proposing to interpret "*time* as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of being," rendering time itself as a kind of spatial boundary (xx). Albert Hofstadter writes that in Heidegger's early work, "the horizon on which something is projected is what gives understandability to the projected" (xxv). As the horizon line "impounds" Billy's "visible world" in *The Crossing* (656), then, Heidegger sees horizons as hermeneutic boundaries against which art makes our world appear as near to us.

Heidegger's late work, though, like Billy, John Grady, and McCarthy's drive toward Spenglerian "limitless space" (letter to Erskine, 12/63, p. 2), not only theorizes the opening of a world, but the opening of that world's horizons too. In *Discourse on Thinking*, a dialogue between a Scholar, a Teacher, and a Scientist, Heidegger plays, quite mystically, even obscurely, with the nature of the horizon. The Teacher says, "We say we look into the horizon. Therefore the field of vision is something open, but its openness is not due to our looking" (64). The Scholar responds, "Likewise we do not place the appearance of objects,

which the view within a field of vision offers us, into this openness… [Scientist:] …rather that [the appearance of objects] comes out of this to meet us" (64). The horizon is an open space out of which objects emerge for us—not simply "projected" by us against the horizon—as we interpret the world. The Teacher replies, "What is evident of the horizon, then, is but the side facing us of an openness which surrounds us […] something like a *region*" (64-5). They describe the "*region*" as an activity, and the Teacher later says, "That-which-regions is an abiding expanse which, gathering all, opens itself, so that in it openness is halted and held, letting everything merge in its own resting" (66). Heidegger describes being as a vast openness, and an activity of opening, in which objects rest, and from which they come to meet us as we behold that opening openness. He thus imagines a region beyond the line of the horizon out of which our "perceptible realm" emerges. In *Truth and Method*, Heidegger's pupil Gadamer offers a (somewhat) more concrete description of exceeding our "horizon." Gadamer sees literary hermeneutics as the model for how we interpret and so exist in the world around us. He renders such interpretation as an intersubjective activity, what he describes as a "fusion of horizons […] continually going on" (273). To interpret the world is to fuse the horizons of our current world with the horizons of another's, opening and expanding our world with and through other people.

This is all very abstract, and in that it resonates with the more obscure inset storytellers in McCarthy's oeuvre, but I think McCarthy's fiction can concretize and, more importantly, historicize the kind of world-making and horizon-opening hermeneutics Heidegger and Gadamer describe. Recall that Attridge, apropos of McCarthy, says that literature creates "a pleasure we feel as our familiar horizons open up to an otherness that we, as products of our culture, had excluded from consciousness" (338). Opening "our familiar horizons" to "otherness," for Attridge, has a specifically ethical valence, bringing previously ignored suffering into our "consciousness." For McCarthy, too, exceeding the horizon of the

self to engage with another person represents a deeply ethical act, always mediated by stories. Judge Holden frames intersubjectivity negatively: "Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacle in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world" (148). The witness, the judge says, is "no third thing, but rather the prime, for what could be said to occur unobserved?" (162). Witnessing creates "the world" by giving being to the observed, and so we exist in and through the others who witness us. Though "endless," this intersubjective chain of "being and witness" also runs up against the limits of the horizon, "the uttermost edge of the world," as the narrator in *Blood Meridian* describes "the trembling perimeter of the world where dust was blowing down the void like the smoke of distant armies" (111). On the other side of the horizon, here, lies the "void," Nietzsche's "abyss," Holden's "pit." Being "tabernacle" in others, rather than a sanctuary, traps characters in hell, in Holden's deadly master-narrative, like Sartre writes in *No Exit*, "Hell is just—other people," "*l'enfer, c'est les autres*" (52). The judge's proclamation of our inescapable sociality explains the violent hells of prison and corruption into which John Grady and Billy fall from their cowboy roaming in open space: Mexican authorities reassert that though the boys cross the U.S.-Mexico border ignorantly and at will, nevertheless "the border stood without regard" (*Crossing*, 428), and it exacts payment for the crossing.

At the same time, Billy and John Grady continue wandering, beginning their lives again after they fall apart, never caught permanently in a master-narrative like the judge's. In *The Crossing*, McCarthy even envisions transcending the horizon into truly "limitless space," rendering intersubjectivity as an ethical rather than a hellish experience. Billy and Boyd are riding through the desert, along a shallow lake, and a nameless cowboy spots them from far off, riding over to check on them. "You all take care," the man says, and when Billy asks how he saw them, the man says, "I seen your reflection. Certain times you can see things out on a playa that's too far to see" (484). "Good will," the narrator in *All the Pretty Horses* asserts, has

"power to protect […] power to heal men and bring them to safety long after all other resources [are] exhausted" (221), while shortly afterward in *The Crossing*, a man tells Billy and Boyd that "good will […] would in itself lend strength and resolution to them in their journey" (494). The man who sees them from over the horizon and tells them to "take care" thus allegedly gives succor, remotely, to Billy and Boyd. This "good will" doesn't last—the boys are eventually, again, subjected to violence—but it represents a small opening across the horizons between people, attending to that which is "too far to see," a witnessing that heals rather than hurts. When John Grady and Rawlins, John Grady and Alejandra, Billy and Boyd, Billy and John Grady, and John Grady and Magdalena form bonds throughout The Border Trilogy, then, they undergo a "fusion of horizons," sheltering each other by knowing one another's story—Magdalena tells John Grady her intimate history (883-3), and he tells her his (950). As well as a "sanctuary," 'tabernacle' indicates a "temporary dwelling," and its verb form means "to sojourn" or "to occupy" such a "temporary dwelling" (OED). McCarthy's characters repetitively seek such temporary shelter in one another's good will—this explains why so many characters tell stories to each other in The Border Trilogy—trying through narrative not only to be "joined to the world" (1028) but to open up and transcend the horizons of that world in ethical connection with others.

If McCarthy envisions his characters repetitively trying to connect with others through storytelling, and so "sojourn" together through "limitless space," he tells us, critically, that the world and its opened horizons described by Heidegger, Gadamer, and Attridge must be, as the blind man says in *The Crossing*, "replenished daily." For Heidegger, the world is "abidingly in force" (43), as Gadamer thinks that our horizons fuse "continually" (273), while for Attridge, as I said in the introduction, ethical engagement with alterity is always deferred into a radical future. In contrast to Heidegger and Gadamer, for McCarthy the world and the "fusion of horizons" come to an end frequently, from specific acts of violence to the general

unsettling caused by WWII—McCarthy's characters are, almost existentially, "disinherited by war" (*Cities*, 948). Nevertheless, McCarthy also locates specific moments when characters do ethically transcend their horizons—"*you be me when I am old*" (1038)—so that characters constantly rebuild their intersubjective relations, rather than deferring them like Attridge describes. Stories open the world and its horizons, but this is temporary, vulnerable, and must be rebuilt, begun again. In the introduction, I described this as the becoming of being, an ethical presence, tabernacling others, that also changes frequently and sometimes disastrously. The wanderer asks Billy,

> What is your life? Can you see it? It vanishes at its own appearance. Moment by moment. Until it vanishes to appear no more. When you look at the world is there a point in time when the seen becomes the remembered? How are they separate? It is that which we have no way to show. It is that which is missing from our map and from the picture that it makes. And yet it is all we have. (1018-19)

The moment of change is un-representable, the wanderer says, "yet it is all we have," the fleeting space of the present in which we live. McCarthy sees ethics and knowledge as the reconstruction of interpersonal relationships and the world in that present moment even as they vanish. This historicizes Heidegger's view of the "world" by remembering the various concrete acts of violence by which people "unmake," to quote Elaine Scarry, each other's worlds. But where Scarry sees art as a "moral" (22) activity that "makes" the "world" after brutality "unmakes" it, McCarthy imagines weaving and unweaving as one and the same, a process of continually remaking a world, a "spiritus mundi," that is constantly unmade by violence, war, and the pervasive threat of nuclear apocalypse depicted in *The Road*.

This emphasis on rebuilding the world epitomizes the strand of postmodern North American fiction I am trying to tease out in this study. Let me quickly describe a contrasting strand. In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas asks, "*Shall I project a world?*" (56), echoing the novella's opening when Oedipa watches Remedios Varo's painting of women weaving the world: "all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and

forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry and the tapestry was the world. […] like her ego only incidental" (13). When Oedipa "*project*[s] *a world*," she weaves it in the "only incidental" pattern of her conspiracy theory about the Tristero, a paranoid order that ultimately breaks down in *Lot 49* and Pynchon's later *Gravity's Rainbow*, as Slothrop mentally dissolves: "Slothrop perceives that he is losing his mind. If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything" (434). Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* figures such paranoid breakdown through metafictional strategies similar to McCarthy's. When the writer-cum-detective Quinn realizes that his case's "meaning had been lost" (128)—that his search for conspiracy (to commit murder) has failed—he continues to write in his case notebook, terrified of stopping: "The last sentence of the red notebook reads: 'What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?'" (129). The Border Trilogy's concluding "*The story's told / Turn the page*" might be a direct response to Quinn's terror, and McCarthy's version of the weaver-god who also unweaves the world might respond directly to Oedipa's vertiginous contingency: things fall apart, McCarthy says, but all we can do is begin again. In my concluding coda, I will ultimately read Pynchon as imagining the same kind of rebuilding that McCarthy does. But Pynchon and Auster's central concern with entropic collapse highlights the unique focus on reconstruction in McCarthy and my other authors' contemporary strand of writing.

McCarthy's picture of literarily rebuilding the world out of its own destruction also resists broader critical accounts of postmodern fiction. As I described in the introduction, Daniel Grausam claims that postmodern fiction in the Cold War and its aftermath cannot imagine conclusions, because no one would survive nuclear apocalypse to experience it *as* a conclusion ("Atomic Nostalgia," 315). But McCarthy imagines not only conclusions—notably the Los Alamos test and the mysterious apocalypse that predates *The Road*—but also how characters move on after those conclusions, as Billy starts a new life when "doomed

enterprises divide lives forever" in *The Crossing* (437) and the boy in *The Road* takes up with a new family when his father dies. Hungerford, describing an entropic evacuation similar to what Grausam limns, argues that McCarthy offers no particular worldview, only a series of metaphysical "nonsense" (90), as postmodern fiction generally articulates a "belief in meaninglessness" (xiv) in order to construct literature itself, formally, as authoritative. As a result, Hungerford says, in *Blood Meridian* in particular, "we are left with the presumptuous creation of a prose that sounds like scripture, tempts one to read (for metaphysical structures) as if one were reading scripture, and yet withholds all but the aesthetic and sentimental effects of scripture" (95). McCarthy in fact, though, portrays a constant pursuit of new possible metaphysical structures when previous stories about the world collapse, as Billy repeatedly encounters anchoritic sages who try to explain reality, and repeatedly tries to construct his own life as a tale. This is postsecular belief not as a deferral of meaning but as a constant reconstruction of meaning, and where McCarthy's critics have described his worldview as an oscillation between nihilism and hope, McCarthy shows that hope paradoxically arises out of destruction. The claustrophobically deadly caves and swamps in McCarthy's early novels and the seemingly limitless massacres of *Blood Meridian* never go away—if anything, the cannibals' basement filled with victims in *The Road* distills and maximizes this violence. But in the latter half of his career, McCarthy also reimagines both boundaries and limitlessness, order and freedom, as two sides of the same Möbius-strip-like activity by which characters rebuild a broken world.

Thus, at the end of *The Crossing*, after Billy drives a ragged dog out of the abandoned building in which he is taking shelter, refusing to "tabernacle" the stray, and following the false dawn of the nuclear explosion at Los Alamos, Billy goes outside to look for the dog:

> He called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind. After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. He sat there for a long time and after

> a while the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction. (740-41)

In *Cities of the Plain*, Billy repays canine-kind by caring for John Grady's puppy, a replacement for the wolf, the dog he drove away, his parents, his brother Boyd, Boyd's dog, and John Grady himself. Despite the repeated devastations of his world caused by the deaths of the wolf, Boyd, his parents, and John Grady, apotheosized in the nuclear explosion, Billy sets out to build his world once more from "that inexplicable darkness," finding "in the deepest dark of that loss that there also was a ground and there one must begin" (604), as "the right and godmade sun did rise, once again," "to make the world again from darkness." Storytelling, for McCarthy, ceaselessly rebuilds our self, our world, and our ethical openness to others out of their own annihilation, a new beginning out of every conclusion: "Ya es de mañana, he said. Viene la madrugada" (627). It is already tomorrow, the dawn arrives.

3. Fictions of the Self: Michael Ondaatje

In Michael Ondaatje's 2011 novel *The Cat's Table*, the suggestively named Michael narrates his previously "barely remembered" adolescence in order to recover his journey from Ceylon to England in the 1950s aboard the ocean liner *Oronsay* (337). Ondaatje's "Author's Note" at the end of the novel warns that while "there were in fact several *Oronsay*s" in his own childhood Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, "the ship in the novel is an imagined rendering" (367). Yet it's hard not to read Michael as a fictionalized echo of Ondaatje's own factual journey to England—Ondaatje indicated as much in a talk at Wolfson College, Oxford—and not to see an echo of the fictional *Oronsay*—anachronistically, as both literary precursor and temporal successor—in Ondaatje's 2000 novel *Anil's Ghost*. In that earlier work, Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan émigré who temporarily returns home to research human rights violations in the Sri Lankan Civil War, uses a now decommissioned, rusting *Oronsay* as her forensics lab. Like Michael recuperating the story of his long-forgotten childhood on the *Oronsay*, Anil excavates hidden bodies in order to memorialize them, able to "read" a victim's "last actions by knowing the wounds on bone" that she handles in her shipboard lab (61), and telling those victims' stories to the probably-culpable Sri Lankan government. As he literarily reinvents the *Oronsay* and its purpose across novels, Ondaatje thus coordinates a temporal process of return—his own and Michael's mnemonic returns to the past or Anil's geographic return home—with the ethical attempt to resist, remember, and recover from violence by reading and telling stories. In this chapter, I read the kind of reinvention epitomized by the *Oronsay*'s transformation as a poetics of self-re-creation, a drama most fully articulated in Ondaatje's 1992 novel *The English Patient* and his 2007 novel *Divisadero*. In these texts, characters turn to literature to ethically rebuild an always already intersubjective self after it has been torn traumatically apart, often repeatedly, by warfare and interpersonal brutality.

Much as it does for McCarthy's wanderer in The Border Trilogy's epilogue, in

Ondaatje's fiction the act of narrating mediates characters' experiences of time, in particular their negotiation of the constant loss intrinsic to the clock's hands ticking away. Anil resists the loss of the past by "read[ing]" murder victims' bodies, and she recalls how "in the Congo one Human Rights group had gone too far and their collection of data had disappeared overnight, their paperwork burned. As if a city from the past had been reburied" (25). Anil's partner, the archaeologist Sarath, in turn dedicates his life to unburying ancient cities in order "to tell the story" of their existence (25). In these resonating images of unburying the past, Anil's close reading of the cuts and fractures on victims' bones becomes necessarily also an act of "tell[ing]," of recreating otherwise "barely remembered" or even erased histories. In his talk at Wolfson, Ondaatje similarly said that he couldn't remember his own boat journey to England, and so decided to write about it in *The Cat's Table*, re-accessing his past by fictionalizing it: "I can go back and read the book now and see echoes of myself." Like *The Cat's Table*'s "Author's Note," all of Ondaatje's novels, as well as his memoir, contain an acknowledgements section in which he names the fragments of other texts, fictional and nonfictional, that echo through his own. These highly self-conscious acknowledgements have come to represent one of Ondaatje's signature formal devices. In her influential description of "historiographic metafiction" in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, in fact, Linda Hutcheon points to Ondaatje's memoir *Running in the Family* as a paradigm case of how postmodern metafiction portrays and theorizes the textual contingency of its own and every piece of historical data and knowledge (114). Ondaatje's acknowledgements foreground the kaleidoscopic activity of rearranging historical and literary sources by which Ondaatje constructs his own writing, recovering the past as an "imagined rendering" the same way he repeatedly reinvents the *Oronsay*. Anil's forensic reading practice thus brings her into an ethical relationship, mediated by their scarred bodies, with the victims whose lost stories she reconstructs in the telling.

Ondaatje invariably, like McCarthy, places violence at the center of his novels, and he

depicts characters struggling mightily to recover from its wounds, as Anil reconstructs and memorializes the violent past, marking her own temporary return home as she returns at least a memory of the victims' lost lives and stories to presence in the world. But where McCarthy emphasizes how storytelling reestablishes and reshapes our repeatedly damaged phenomenological relations with the world, Ondaatje privileges the experience of individual subjectivity. For Ondaatje, individuals invent themselves not to be "joined to the world," as McCarthy's wanderer says (1028), but to repair their psychological coherence when violence splits it apart. Where McCarthy frames ethics as a way of being in the world, then, an obligation to "tabernacle" others on a sojourn through "limitless space," Ondaatje grounds our ethical relations and obligations to others in the very nature of the self, which for him becomes a patchwork quilt of the other people who influence who we are. Following an adolescent Michael in the process of forming his identity, *The Cat's Table* captures Ondaatje's focus on subjectivity. Michael declares that on the *Oronsay*, "there was a chance to escape all order. And I reinvented myself in this seemingly imaginary world" (17), using his phenomenological capacity to reimagine his surroundings as, for example, a "castle" (7), in order to shape himself. Seated at the so-called "Cat's Table" farthest from where the Captain dines, eleven-year-old Michael occupies a peripheral position on the ship similar to Sri Lanka's place in the former British Empire, and he uses this marginality, outside "all" social "order," to discover and become who he wants to be, "You find in this way the path of your life" (251). Because he can "escape all order," Michael imagines his own order into the world—a softer version of Judge Holden's claim in *Blood Meridian* that "the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there" (258)—and he uses this world-making ability in order to invent himself as a kind of literary character.

As the adult Michael describes the ship's other passengers, though, he realizes how inextricably his invented self interwove with everyone around him. Michael claims that "it

would always be strangers like them, at the various Cat's Tables of my life, who would alter me" (270), so that even in the periphery, Michael's social relations with others partly and subtly determine who he is. Like his "seemingly imaginary world" on the *Oronsay*, Michael frames the ship's passengers as an imagined community, asserting that we emerge "out of ourselves in order to imagine another's life" (102). Michael's imagined self takes form through its similarly imaginarily mediated communal ties. And like Anil's recovery of other people's stories from the buried past, Michael's imaginary, always already intersubjective self-creation is a temporally contorted process. In *The Cat's Table*, the past and the present dialectically rewrite one another, like strangers emerging "out of" themselves in conversation at "the various Cat's Tables [of] life" (270). As he narrates his time on the *Oronsay*, for instance, Michael realizes that he likely witnessed a murder on the ship fifty years before. Teasing out how this potential murder secretly shaped "the path of [his] life," Michael declares that "some events take a lifetime to reveal their damage and influence" (197). Treating his own past self as a kind of other person, Michael's adult narration thus reconstructs his own and others' pasts in order, reciprocally and paradoxically, to reinterpret from that historical perspective who he now is in the present, uncovering the long-hidden influence of other people's actions. "What was I in those days," Michael asks—much as Michael's author Michael Ondaatje said at Wolfson that he asked, when he started writing *The Cat's Table*, who he had been on his own boat—and the novel fleshes out an answer, as Michael puts it, "if I had to invent" (36).

As presaged by Ondaatje's description of an "imaginary world," this chapter draws on the themes of literarily recreating the world that I articulated in my reading of McCarthy, now shifting emphasis in order to lay out the mechanics of literarily recreating the self. I've described self-re-creation in Ondaatje in microcosmic or germinal form so far, pointing out how Michael uses storytelling to connect with other people and his own past in order to

reinvent his present self, and how Anil's forensic work imbues such intersubjective, reconstructive storytelling with ethical value. The rest of this chapter plays out the exact mechanics of this self-re-creation in more fine-grained detail, examining exactly how violence breaks up the self and how acts of reading and writing repair that self through an embodied relationship with others. Like my conclusions about McCarthy, I leverage this picture of individual literary self-re-construction to intervene in philosophical debates about aesthetics and critical discussions of postmodern fiction. My reading of McCarthy historicized Heidegger's phenomenology by showing how McCarthy's characters must repeatedly rebuild their poetically-constructed worlds in response to acts of violence like World War II and the Bomb. I argued that this world-re-building also refigures the evacuation of religious belief in postmodern fiction described by Hungerford and the entropic failure to imagine conclusions described by Grausam: McCarthy's characters repeatedly reimagine new beliefs about the world after a series of devastating, world- and self-shattering conclusions. Similarly, my reading of Ondaatje complicates the pictures of literary self-fashioning offered by Nietzsche and his philosophical heirs and the accounts of postsecular religious belief offered by McClure and Ratti. As I explained in the introduction, Nietzsche and readers of Nietzsche like Nehamas, Rorty, and Sloterdijk envision the self as an autonomous, self-creating, self-improving being. In sometimes explicit dialogue with Nietzsche, though, Ondaatje shows how this self-fashioning is always already an act of literary self-re-fashioning, one which depends critically on other people. And while McClure and Ratti both frame Ondaatje's postsecularism as a continuous deferral of ethical and religious community into an unapproachable future, I argue that for Ondaatje, reading and writing reconstruct embodied, present yet flexible ethical and religious communities here and now. Working with trauma theory, I show how Ondaatje's characters read and write in order to delve back into their past to reassemble a coherent, present sense of themselves, through their embodied communal

relations with others, after violence traumatically splits them apart.

The *Oronsay*, again, epitomizes this post-traumatic transformation, recovering the past in order to reassemble a coherent present that opens itself to change in the future. Mr. Nevil, an adult at the Cat's Table, tells Michael about his days as a ship-breaker, dismantling old vessels "into thousands of unrecognisable pieces" (97). "It was painful to realise that nothing was permanent, not even an ocean liner," Mr. Nevil opines, but even the most derelict ship is "beautiful… because in a breaker's yard you discover that anything can have a new life, be reborn as part of a car or railway carriage, or a shovel blade. You take that older life and you link it to a stranger" (98-99). Everything falls apart, Mr. Nevil says, even a whole "world" or "castle" like the *Oronsay*. But this very destruction generates "beautiful" rebirth, linked "to a stranger," like the remade *Oronsay* and its new ethical purpose of giving Anil a place to read and narrate lost, brutally erased lives. A serious risk of dehumanization lies in metaphorically equating a post-traumatic life with a piece of a ship's hull remade into a shovel blade, as Ondaatje's writing style invites us to do, and with equating Anil's return home or even narrative recovery of their lost lives with the actual lives of murder victims. In their respective book reviews of *The English Patient*, similarly, Hilary Mantel and Nicholas Spice both criticize Ondaatje's metaphors, which "do not always quite add up" (Spice) and "trip" one another, one "image" slipping too freely into the next (Mantel). Ondaatje's distinctive aesthetic draws such loose parallels between images and activities—unburying a murder victim, unburying a city, returning to Sri Lanka—to use those sometimes disparate images and activities to make sense of one another. His characters use the same loose resonances between themselves and others, between the past and the present, to reassemble themselves. Rather than dangerously eliding difference, though, I will argue that Ondaatje uses these "echoes," which he defines as uniquely poetic, to highlight the searing particularity of individuals' pain, and to use that particularity to rebuild communal solidarity by making individuals legible to one another.

Violence and poetic paths to recovery

In Ondaatje's first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, published in 1976 when Ondaatje was still considered primarily as a poet, the jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden and the photographer Bellocq both pursue their art through violence. In the process of creating his tortured music on the trumpet, Bolden engages in acts of self-mutilation with a razor in front of a mirror, slashing himself and the reflected image of himself (134), while Bellocq, after taking photographs of prostitutes, slashes the pictures that reproduce their naked bodies with a knife, "The making and destroying coming from the same source" (51). Critics identified the centrality of such violence early in Ondaatje's career: specifically describing *Coming Through Slaughter*, Sam Solecki writes that Ondaatje thematizes "art or creativity in which making and destroying, particularly self-destroying, are integrally related" (24-5), while Christian Bök argues more generally that "violence in Ondaatje's work represents an aesthetic virtue" (109). Art and violence do interweave closely in Ondaatje's writing, "coming from the same source," like McCarthy's weaver-god who also unweaves the world. But Bök and Solecki both miss the paradoxical complexity by which Ondaatje's characters use art to transmute such destruction into recovery, as Mr. Nevil's ship-breaking splits up a derelict vessel in order to kaleidoscopically rearrange its fragmented pieces. Bolden's real-life story has been lost, no recordings made of his ground-breaking early jazz, yet *Coming Through Slaughter*'s narrator sees himself reflected in Bolden, having cut himself in the mirror too (134). The narrator's "historiographic metafiction," then, ethically recovers Bolden's history, fighting against Bolden's state-sanctioned erasure when he was imprisoned in a mental hospital, through the mirroring repetition of violence done to the self. Ondaatje's fiction frames violence and trauma as a constitutive, unavoidable fracturing of the self that paradoxically holds the self together as it post-traumatically recovers and remakes itself. And Ondaatje frames this subject-constituting post-traumatic recovery as a fundamentally literary, and specifically

poetic process of rhyming the self with others and its own past.

Ondaatje's 2007 novel *Divisadero* depicts the shattering effects of violence on the individual psyche and outlines a tentative path to self-healing through literature, which Ondaatje portrays as a tool for creating metaphorical resonances between fragmented pieces of the self. *Divisadero* employs a complex narrative structure set simultaneously in early-twentieth-century France, 1970s and 1990s California, and early-twenty-first-century France and California. Like Ondaatje's claim that Michael in *The Cat's Table* "echoes" and so literarily recovers Ondaatje's own personal history, the diverse characters in *Divisadero*'s temporally and geographically disparate settings echo one another's histories, mirroring one another's actions and emotions across the span of a century and the space of an ocean. Framed as a fictional memoir, the novel envisions memory as a poetically therapeutic, rhyme-like activity of reconstructing the self by tracing such repetitions and variations across many "imagined rendering[s]" of other people (*Cat's Table*, 367). *Divisadero*'s first 200 pages blend first- and third-person accounts of Anna, her sister Claire, and their ranch-hand-cum-foster-brother Coop, in California, from the 1970s to the present. The final 100 pages refocus abruptly on the early-twentieth-century life of Lucien Segura, a French poet and novelist ravaged physically and psychologically by World War I. Thirty pages into *Divisadero*, Anna's father finds her sleeping with Coop and beats them both severely. Anna runs away from home, never to see her family again, and invents a new identity. She eventually becomes an expert in French literature, and in the present, Anna lives in Lucien's old house in France while researching and writing his biography. By the novel's conclusion, it's clear that Anna has written *Divisadero*'s entire narrative, imagining herself into the other characters' perspectives and her own past in order at least to pretend to reconnect with her long-lost family and so heal her psychic wounds.

Anna metafictionally theorizes her own biographical and autobiographical life-writing

practice as a form of post-traumatic recovery. In *Divisadero*'s epigraph, Anna writes, "*'We have art,' Nietzsche said, 'so that we shall not be destroyed by the truth.' The raw truth of an incident never ends, and the story of Coop and the terrain of my sister's life are endless to me*" (1). Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* sought to explain the phenomenon of trauma in WWI by describing the so-called death drive and its "compulsion to repeat" (21). Endlessly reliving "*the raw truth*" of her violent past, Anna experiences such a "compulsion to repeat." And as the death drive's name implies, Anna's "endless" re-encounter with remembered violence leaves her on the brink of subjective disintegration, "*For I have taken myself away from who I was with them, and what I used to be. When my name was Anna*" (1). In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, a seminal volume in trauma studies, Cathy Caruth defines post-traumatic stress disorder as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event [...] the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4-5). Anna's beating is too overwhelming for her to process—it remains instead a "*raw truth*"—and so it possesses her, forcing itself always back into her life. Echoing Nietzsche's claim that we use "art" as a "mask" to survive peering at "the truth," Anna portrays her writing as a strategy for resisting this traumatic "possession" by confronting and narrating the "*incident*." Ondaatje describes his own poetry as self-discovery through "a mask of some kind" (Bush, 240), and Anna similarly writes, apropos of Colette, "there was nothing more assuring than a mask. Under the mask she could rewrite herself into any place, in any form. This is where I learned that sometimes we enter art to hide within it [...] to save ourselves" (149). Mimicking Colette, Anna re-identifies with "*who I was*" in her violently separated past by creating and donning fictional masks of Lucien, Claire, Coop, and her own past self, literarily splitting up her own subjectivity in order, paradoxically, to recover and reassemble herself after the beating.

Looking at Ondaatje's earlier novel *The English Patient*, we can see, like Michael

realizing how fundamentally he was shaped by the many "strangers" on the *Oronsay*, the crucial role of other people in the kind of literary-artistic recovery Anna's writing theorizes and pursues. *The English Patient* follows four survivors grappling together with the horrors of WWII, a case study Freud would have salivated over. In a bombed-out Italian villa, formerly a nunnery, in the spring of 1945, Hana, a Canadian nurse, cares for an anonymous pilot—the eponymous English patient, really the Hungarian aristocrat and Nazi collaborator László de Almásy—who was burned beyond recognition in a plane crash in the Sahara. They begin the novel living alone, but are soon joined by Caravaggio, a Canadian thief and Allied spy whom Hana knew as a child, and Kip, an Indian Sikh sapper clearing German mines. The patient and Caravaggio, who lost his thumbs to Nazi torture, are addicted to morphine, while the war and the overwhelming news of her father's death shatter Hana's mind:

> Nurses too became shell-shocked from the dying around them. […] They broke the way a man dismantling a mine broke the second his geography exploded. The way Hana broke in Santa Chiara Hospital when an official walked down the space between a hundred beds and gave her a letter that told her of the death of her father. (43-44)

Physically and mentally traumatized, Hana and Almásy survive their war-torn reality through books. She reads to him daily, and she "fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world" (7). As Anna masks herself in Lucien, Hana imagines herself into novels, "for she entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others" (13). This fictional immersion creates real-world community, as Almásy tells Caravaggio, "the only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me" (269). By getting her to read to him, the patient begins to rebuild through literature the communicative web of social relations that collapsed when Hana broke.

Ondaatje analogizes Anna and Hana's individual traumas with the world-historical violence of war. Warfare permeates *Divisadero*, as characters witness and contest WWI, WWII, Vietnam, and the First and Second Gulf Wars. In one crucial scene, Anna imagines Claire

and Coop at a community dinner in the American Southwest, costumed "for the medieval feast that was an annual local event" (166-7). As they pretend to be "fourteenth-century European villagers," they listen to NPR broadcast the beginning of the Second Gulf War, "as if coupled in another time, at an outbreak in the Hundred Years War" (167 & 169). In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje wrote almost triumphantly that "the last medieval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944" (73), but eight years later, in *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje wrote of the Sri Lankan Civil War, "we've become medieval" (183), and *Divisadero*, another seven years on, continues the metaphor, identifying even our most modern war as a repetitive, never-ending medieval masquerade. This serial warfare not only destroys selves and communities—one character in *Divisadero* says, "I went to war and I never came back," abandoning himself and his family (183)—but also infects characters' basic perceptions of the world. The landmines Kip disarms in *The English Patient* leave him "unable to look at a room or field without seeing the possibilities of weapons there" (80), Little Boy's explosion over Hiroshima drives Kip to abandon his friends in protest at Western genocide (304), and terrorism in the Sri Lankan Civil War infuses *Anil's Ghost* with "paranoid" fear (50). Perverting Michael's reinvention of his surroundings in *The Cat's Table*, pervasive nuclear, terroristic, and conventional military threats phenomenologically warp the very worlds Ondaatje's characters occupy, defining modernity—like Walter Benjamin, who extended Freud's theory of trauma "into a global economy of modern life" (Newmark, 238)—as constitutively violent and traumatic.

By analogizing the various wars he references as equally "medieval," and by analogizing that warfare with various kinds of personal suffering, as Anna understands her beating through Lucien's time in WWI, Ondaatje's portrayal of Anna's or Hana's literary recovery from violence runs a pair of related risks. First, as I said above, this aesthetic threatens to erase the particularity of pain. Echoing Rorty's division of individual "self-creation" from socially-pursued and -accomplished "justice" (xiv), David Lloyd argues that,

especially in postcolonial contexts, trauma theory cannot limn the experiences of individuals and groups alike. While "the individual survivor in therapy comes into relation with her own past," Lloyd writes, in colonial situations, "the relation to the past is strictly not a relation to one's own past but to a social history and its material and institutional effects" (216). Viewing socially experienced violence through individual post-traumatic recovery consequently lets "the dead slip away without the trace of a wake behind them," remembered only as non-unique parts of a group (221). By pursuing a basic literary strategy to repair analogized traumas at individual, social, and world-historical scales, Ondaatje endangers the particularity of each form of violence. Second, Ondaatje risks merely aestheticizing violence. The aesthetic, Ratti says, is "a form of reconstruction and healing" in Ondaatje's work, but it "can also become an alibi" (103 & 66). As I mentioned, critics have investigated the aesthetic productivity of violence for Ondaatje, and numerous critics, including Arun Mukherjee (34), Chelva Kanaganayakam (41), and Suwanda Sugunasiri (64) have argued that Ondaatje appropriates Sri Lanka for his own literary uses without attending to its people's particularity or pain. Ondaatje's portrayal of violence, however, works specifically against forgetting and appropriation. Kai Erikson writes that "trauma can create community" through a shared sense of suffering (185), as Hana and Anna both immerse themselves in the particularities of "the lives of others" (*English Patient*, 13), richly recreating Lucien's life or listening intently to the English patient's stories. Scarry says that pain represents a limit case of both "certainty" and "doubt": you cannot deny your pain, while I cannot confirm it (4). Ondaatje's aestheticized depiction of violence strives to make his audience as certain as possible of others' suffering in order to establish empathetic communities of healing, just as Anna understands her own pain by confronting the undeniable pain she imagines Lucien experiencing.

If the self, for Ondaatje, always already tries to repair itself through what Anna labels "art," then trauma, by breaking the self, paradoxically also creates the self. "I find the lives of

Coop and my sister and my father everywhere (I draw portraits of them *everywhere*)," Anna writes, "for it is the hunger, what we do not have, that holds us together" (280). The "hunger" that "holds us together" in *Divisadero* recalls another hunger in *The English Patient*. Escaping the nationalities and hierarchies of Old Europe, Almásy becomes "his own invention" in the desert (262), and his illicit lover Katharine "discover[s] herself" there too, "hungrier to change than [Almásy] had expected" (244). Trauma doesn't just break the subject, the subject shapes itself through such "hunger"—and Anna, in fact, becomes a subject *through* trauma. At *Divisadero*'s outset, Anna and her adopted sister Claire are nearly identical, born on the same day and raised together. "As sisters," Anna says, "we reflected each other" (16). Winfried Siemerling points out that Ondaatje's characters typically discover themselves in the alterity of mirrors (139), like the narrator and Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter*, but here, before Anna and Claire become distinct individuals, they naively assume that they reflect each other identically. As teens, the girls develop their own interests, "but we were still sharing everything then," Anna says, "almost inseparable" in the rhythms of their lives (17 & 18). It takes an act of violence to wreck the girls' shared identity. Prefiguring Anna and Coop's beating, Claire's horse attacks the girls when they're fifteen. The girls' "senses," Anna writes, "closed down," unable to process the "nightmarish" event (19). Eventually, Coop finds the girls and rushes to Anna, mistakenly calling her "Claire." Claire, Anna says, "became confused, uncertain for a moment as to who she was," while Anna herself thinks, "then I am not Anna, then that must be Anna over there" (20 & 21). The attack and subsequent identity-swap individuates the girls: "Something happened in the horse barn, that early evening, between the two of us, in the confusion. We had stepped suddenly into the large uncertain world of adults, and we would now need to be distinctly Anna and distinctly Claire" (20).

Drawing further on the trauma theory I introduced with Caruth, I want to explicate Anna's and Claire's individuation as simultaneously a process of traumatization and post-

traumatic recovery, like McCarthy's weaver-god unweaving the world. Anna says that

> There is a broken path in both our memories toward this incident, even now. We are aware only that something significant happened. Claire recalls herself whistling as she entered the barn, but in what follows, in what we have tried to piece together, she is still too close to the remembered evidence, as if she can see only grains of colour. (19)

Writing on the phenomenology of trauma, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart say that while memory normally "categorizes and integrates all aspects of experience […] into ever-enlarging and flexible meaning schemes," traumatic events are those that do "not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and either may be remembered with particular vividness or may totally resist integration" (159 & 160). We might thus locate the girls' original indistinctness in their identical "meaning schemes," the same experiences having shaped their understanding and expectations of the world, so that they see themselves and the world around them in more or less identical ways. We can then attribute the collective "broken path in both our memories" to the girls' individual failures to integrate the "incident," remembering it "with particular vividness" as "only grains of colour." Breaking each girl's individual "meaning schemes," the attack necessarily breaks their shared identity: "in the next few months we often slipped back into this 'incident,' to talk about it. There was a border now between us" (20). Failing "to piece together" the incident through co-narration, the girls recognize the "border[s]" of one another's subjective perspectives, reinforced by the quasi-Hegelian identity-swap in which they recognize one another's uniqueness by temporarily looking at themselves from the outside. To be a self, Ondaatje seems to think, requires such a basically traumatic, self-shattering recognition of the limitations and contingency of the "meaning schemes" by which we conceive of ourselves and our reality, a sense that our experiences cannot be assimilated with anyone else's or fully recovered by us in the present.

And if for Ondaatje "hunger," its own incompleteness and traumatic fragmentation, "holds" the self "together," then selfhood also requires a form of post-traumatic reintegration,

through the "mask" of Nietzschean "art." Ondaatje and Anna both render this "art" synecdochically as "poetry." Asked about *Divisadero*'s style, Ondaatje says, "I've taken some of my personal rules of poetry […] and tried to put [them] into fiction" (Wildman), the same way he earlier describes *The English Patient* as "written from the point of view of that private, poetic voice—not so much in terms of language but in how one sees things" (Wachtel, 256). Anna likewise thinks of her way of seeing, remembering, and writing as essentially poetic. When Anna's friend Branka shows her a medieval church's twisted steeple, Anna muses,

> It's like a villanelle, this inclination of going back to events in our past, the way the villanelle's form refuses to move forward in linear development, circling instead at those familiar moments of emotion. Only the rereading counts, Nabokov said. So the strange form of that belfry, turning onto itself again and again, felt familiar to me. For we live with those retrievals from childhood that coalesce and echo throughout our lives, the way shattered pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope reappear in new forms and are songlike in their refrains and rhymes, making up a single monologue. We live permanently in the recurrence of our own stories, whatever story we tell. (142)

Anna presents the villanelle's insistent return to two rhymes and two words as a *mise-en-abyme* model of *Divisadero*'s twisted narrative structure, of the workings of memory, and of simply being alive. Lynette Hunter says that Ondaatje's poetry embodies a "conscious statement that poetry is a metaphor for all experience" (50). *Divisadero* similarly argues that the singular "story" we live consists of abundant "stories" and "refrains" that reform "those familiar moments of emotion," poetically reconstructing us the same way that villanelles obsessively rework their theme over nineteen lines. We may resist Anna's definition of all repetition as fundamentally poetic—Susan Sontag, for example, writes that "if one does not perceive how a work repeats itself, the work is, almost literally, not perceptible" (35)—but the villanelle splits the self up "in a kaleidoscope," like Anna's traumatized subjectivity, in order to reimagine it as whole, "a single monologue" emerging from those "shattered pieces of glass."

Anna's portrayal of Lucien in the last third of *Divisadero* intersubjectively enacts this 'rhymed,' poetic self-re-creation. *Divisadero*'s sudden shift from Anna in the present to Lucien

in the past is "an odd structure" for the novel, Ondaatje admits, but he claims that it allows "Anna to deal with her life and her past," because "all the connections are there between the two stories, the parallels and the echoes" (Wildman). Like Anna, Lucien suffers childhood trauma, losing an eye to a dog, and WWI separates him from his lover Marie just as the beating splits Anna from Coop. But Lucien overcomes his traumas, facing the fallout of WWI and Marie's death by writing novels, and Anna envisions Lucien catching his daughter in an illicit relationship with her brother-in-law, like Anna's own father catching her with Coop, but in Anna's rendition Lucien chooses to let the relationship be. Ondaatje declares that "poetry is an art form which is three-quarters said […] so that the reader participates in filling in the picture […] I want the reader to bring herself into the story" (Wildman). We can again resist seeing reader response, as Ondaatje insists, as a uniquely poetic phenomenon. But as she researches his life in the "*Lucien Segura Archives*" at Berkeley in order to write his story (199), Anna "bring[s] herself" into Lucien's life, "filling in" the gaps left by the archive to flesh out her picture of his experience with the kind of things she herself has experienced. Anna rhymes Lucien's life with her own, and so imagines his perspective as a mask through which to reimagine her own life, this time healed, like him, from her violent, shattering loss of self.

The English Patient's characters similarly repair their traumatically-broken communal ties by "filling in the picture" in the stories they read, write, tell, and hear. When Hana reads to him, Almásy drifts in and out of morphine-induced sleep, so that the books, "as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms […] The villa that she and the Englishman inhabited now was much like that" (7-8). The holes in the villa left by bombs symbolize the holes in characters' memories and bodies, but Ondaatje attempts to transmute those holes into the empty spaces within novels. In an all-too-obvious metaphor, Hana fills the gaps with fiction, rebuilding the villa's stairs by nailing together books, literally and figuratively climbing up the backs of the authors who came before her (14), Bloom's

"anxiety of influence" become a practical way of navigating the world. Kip, whose love helps fill the holes in Hana's life left by her aborted child and its dead father, similarly arrives when Hana is reading Kipling's *Kim*, appearing "as if out of this fiction. As if the pages of Kipling had been rubbed in the night like a magic lamp" (100). Even before the crash destroys his body, Almásy lives by filling in gaps in others' writing. He always carries "a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books and writing his own observations—so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus" (17). As he rewrites, supplements, and glosses Herodotus, Almásy reciprocally perceives the world through *The Histories*, his desert exploration "governed by words. By rumours and legends" (245). When Katharine reads a story of infidelity from Herodotus to Almásy and her husband Geoffrey, "a path suddenly revealed itself in life," as Almásy and Katharine fall in love through the book (247). Almásy quotes Herodotus: "'This history of mine […] has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument.' What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history—how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love" (126). Hana and Kip, Katharine and Almásy form their relationships through literature, supplementing their "meaning schemes" by rhyming their lives with what others have written, poetically "circling instead" at the "cul-de-sacs" of history.

Like Ondaatje's acknowledgements sections and Anna's archival recovery of Lucien's story in *Divisadero*, Almásy's use of Herodotus advances a historiographical claim that history consists of "rereading" and rewriting. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje writes that when his aunts tell family history, "no story is ever told just once […] we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way, history is organized" (11-12). Ordering history through subjective retelling, Ondaatje enters into and reconstructs what he calls the "parentheses" of history (*Running*, 168), the various Cat's Tables of life, especially the violently excluded ones—black New Orleans brothels in

Coming Through Slaughter, Toronto immigrant ghettoes in *In the Skin of a Lion*, "the parentheses" around British colonists in Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family*, terrorized Sri Lankan villages and their buried dead in *Anil's Ghost*. In Ondaatje's novels, Ajay Heble writes, "gaps in history *are* filled in; suppressed stories *do* get told" (251). There is a political and an ethical claim here then, too, about the way that storytelling resists the suppressions of official History, reading itself into the gaps and cul-de-sacs in normative "meaning schemes" in order to recover who and what have been abjected. This aesthetic task runs its own risk, of course, like the danger of appropriating and aestheticizing others' suffering. Alice Brittan points out that Almásy elides the fact that in the story through which he and Katharine fall in love, infidelity leads to war (207). Geoffrey dies trying to take revenge on Katharine and Almásy for their affair, and Katharine also ultimately dies because the British believe Almásy works for the Nazis. Almásy himself dies trying to recover Katharine's body from the desert. So while Almásy lives through his personalized rereading of Herodotus, he also suffers for obscuring the text's particularity and the warnings about historical violence it records. "Filling in the picture" threatens merely to impose our own perspectives, leading to violence.

Embodying a "hidden presence" of others

A classically split postmodern self, Anna's traumatically fractured identity appears to represent for Ondaatje the fragmentary nature of subjectivity itself, as does her 'poetic' strategy for reintegrating her identity by 'rhyming' herself with others and her own past self. To be a self, then, is a continual process of disintegration and reconstruction—paradoxically, "It is the hunger, what we do not have, that holds us together"—that Ondaatje portrays as a literary activity of "rereading" the past to rewrite our present selves. Anna uses the villanelle to describe this activity of "going back to events in our past," like Michael or Anil recovering lost stories or Almásy rewriting Herodotus' *Histories*, so that Anna's sense of Nietzschean "art" and Ondaatje's use of "poetry" as a synecdoche for that art become metaphors for how we

cope with time. To return to Nietzsche, Nehamas writes that for Nietzsche,

> to lead a perfect life is to come to know the self that is already there […but this] will inevitably include new actions that must be integrated with what has already occurred and the reinterpretation of which will result in the creation or discovery of a self that could not have been there already. This paradoxical interplay between creation and discovery, knowledge and action, life and literature is at the center of Nietzsche's conception of the self. (168)

According to Nehamas, Nietzsche thinks that we live forward in time by literarily reinterpreting our past—like Michael narrating his time on the *Oronsay* "if I had to invent"—in order to integrate it with our present. In *Divisadero*, Anna eloquently echoes this temporal dilemma: "The present continually altered the past, just as the past was a strange inheritance that fell upside down into one's life like an image through a camera obscura" (108). We reread the kaleidoscopic multiplicity of our past and present selves, rhyming together our fragments, to rewrite our own coherence. And the essential intersubjectivity of Ondaatje's concept of "poetry," I'll argue in the remainder of this chapter, grounds his characters' rewritten selves in a form of ontological presence, an embodied relationship with others, that both persists through violent destruction and remains as they open themselves to change.

Anna's portrayal of Lucien again representatively dramatizes the intersubjectivity of her own literary self-re-construction. When he returns home from WWI, starving and exhausted, Lucien hallucinates a reunion with Marie, only to discover the next morning that she's long dead. Lucien responds to this loss by fantastically rewriting his life, composing adventure stories about himself, Marie, and her husband Roman like the Dumas novels he read with Marie in their youth. Like Anna remembering her beating by writing about Lucien, Lucien understands himself through these adventure stories: "the table always a fraction below his notebooks, always out of focus as he wrote. The six nails that held it together, the colour of the paint, that exact height for him to bend over, as if over a mirror, to see what could be found. His constant companion" (281). Lucien adopts Marie's old house as a writing studio, and his table used to belong to her. In fact, the day that he realizes Marie is dead,

Lucien "woke in the morning, his head on the kitchen table, his eye against the blue of it—the scratched and cut-into blue, a history of them all. So he knew where he was, coming out of the deepest sleep, in the instant of waking" (272). The table's paint and scratches physically memorialize the lives of the people who used it, and thereby anchor Lucien's perception of the world around him, "so he knew where he was." As he bends over the table to write, then, Lucien uses its recording of his "history" with Marie to recreate a fictional life with Marie in his novels, making Lucien's writing a "constant companion" that embodies his lost past. In his final novel, Lucien kills off himself and Marie, leaving Roman devastated, and then, we are told, "Lucien stopped writing, near the village of Marseillan, at his neighbours' table. […] Lucien had said all he knew and remembered about Marie-Neige in these stories […] she was with him now" (278). Like Melanie Klein's theory of mourning, in which we reconstitute lost others as "inner objects" in our minds (110), Lucien's writing gives Marie a memorial presence "with him," embodied in his existence like the "history" scratched into the table.

Anna recovers her past with Claire and Coop exactly the same way, even composing *Divisadero* at Lucien's table some fifty years after he stopped writing. "Most days," we're told,

> Anna worked indoors at a kitchen table, reading the manuscripts and handwritten journals of Lucien Segura. The *manoir* had once been the writer's home, and she found herself in some modest contrapuntal dance with him. So that when she looked up from her work, it took a moment to recognize the same doorways and the room around her—she had until that moment been immersed in unearthing and cross-referencing a detail from this French writer's life, delving below the surface of his work. (67-8)

Anna's lover Rafael, a local gypsy who knew Lucien as a child, identifies the "blue table" in the kitchen as "what is most valuable in this room," the strongest revenant of Lucien's time in the house (75). The table itself therefore allows Anna to "immerse" herself in Lucien's life as she reads his writing, just as it let Lucien immerse himself in Marie's life as he recreated her in his novels. And just as the table helps Lucien locate himself when he wakes up in Marie's kitchen, the table phenomenologically shapes Anna's present experience of Lucien's kitchen,

placing her simultaneously in Lucien's moment in time as she perceives the room from his perspective: by reading and writing, Anna enacts "some modest contrapuntal dance" between the two times, as the past and the present "continually altered" one another. Lucien's table, moreover, brings Anna back to her own past. The day she and Coop are assaulted, Anna begins painting Coop's table blue, to match the Buddhist prayer flags she hangs, in which blue represents "sky, limitless space or mind" (32 & 30). Seen through Anna's own memories, then, the table in France records "a history" of Anna and Coop as well, placing Anna back in California. Anna recovers her own past through Lucien's table by writing about Lucien recovering his past by writing at Marie's table. The table's materiality allows Anna's memory to expand "limitless[ly]" across a hemisphere of "space" into the subjective "mind[s]" of Lucien, Claire, Coop, and her own past self, who are "with" her as she writes.

The combination of mirrors and companions by which Anna figures Lucien's writing might best be thought of as a cross between Hegel and Lacan. Recall that Anna and Claire gain their subjectivity partly by seeing themselves from each other's perspectives. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes self-consciousness as a similar movement out of and back to the self, mediated by another: "consciousness [comes] *out of itself* […] aware that it at once is, and is not, another consciousness […] Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites itself with itself" (§184). Lacan traces such self-conscious subjectivity to the "mirror-stage," in which the infant projects the idea of itself onto its image in the mirror and introjects this coherent image as its self-conception. For the infant, Lacan writes, "this jubilant assumption of his specular image […] exhibit[s] in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form" (2). If we consider Anna's "hunger" as a kind of Lacanian dehiscence, a fundamental incompleteness that drives the subject's actions, then when Lucien writes "as if over a mirror, to see what could be found," he attempts, like the infant in the mirror-stage, to conceptualize himself

holistically, unbroken by WWI or Marie's death. But instead of projecting an image of *himself* onto the mirror, Lucien recreates Marie as an Hegelian Other in the mirror by which to see himself. Anna likewise paradoxically restores the "broken path" of her life to "a single monologue" by multiply imagining herself into *Divisadero*'s other characters (142). If Nietzschean "art" is a "mask" through which she safely encounters "the truth," Anna makes Lucien as a mask in the Hegelian-Lacanian mirror of her writing to look back at herself.

Instead of a narcissistic engagement with the self, then, the literary mirrors Lucien and Anna create emphasize alterity—rhyme, echo, and substitution—to reimagine their own coherence. In *The English Patient*, Almásy says that when he wrote his book on desert exploration, he "translated [Katharine] into" it," "unable to remove her body from the page," then he quotes Wallace Stevens' "Arrival at the Waldorf," "*The wild poem is a substitute / For the woman one loves or ought to love / One wild rhapsody a fake for another*" (250). Almásy's friends call him Odysseus, who, Almásy says, "felt alien in the rhapsody of false art" (255), but Almásy seems at home "substitut[ing]" the desert and his writing "for the woman [he] loves," declaring earlier that "*echo is the soul of the voice exciting itself in hollow places*" (22). In Ovid's tale, Narcissus cannot communicate with his image in the pool because it mirrors him perfectly, but Echo, unable to speak for herself, communicates through selective repetition, changing Narcissus's defiant "I'll die before I yield to you" into the romantic submission, "I yield to you" (III.391-2). Anna likewise literarily expands herself in the "hollow places" of Lucien's life, "filling in the picture" to recreate herself in intersubjective echoes—that Lucien does this too seems to remove the gender-specificity of Ovid's model of the echo. "There is a hidden presence of others in us" (17), Anna writes, and she glosses *Divisadero*'s title this way:

> I come from Divisadero Street. Divisadero, from the Spanish word for 'division' […] Or it might derive from the word *divisor*, meaning 'to gaze at something from a distance' […] It is what I do with my work, I suppose. I look into the distance for those I have lost, so that I see them everywhere. Even here, in Demu, where Lucien Segura existed, where I 'transcribe a substitution / like the accidental folds of a scarf.' (149)

Anna authors herself by substituting others for herself, literarily reintegrating the people she's lost the same way she borrows the lines about the scarf from Lisa Robertson's *Rousseau's Boat*, the same way Ondaatje highlights this borrowing in *Divisadero*'s acknowledgements (288), the novel framed as *bricolage*. The self becomes an intersubjective, intertextual tissue of echoes.

Like the table that becomes Lucien's "companion," Almásy's claim that he wrote Katharine's "body" into his book anchors these intersubjective echoes in the physical space in which we interact as embodied selves. As she writes about Coop's life after the beating, Anna imagines him beaten again, this time into amnesia. Anna has Claire discover Coop by happenstance, not having seen him in years, but "Coop's memory, the Coop she knew, seemed to have sunk without a trace" (158). "His mind," Anna writes, "was this scrubbed table that could barely remember holding cups" (170). Anna's father thinks of photographs as "a carefully laid table that would clarify the past" (18), but with Coop's amnesia, his past disappears, taking his identity with it, and empties the table of its "carefully laid" "cups." In Ondaatje's metaphor, however, the table itself remains, as Coop's body and its muscle memory persist through his amnesia. When Claire takes Coop back to their farm, she lets him drive down the road like he used to, and "he swerved the steering wheel with one hand casually to the right and they drove down the narrow farm road" (172). Though he hasn't been home in decades, and couldn't remember the address if he tried, Coop's body recalls where he lived, preserving part of who he is and his relation to Anna's family. In *The Human Condition*, Heidegger's pupil Hannah Arendt writes that human creations "have the function of stabilizing human life. […] men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table" (137). Like Heidegger's poetic "world," for Arendt our creations "stabiliz[e]" identity, as Lucien knows where he is through Marie's table. As they reinvent themselves by rereading and rewriting, Ondaatje's characters objectify and retrieve themselves and their relationships

through the tables where and the bodies with which they sit—in *The English Patient*, Hana "sat down, trembling. Needing this table, this half-finished book in order to collect herself" (33).

The body, of course, mediates not only past but present intersubjective relationships. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, Bolden disappears, and his friend Webb, a detective, takes up the case. "Perhaps the only clue to Bolden's body was in Webb's brain," we hear, and also that "Webb discovered the minds of certain other people through their bodies" (16 & 53). Webb knows Bolden's mind by reading his body, so he can now imagine where Bolden's body is. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Patrick knows Clara through her body, and reciprocally loves her body for who she is: "He found himself at this hour in the spell of her body, within the complex architecture of her past" (68). And Katharine and Almásy know each other through their bodies, having "met in perfumes, in sweat, frantic to get under that thin film with a tongue or a tooth, as if they each could grip character there and during love pull it right off the body of the other" (185). Karen Overbye writes that in Ondaatje's work, the body situates us "in the history of others" (4). If we know ourselves through others, and we know others through their bodies, then other people intersubjectively embody our identity, our histories scratched into them like Lucien's blue table. The body extends the self not only into the physical world, but into an imaginative engagement with other people and the past. Iris Young writes that

> The body is the first locus of intentionality. […] The most primordial act is the motion of the body orienting itself […] There is a world for a subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions. (35-6)

Ondaatje portrays a similarly embodied self, in which memory and identity exist in the body's motions, like Coop steering or Clara making love. But Ondaatje finds "the first locus of intentionality" not in spatial orientation, but in the experience of "orienting" ourselves, through the body, in the "world" of history and social relationships with others. The self becomes the singular "story we tell" by embodying "a hidden presence of others in us."

If Anna thinks that Nietzschean "art" holds us together after we fall apart, and

Nietzsche says that "*we*, however, want to be poets of our lives" (*Gay Science*, §299), then Ondaatje's "personal rules of poetry" (Wildman) socialize literary self-authorship, making it always already an act of self-re-creation that grounds our presence in others. For Nietzsche, being "poets of our lives" is an intensely individual process, the virtuosity of the *Übermensch*. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes that "the highest man would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured," and sees selfhood as an artistic mastering of these multiple drives, "where the plant 'man' shows himself the strongest one finds instincts that conflict powerfully (e.g., in Shakespeare), but are controlled" (§966). Nehamas follows Nietzsche's individualism, viewing "life as literature" through Nietzschean selfhood. Rorty, as we saw in the introduction, likewise separates "self-creation" from communal "solidarity" (xiv). Harold Bloom, in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, glorifies Hamlet's autonomy as the origin of Western concepts of the self, framed by an epigraph from Nietzsche. And while Sloterdijk's account of self-improving practice offers Foucauldian readings of society-wide practices, he ultimately exalts the Nietzschean ascetic acrobatically leaping alone across cliff tops. In *Divisadero*'s epigraphic allusion to Nietzsche, Ondaatje situates himself as another of Nietzsche's heirs, but he immediately defines Nietzschean "art" as the socially affective and effective means by which Anna recovers and reinvents herself in relation to Lucien, Claire, and Coop. On Ondaatje's view, then, Rortian "self-creation" is not only not separate from but is in fact inextricably rooted in communal "solidarity," empathy for others based in literary imagination. And while Sloterdijk never says what happens when acrobats fall—Nietzsche himself aristocratically refusing to consider anyone but the *Übermensch*—Ondaatje thinks of nothing but failures of self-creation and how art, particularly literature and "poetry," rebuilds the "shattered pieces" of ourselves and our communities "in new forms" (*Divisadero*, 142). Like McCarthy, Ondaatje portrays selfhood as a present being, grounded in others, that becomes.

If for Sloterdijk, in his Nietzschean reading of the postsecular West, religion is a constantly self-improving practice, Ondaatje portrays postsecular belief as a process of continually reinventing spirituality in response to failure and violence, like Anna's echoes of Buddhist prayer flags. In *The English Patient*, Hana rebuilds the former nunnery with books, and revitalizes its garden with a crucifix for a scarecrow (15). Kip similarly survives battle by remembering Piero della Francesca's painting of the Queen of Sheba. Stuck in the mud in a river under enemy fire, "There was no comfort in this river except for his desire for her, which somehow kept him warm" (74). "There was no promise of solution or victory," Kip feels, "except for the temporary pact between him and that painted fresco's royalty who would forget him, never acknowledge his existence or be aware of him, a Sikh, halfway up a sapper's ladder in the rain, erecting a Bailey bridge for the army behind him. But he remembered the painting" (75). Kip's spiritual survival, mediated by art, crosses religious boundaries—a Sikh remembering a Christian painting of Jewish scripture—to establish an at best "temporary pact" with a woman who cannot know him. Pointing to the nunnery, as well as the monk Palipana in *Anil's Ghost*, McClure says that Ondaatje "stake[s] out a neomonastic, communitarian space of spiritual sustenance and political responsibility at the edges of Catholicism and Buddhism" (25). This neomonastic space, McClure, writes, is one of healing, as Hana seeks "to draw back from the endless, impersonal butchery of the war, and to reconstruct for herself out of the ruins of religion (the old nunnery) a place of retreat" (174). Ratti similarly locates Ondaatje's "anti-communitarian communitarianism" in the bombed Buddha statue that the artist Ananda reconstructs in *Anil's Ghost*, arguing that the still-fractured statue represents "a hybrid religiosity" that "seeks to show the range of Buddhisms" (109). For Ratti and McClure, however, Ondaatje's hybridization fails. McClure writes that Hana never heals sufficiently to return to the world from her "neomonastic" retreat (25), while Ratti sees Ondaatje's depiction of Buddhism tacitly solidifying into dangerous political

dogma: "although worship of the Buddha statue exists in both Buddhist and Hindu practices, the hegemony of the Buddha symbol circulating in the Sri Lankan public sphere as part of Sinhalese majoritarianism overrides the more subtle, hybrid religious practices" (109).

Ondaatje, though, emphasizes these failures even as his characters try to reimagine belief. Like the broken nunnery, the fields where Ananda reconstructs the bombed statue in *Anil's Ghost* are places "where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century," making faith an equally shellshocked victim of modern war (296). Ananda involves a whole village in his "complex and innovative" reconstruction of the statue (297), which is "no longer a god" because it has been broken and rebuilt (303). And while Ananda "had planned to homogenize the stone, blend the face into a unit," he decides to leave the Buddha looking "quilted," a reminder of its destruction (298). Ondaatje's recuperative affirmation of religious values thus foregrounds its own basic brokenness, existing only in communal attempts to recover spiritual experience. In *The English Patient*, Hana sings to her friends at a party they hold for her birthday, and to Caravaggio her voice sounds

> as if it was something scarred […] in the forty-fifth year of the twentieth century. Singing in the voice of a tired traveller, alone against everything. A new testament. There was no certainty to the song anymore, the singer could only be one voice against all the mountains of power. […] Caravaggio realized she was singing with and echoing the heart of the sapper. (285-6)

Hana's song is "a new testament" to rebuild from war, but like the Buddha statue, her reparative art remains essentially "scarred," bereft of anything remotely like "certainty"—this is no leap of faith. But although she sings "alone," Hana also sings "with" others, "echoing" Kip's "heart" as she crafts her "testament." Belying McClure's reading, the "hidden presence of others" invests Hana's "scarred" withdrawal, while her "new testament" and Ananda's hold themselves together through "hunger," their own existential brokenness. Ondaatje's characters constantly try to recover lost meaning through communal art, building again when their faith collapses, as Ondaatje says of *The English Patient*, "there are churches in Rome that

stand on the remains of two or three earlier churches, all built on the same spot. That sense of history, of building overlaid with building, was central in my mind" (Wachtel, 251).

Though Ondaatje depicts the failure of faith, he thus also imagines communal presence, a community that falls apart, repeatedly, but one that isn't merely deferred. This model resists what Ratti calls "ethics yet-to-come" and the radical futurity of Attridge's literary ethics. Ondaatje's characters open themselves to one another's alterity via literature—"their foreignness intimate like two pages of a closed book" (*English Patient*, 165)—but this intimacy exists precisely through its own dissolution and reconstruction. When he hears about Hiroshima, Kip leaves the villa in protest and never sees his friends again. As he drives away,

> He feels he carries the body of the Englishman with him [...] It sits on the petrol tank facing him, the black body in an embrace with his, facing the past over his shoulder, facing the countryside they are flying from, that receding palace of strangers on the Italian hill which shall never be rebuilt. (312)

Almásy's imagined body mimics Benjamin's angel of history, gazing back on a wrecked communal space that will never recover, but it also unforgettably embodies Kip's past. Kip returns to India, but Hana echoes throughout his life, as "he watches Hana, her hair longer, in her own country. […] This is a limited gift he has somehow been given" (319). In Kip's memory and imagination, Ondaatje reunites his lovers in the novel's final sentences:

> And so Hana moves and her face turns and in a regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles. (321)

Kip and Hana's bodily movements rhyme with one another, making each fictionally present to the other. In the penultimate paragraph, right before Kip 'catches' Hana's glass, the implied author laments that Hana "is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life" (320). Helping others, in a bodily, 'poetic' relationship with them, both does and doesn't establish ethical, healing communities. This embraces the provisionality with which Attridge or Ratti describe ethics, but it also

makes the provisional rebuilding of ethical relationships itself a form of "hidden presence."

As he imagines the self reconstructing itself in provisional, hidden relationships with others, Ondaatje defends literary value as a tool for recovering from personal and wider world-historical forms of trauma. In Ondaatje's version of trauma theory, individuals heal by rhyming themselves with a healed self, through other people, even if they remain also broken. Ondaatje envisions such a form of fragmented yet coherent presence in close relation with postcolonial subjects like himself. Almásy says that he and Kip "are both international bastards—born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives" (188), while Ondaatje says that there are a "lot of international bastards roaming around the world today" (Wachtel, 260). In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje writes that colonial Sri Lanka "became a mirror. It pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities, some of whom stayed and intermarried—my own ancestor arriving in 1600" (60). Following this mirror metaphor, Lee Spinks writes that Ondaatje eschews both "narcissistic identification with the imperial imaginary" and "nationalist demand for ethnic purity," opting instead for "the experience of cultural hybridity [...] engendered by the fact of cultural difference" (108-9). Postcolonial identity, for Ondaatje, becomes a matter of recovering "homelands" and rhyming together disparate cultural heritages to create a new self, as Anna remembers and recreates herself through the mirror of Lucien's story. This poetic self overcomes but does not erase the cracks within an "international bastard." It rhymes together without eliminating the particularity of the multiple selves Derek Walcott famously describes in "The Schooner Flight," "I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation" (42-3). Ondaatje envisions a self that is both "nobody" and "a nation"—multiple, kaleidoscopic, yet whole.

Ondaatje's other major historical context is his response to serial 20th-century warfare and the wreckage that its modern technology inflicts. Like McCarthy, Ondaatje frames

reading and writing as a means of beginning life again after the nuclear explosion in *The English Patient* rends the villa's community apart, as Kip impossibly 'catches' Hana's glass in the novel's conclusion. Ondaatje also traces how conventional bombs wreck and continue to mark the natural environment as a way to map how the self interweaves physically and phenomenologically with a perpetually, constitutively violent modern world. Describing "the amount of shrapnel we shot into it during the *last* war," Hana says that even Europe's "trees are thick with the diseases we brought," and Kip spends his time "dismantling bombs in orchards" (129). Repeating this emphasis on repetition, on "the *last* war," in *Anil's Ghost*, the Sri Lankan Civil War feeds off international trade, "importing state-of-the-art weapons from the West" (13), "a Hundred Years' War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries" (39). The international context of the Sri Lankan Civil War here inverts the situation in *The English Patient*: where Kip journeys from India to England to fight in the Italian campaign in 1945, Western money and weapons, as well as the émigré Anil, circulate throughout postcolonial Sri Lanka in the inexact time period of *Anil's Ghost*. The kaleidoscope flips over, power exercises itself in new strategic lines of domination, but Ondaatje implies that the picture remains generally the same, "a Hundred Years' War" punctuated by deceptive periods of quiet like the attempted truces in the Sri Lankan Civil War. *Divisadero*'s emphasis on the Second Gulf War—and so oblique reference to the War on Terror more broadly, resonating with the terrorist attacks that Ondaatje depicts in *Anil's Ghost*—establishes the 1990s as an interwar period much like the 1920s and '30s that Hana references when she talks about "the *last* war." "State-of-the-art weapons" in WWI imprint the European landscape, before nuclear technology in the Cold War creates an atmosphere of looming apocalypse, before the threat of terror attacks and drone strikes becomes an even more pervasive because delocalized threat of violence. Rhyming conflicts with one another in this way, Ondaatje risks homogenizing various wars and their particular victims, perpetrators,

and histories in order to draw out the nearly (perhaps more than nearly) incomprehensible, even accelerating aura of destruction in the world that he limns.

Ondaatje ultimately turns to ecological metaphors to capture the impact of 20th- and 21st-century violence. The shrapnel-laced trees in *The English Patient* literally capture the environmental damage of modern warfare, while Kip's apprehension of danger everywhere phenomenologically distorts his perceptions of his landscape and damages his very subjectivity. By simultaneously tracing the routes of global capital and technology driving the Sri Lankan Civil War in *Anil's Ghost* and lovingly detailing Sri Lanka's natural landscape in the jungle episode in *Running in the Family* and Palipana's monastic retreat in *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje also implicitly rhymes worldwide warfare with global environmental degradation. The economist Elinor Ostrom writes that "all humanly used resources are embedded in complex, social-ecological systems" (419), and ecocritics like Gillen D'Arcy Wood have, in turn, called for literary "sustainability studies" that draw "maps that show connections between apparently unrelated domains" (5). In *The English Patient*, Almásy "maps" such a "complex, social-ecological system" when he describes desert winds that deposit Saharan sand "as far north as Cornwall and Devon" (18), like David Attenborough, in "Pole to Pole" on the BBC's *Planet Earth*, describing warm summer oceans that create great Saharan winds "blowing sand halfway round the world to fertilize the Amazon Jungle." The complex intertextual and intersubjective threads that compose the tapestry of the self in Ondaatje's writing draw the "maps" D'Arcy Wood calls for, showing how European machine gun bullets in WWI reshape the ecological world and thereby alter the very perceptions of an Indian sapper twenty-five years later. Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence*, excavates the globalized environmental and consequent human damage of Western neoliberal economics, and Ondaatje's depiction of modern military technology and postmodern terroristic violence traces the same complicated global networks of influence and harm. Ondaatje's portrayal of

ethical attachment and action, then, argues for a 'poetic' experience of our entanglement with others that might begin resisting the unthinking destruction wreaked by the economic systems in which we participate. Reading *Anil's Ghost*, Katherine Stanton argues that Ondaatje pushes us to recognize that ethical obligations extend beyond national borders (3)—we might remember McCarthy's horizon-crossing cowboys—and Ondaatje's portrait of the self as a kaleidoscope makes these international relations and ethical obligations, from warfare to global warming, part of the very nature of who we are.

Ondaatje attempts to think the presence of the self and its communal relations together with their destruction and recuperation, a becoming of being that remakes ethics and belief out of their own disintegration. "With memory," Anna says in *Divisadero*, "with the reflection of an echo, a gate opens both ways. We can circle time" (280). The absence of the past returns as presence in literary echoes, the self held together in its self-reinvention by its very fragmentation. As he is dying at the end of *The English Patient*, Almásy says,

> We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. (277)

Literature, for Ondaatje, embodies the past and our relationships with others even as we face the ultimate disintegration of the self, and so Ondaatje places his faith in literature precisely because he knows that it fails, but that it also tries to rebuild again—"You take that older life and you link it to a stranger" (*Cat's Table*, 99). When he finishes a novel and starts writing again, Ondaatje says, "I'm broke, trying to rebuild" (*Powell's*). His fiction makes all selfhood such rebuilding.

4. Fictions of Community: Toni Morrison

In Toni Morrison's novels, houses become characters too, sometimes even more central than the humans who inhabit them. In Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, the Breedloves' tumbledown apartment in an old storefront shapes the degraded family within, "festering together in the debris of the realtor's whim" (34). "Each member of the family," we hear, lives in the storefront trapped "in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality—collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there. From the tiny impressions gleaned from one another, they created a sense of belonging and tried to make do with the way they found each other" (34). Like Anna kaleidoscopically piecing things together in *Divisadero*, the Breedloves construct themselves and their "reality," what Heidegger calls a "world," out of the "debris" around them. Despite being locked in solipsistic "cell[s]," they also construct a familial "belonging" in a *bricolage* of fragmentary experience "gleaned from one another." The large, subdivided room in which they all live structures their belonging, a cellular membrane that organizes them within itself, making them exist as the people "they found" inside it. Soaphead Church's house in *The Bluest Eye* similarly gains an almost magical association with its resident—people consider the house as dangerous and weird as they think Soaphead to be—while in Morrison's *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Paradise*, and *Love*, mansions, hotels, whorehouses, and converted convents divide and control the spaces in which black, white, male, and female bodies move and interact. And *Beloved* famously begins with a house, "124 was spiteful," its rooms and rafters haunted by the traumatic ghosts of slavery itself (3). If for McCarthy the self exists in a relationship of witnessing and tabernacling others, and if for Ondaatje the self exists intersubjectively in embodied yet imaginary relations with others, Morrison's emphasis on houses, on the communal space in which the Breedloves coalesce as a family, makes the primary term not the self in its relations with others, but the organizing network of

relationships itself. The self, for Morrison, has a decentered, protean form emerging from and intrinsically interwoven within a larger, ever-shifting communal tapestry. And storytelling accomplishes this interweaving, reforming communities torn apart by violence.

Storytelling and houses merge most strongly in Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy*, whose primary narrator, Florens, carves her story into the boards of her master Jacob Vaark's mansion. Though he lives in 17th-century Virginia, Jacob's money comes from his investments in the slave economy of Barbados, and he and his mansion intertextually echo Sutpen's Hundred in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* Florens' carving, then, as she writes her herself into the house, refigures and works imaginatively to reclaim Thomas Sutpen's plantation. In *Absalom*, Sutpen, a poor white boy from the (now West) Virginian hills, seeks his fortune in the West Indies, perhaps Barbados, before building a huge antebellum plantation near Jefferson, Mississippi. Constructing himself as a slave-owning Southern aristocrat, Sutpen enacts a twisted version of Emersonian self-reliance. Faulkner's narrator, Quentin, speculates that "the self-reliance of mountains and solitude" that Sutpen had as a child enabled him "to listen when the teacher read aloud," learning about far-off places from books (241). And as he listened to the books, Sutpen claims, "I was equipping myself better for what I should later design to do […] What I learned was that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn't matter how, so long as the man was clever and courageous" (242). Sutpen aims to overcome the rich white men who have shamed him, and his mansion and slaves are his weapons—"you got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (238). So he fashions himself by building his house. Quentin imagines watching Sutpen "drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*" (8-9). Having previously listened to books, Sutpen creates himself and his

property with a quasi-divine voice. Then, at the end of *Absalom*, Sutpen's enslaved daughter Clytie destroys his mansion with fire, a revolt that utterly undoes his self-authoring "design."

Jacob Vaark in *A Mercy* begins with humbler ambitions. A merchant-farmer in Virginia who loans money to Maryland slave-owners, Jacob eventually desires a house of his own as magnificent as the ones he sees on Maryland plantations. So he starts investing in Barbados—"his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog" (41). Jacob's Native American servant Lina, reflecting on Jacob's previous houses, thinks that

> The first house Sir built—dirt floor, green wood—was weaker than the bark-covered one she herself was born in. The second one was strong. He tore down the first to lay wooden floors in the second with four rooms, a decent fireplace and windows with good tight shutters. There was no need for a third. Yet at the very moment when there were no children to occupy or inherit it, he meant to build another, bigger, double-storied, fenced and gated like the one he saw on his travels. (51)

Lina laments that the new house is so unnecessarily large that it "distorted sunlight and required the death of fifty trees" (50). "The last few years [Jacob] seemed moody, less gentle," Lina thinks, but when Jacob "decided to kill the trees and replace them with a profane monument to himself, he was cheerful every waking moment," buoyed by the act of embodying his own power in the house (51). This self-aggrandizement, according to Lina, also brings about Jacob's downfall. "Killing trees in that number," Lina says, "without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune. Sure enough, when the house was close to completion he fell sick with nothing else on his mind" (51). As Jacob succumbs to measles, Florens, Lina, and Jacob's wife Rebekka carry him to the almost-finished mansion, but he "never wakes. Neither Mistress nor we know if he is alive for even one minute to smell the new cherrywood floors he lies on. We are alone" (43). Sutpen temporarily enjoys commanding his plantation, but Jacob never even finishes constructing his own—or himself.

Like Sutpen, Jacob seeks to be a self-made man in the so-called New World by violently oppressing others. Like Sutpen, Jacob spectacularly fails. And just as Sutpen's

daughter Clytie haunts his house until the end of *Absalom* when she burns it down, Florens haunts Jacob's house in *A Mercy*. Florens narrates multiple sections in the novel, in a roughly every-other-chapter rhythm. Her narration occurs in the second-person, directed at the black blacksmith who forged the mansion's gate. Florens loves the blacksmith, and while he briefly loves her back, he later rejects her. In the novel's penultimate chapter, we know that Florens' narration has been written all over Jacob's unfinished house, "There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. […] I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell anyone but you" (188). "If you never read this," Florens says, "no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves" (188). Needing to tell her story, Florens embeds it in Jacob's house much as Jacob sought to monumentalize himself by building the house, but she worries that the blacksmith will not hear her. "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you," Florens says at the very beginning of the novel, then explains, "You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like […] One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?" (3). Combined with her opening reference to hurting, Florens' first question, "who is responsible," establishes the novel's ethical framework, while her second question, "can you read," intertwines ethics with literary interpretation. This second question also resonates profoundly in a slave-holding society predicated on black illiteracy—a priest illicitly teaches Florens to read (191), enabling her to express herself—and poignantly crashes against the blacksmith's illiteracy. Though he is free, the blacksmith cannot read, and so he will "never read" the "telling" Florens carves in the house. Tessa Roynon argues that in *A Mercy*'s setting, illiteracy was seen as Satan's work (603), like the Separatists' claim that Florens is a demon because she is black. Like a Puritan diary, then, Florens' autobiographical writing embodies her very soul in its carven letters, as she works to trace "who is responsible" in an imaginary second-person dialogue with the blacksmith, though she is still enslaved and he cannot read.

At least we, and not "no one," read Florens' story. Her words don't merely "talk to themselves," but open up a second-person dialogue with us, Morrison's implied readers, who stand in for the blacksmith. *A Mercy*'s final chapter envisions a similarly imagined dialogue, as Florens' mother speaks impossibly across time to her daughter. Florens' mother tries to explain why she abandoned Florens, and describes her initial enslavement in Africa: "Then the whitened men divided we and placed we in canoes. We come to a house made to float on the sea" (192). Florens' mother works to trace "who is responsible," and hopes that Florens can "read" her "confession," as Florens writes herself into the wood of Jacob's house, always already in an ethically-laden second-person dialogue with both the blacksmith and us as readers. Like Sutpen and Jacob authoring themselves by building their houses, Florens' dialogic writing expresses and claims herself. She thereby rewrites and so imaginatively reclaims Jacob's house, the slave ships floating like houses off the African coast, and, in intertextual echoes, Sutpen's mansion in *Absalom, Absalom!* If Jacob and Sutpen enact a kind of Nietzschean self-creation—the "*Be Sutpen's Hundred*" (9) like Nietzsche's view of self-affirming, slave-dominating "master morality" in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (I, §1)—Morrison refigures such self-construction as an epiphenomenon of a more basic living-with-others. Florens' community is broken, her mother and the blacksmith gone. But like her mother speaking impossibly to her, Florens works in the very syntax of her "telling" to repair her relationship with "you," with the blacksmith. Florens, we know, will soon be sold away from home (182), so that her attempt to repair her relationship by carving her story into Jacob's house cannot permanently succeed. But she tries anyway, like Billy in McCarthy's Border Trilogy or Hana singing her already-broken "new testament" (285) in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Florens writes to reconstruct a community savaged by slavery, ultimately grounding the world- and self-re-making I described in chapters 2 and 3 in a self-re-building communal "belonging."

A number of critics have focused on questions of literary self-making in Morrison's

fiction, but these critics typically both over-emphasize the self and separate self-making from destruction. As a result, they don't quite capture the paradoxical combination of selfhood and community, and of disintegration and rebuilding, by which the Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye*, for example, construct themselves out of each other's "debris" (34). In *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison*, John Duvall alludes to Greenblatt to argue that "self-fashioning, then, helps describe the development of Morrison's identity" (11). For Duvall, Morrison's early fiction seeks to build up black and feminist solidarity, and so enacts "a modernist desire for authentic identity" (18). Morrison's later fiction, though, according to Duvall, deconstructs homogeneous ideas of black identity, drawing on "a postmodern understanding of the constructedness of all identity" (18), in order for Morrison to create her own individual self. Morrison fashions herself as an author through the development of her fiction toward postmodern plurality, and so "Morrison's treatment of an individual's identity formation," Duvall writes, "especially as it occurs within a community, points to what is both modernist and postmodernist about her work," a self-fashioning play between identity as essence and as construct (15). Philip Page, in *Dangerous Freedoms: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*, similarly argues that in Morrison's novels, "characters' pysches are revealed to be whole yet divided, families oscillate between unity and separation, communities exist yet are always already fragmented" (3-4). Page quotes Morrison, "The trauma of racism is… the severe fragmentation of the self" (26), then says that "characters who voice their own stories find as much integration and satisfaction as Morrison's world permits, and the ability to listen with care and absorption usually coincides with this storytelling power" (179). To be black in Morrison's world is to be fragmented by racism, and storytelling works to fuse these fragments of the self together. For Duvall and Page both, Morrison's fiction "oscillate[s] between" coherent forms of individual and communal identity and the shattering of those identities.

To pick up again on my overarching themes of ethics and postsecular belief, McClure

and Hungerford's respective readings of Morrison both likewise emphasize literary self-fashioning. McClure explores how Morrison's characters create their own versions of spirituality, syncretically merging "African and Christian traditions" (106). Morrison, McClure writes, "is a champion of the spacious spiritualities [her characters] forge, but she also insists that the very success of their seeking provokes new dangers. In both *Beloved* and *Paradise*, the intoxication of spiritual emancipation and enchantment gives rise to mortal miscalculations" (103). Morrison's characters routinely go 'too far,' McClure says, as Sethe in *Beloved* ends up trying "to kill her children and herself" to save them from slavery (122). McClure sees a similar impulse in *Paradise*, where the town of Ruby exercises a basically hermeneutical form of violence to enforce a "controlling" narrative of the town's collective life (111 & 113). McClure reads in Morrison the collapse of these self-fashioning, open spiritualities into rigid dogma. Hungerford identifies a different form of religiously-inflected self-authoring in Morrison's fiction. Morrison replaces white possession of the Bible, Hungerford argues, with the "authority based in the illiterate's possession" of the Bible (96), like Baby Suggs' preaching in *Beloved*. This allows Morrison "to imagine a supernatural literacy," Hungeford writes, "that transcends both constituencies she touches in her work—high-culture literates and the illiterate possessors of oral tradition. She goes on to donate the double authority thus accrued to an autonomous and supernatural instance of language (her own novel)" (105). Morrison's writing authors its own authority, though it remains, for Hungerford, a "belief without meaning" (xiv), lacking specific content. Like McCarthy, Hungerford says, Morrison works "to imagine contemporary fiction as something like scripture—supernatural, transcendent, imbued with ultimate authority" (105). McClure and Hungerford both find in Morrison a depiction of how literature crafts a coherent spiritual authority of its own.

Page comes closest to what I want to argue in this chapter, that any authority or

identity that Morrison's characters might construct for themselves through literature remains intimately bound up with its own destruction, as we know that Florens will soon be sold into a new slavery at the end of *A Mercy*. Identity in Morrison's fiction is never as unitary as the "modernist" pursuit of "authenticity" Duvall describes (18), and religious authority never remains as coherent as McClure and Hungerford imply—Morrison thematizes the way that belief always collapses. But Page's model of "fusion and fragmentation," by focusing on individual identity and freedom, ultimately emphasizes the unity of the self too, separate from the plurality of a community. And like Scarry's division of "making" and "unmaking" (13), Page locates an aporia between the unity and the multiplicity, the fusion and fragmentation, of the self, declaring that the two sides "oscillate" back and forth (3). I want to show instead how Morrison, like McCarthy and Ondaatje, frames the creation of worlds, selves, and communities as emerging out of their own devastation. Creation and destruction in Morrison represent two sides, to repeat my earlier image, of the same Möbius strip, so that self-creation is always already an act of recreating the self out of its disintegration and "debris." And I want to push the intersubjective picture of subjectivity I've developed in my analyses of McCarthy and Ondaatje a step further as I read Morrison, framing the self as emerging out of a more basic community. This is not to eliminate the self, but to depict its self-re-construction as an always already ethically-charged communitarian existence and activity, the process of reconstructing communal ties, as Florens tries to put her community back together by telling her story. For Morrison, fiction's value lies in its capacity to rebuild communities, as in Florens' "telling," and thereby to rebuild individual lives and their worlds, too.

Even split trees can still grow

"We never shape the world […] The world shapes us," Lina tells Florens in *A Mercy*, but much like the characters in McCarthy's and Ondaatje's novels that I described in chapters 2 and 3, Lina works hard to "shape" herself and her world (83). When she is a child,

a plague brought by European settlers destroys Lina's village, and a group of Presbyterians takes her in. They attempt to assimilate her into their religious worldview and practices—"Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies" (55)—but eventually she "erupts," we are not told how, and the Presbyterians "abandoned her without so much as a murmur of fare well" (56). Much later, exiled by the Presbyterians and now working for Jacob Vaark, Lina begins constructing her own worldview and practices:

> she decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. (56-7)

Lina recovers elements of her Native American heritage and reconstructs them into a new way of being "in the world," recombined with aspects of European culture that she picks up like a magpie. Lina's *bricolage* depends fundamentally on loss, on forgetting her first six years of life in her village: "Solitude, regret and fury would have broken her had she not erased those six years before the death of the world" (58). Traumatized by her village's destruction, Lina becomes complicit in that destruction in order to survive, forced to complete the village's erasure even in her own memory if she wants to remain whole and unbroken as a self. But she also preserves bits and pieces of the world that she has to help erase, and she integrates those pieces into a new self that she forms to match her situation as Jacob's servant. Lina, we hear, "sorted and stored what she dared to recall and eliminated the rest, an activity which shaped her inside and out. By the time Mistress came, her self-invention was almost perfect. Soon it was irresistible" (59). Lina's "self-invention" is far from autonomous—she is no Nietzschean *Übermensch*—but rather adapts itself to her particular position as a subject, subjected to Jacob's rule and whatever it lets her "dar[e] to recall." Nevertheless, Lina empowers herself, able to make her multicultural "medicine" "irresistible" to Jacob's wife Rebekka, fresh off the boat

from England as a mail-order bride. Lina's cobbled-together self makes a new world for itself to replace the dead one, and she carves a place in it for herself in solidarity with Rebekka.

Rebekka similarly establishes a communal bond with her husband, a deeply intersubjective tie in which each exists only through the other. Rebekka and Jacob form their bond over time, "They settled into the long learning of one another: preferences, habits altered, others acquired; disagreements without bile; trust and that wordless conversation that years of companionship rest on" (102). Rebekka and Jacob remake one another's practices and desires, and eventually, "they leaned on each other root and crown. Needing no one outside their sufficiency. Or so they believed" (102). Their dependence on slaves and indentured servants ironically undermines Jacob and Rebekka's claim to a form of husband-and-wife self-reliance, but *A Mercy*'s narrator envisions the two as trees that have grown organically to remain upright only through one another's continued support. Never having met before Rebekka sailed to North America, Jacob and Rebekka piece together their marriage as Lina cobbles together her world, and Jacob's travel stories form the thread that sutures them together: "Tales of his journeys excited her," retrospectively linking him with her on his travels once he's gotten home (103). When Jacob starts making real money from Barbados, though, "the tales were fewer and the gifts increasing, gifts that were becoming less practical, even whimsical" (103). Jacob substitutes money for stories and tools that fit usefully into their life on the farm, and when Jacob decides to build his third and grandest house, Rebekka tells him, "We don't need another house" (103). "What a man leaves behind is what a man is," Jacob responds, replacing their story-based relationship with his own narcissistic reflection in the mansion (104). Jacob and Rebekka's sons have all died, and a horse working on the mansion kicks their daughter in the head and kills her (104), so that Jacob's Sutpen-like self-making destroys the familial community he'd built. Rebekka and Jacob make each other as they make their world together on the farm, but like Lina's dead world, none of it lasts.

Moreover, when Jacob dies of measles, the female community that he leaves behind, consisting of Rebekka, Lina, Florens, and the headstrong, traumatized woman Sorrow, also falls apart. Rebekka realizes that "without the status or shoulder of a man, without the support of family or well-wishers, a widow was in practice illegal" (115). Rebekka has no legal status to run her farm in Jacob's absence, and in the social mores of the day, her widowhood renders her existentially criminal. Like Jacob, Rebekka also gets sick, and when she recovers, her indentured servant Willard says that "the village will provide," expecting a husband to materialize to maintain the farm (171). Changed by the sickness, though, Rebekka focuses on reading her Bible, rejecting Lina's previously "irresistible" friendship, putting Florens up for sale despite Florens' daughterly relationship with Lina, and beating the new mother Sorrow. "Such were the ravages of Vaark's death," Rebekka's other indentured servant Scully thinks,

> And the consequences of women in thrall to men or pointedly without them. Or so he concluded. He had no proof of what was in their minds, but based on his own experience he was certain betrayal was the poison of the day. […] They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess. (183)

Rebekka and Lina once formed a sister-like bond as they built the farm together during Jacob's travels, and Lina and Florens acted as mother and daughter. Now, however, under the external pressure of patriarchy and the internal pressures of slavery, religion, and mourning, the family they built together crumbles, not just revealing its own falsity or casting them back into their "isolation," but actively damaging each individual in the group. The two trees leaning on one another turn out to need someone "outside their sufficiency," and Morrison reveals the inevitability that those interrelated trees will tumble down like dominos.

Florens resists such communal collapse when she writes her story by carving it into Jacob's house, working narratively to rebuild her relationship with the blacksmith and to reclaim the mansion and the slave ships-cum-houses that captured her mother. When the

blacksmith first arrives to work on the gate of Jacob's house, he and Florens enter into a sexual and spiritual relationship. The blacksmith eventually finishes the gate and leaves, but when Rebekka gets sick, she sends Florens to find the blacksmith for medicine. Rebekka gives Florens a letter of passage, but on the way, a group of Puritan Separatists stops Florens to test if she is a demon, terrified of her black skin. When she escapes the Separatists, Florens loses her letter, and as she later recounts her feelings on fleeing the Separatists, she says,

> Inside I am shrinking. […] With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandoned by the herd […] a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. […] You have the outside dark as well. And when I see you and fall into you I know I am alive. […] The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home. (135-6)

Losing her letter, Florens becomes practically and existentially illegal, an outcast "abandoned by the herd." She connects this alienation with both her black skin and an "inside dark," an animalistic, "toothy" ferocity. She expects to salve this "inside dark" when she "fall[s] into" the blacksmith, where she will become most fully herself, "the dark is me," in union with him, "is we." The blacksmith's body becomes her "home," she says, like the embodied relationships between Ondaatje's characters, and his body therefore elevates hers from its outcast state, "With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me" (161). Florens founds her subjectivity on the intersubjective and embodied reciprocity of mutual 'having,' able to "belong" in herself by "belonging" to the blacksmith.

When Florens arrives at the blacksmith's house, however, their perfectly reciprocal "belonging" breaks apart. The blacksmith has taken in a foundling named Malaik as his son, and despite Malaik's own orphaned status, his presence reminds Florens of the time when she herself was cast away by her mother, the time when "I am expel" (160). "I worry as the boy steps closer to you," Florens writes, "How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me" (160). Taking part of the blacksmith's body away from Florens, Malaik, according to Florens, replaces her as the blacksmith's "future." The blacksmith briefly leaves

Florens to babysit Malaik, and she takes away Malaik's doll because she fears that it "must be where his power is" (164). Malaik starts screaming, and Florens cracks his shoulder. Blood trickles down his mouth, and right then, the blacksmith returns: "I don't hear your horse only your shout and know I am lost because your shout is not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik" (165). "You choose the boy," Florens writes, "I am lost" (165). Instead of opening up her union with the blacksmith to become a three-person family, Florens lashes out to maintain her sole possession, and so she is lost, cast out by the blacksmith defending his tiny son. "You are a slave," the blacksmith tells her, declaring that she has enslaved herself to desire and so abused the child, "Your head is empty and your body is wild" (166). "I am adoring you," Florens says, "And a slave to that too," he replies (166). "You alone own me," she claims, and he tells her, "Own yourself, woman, and leave us be" (166). Realizing that she has "no consequence" any longer in his "world," Florens says, "Now I am living the dying inside," and attacks the blacksmith with her fingernails and a hammer (167). Florens rends the blacksmith's skin as she shatters their union and her own self—"living the dying inside."

Having lost her relationship, Florens' writing ability breaks too. Like Lina's pieced-together worldview, Lina taught Florens to decipher signs in the world around her, and at the beginning of the novel Florens says, "Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much. […] Let me start with what I know for certain" (4). Florens' "telling," then, offers the "certain" insight of her omen-reading. When the blacksmith expels her from his house, though, Florens declares that

> What I read or cipher is useless now. Heads of dogs, garden snakes, all that is pointless. But my way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me. I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. (184)

Florens loses her ability to read the world, yet her "way" is also "clear," individual, wild, independent, treating no one as having "claim and rule over me." Her way is to write her

story in Jacob's floorboards with a nail, the words sometimes "disorderly" (185). "I sleep among my words," Florens says, "The telling goes on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away, leave this room and do chores" (185). The story becomes Florens' world, as Anna has to reorient herself in *Divisadero* when she looks up from reading Lucien's writing at his desk. And so, though she sits among "all manner of building waste" left in Jacob's house (186), Florens builds for herself a new world and a new self by writing her story for the blacksmith. "I cannot tell it to anyone but you," she writes, then realizes his illiteracy: "Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (188). Florens wonders if her words themselves, perhaps never to be read, need freedom, and she contemplates burning down the house, like Clytie in *Absalom*. "I am also Florens," she says, "In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last. / I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her" (189). When she realizes that her writing cannot reunite her with the blacksmith, Florens pretends to fall back on a self-reliant self, but even then, she regrets being unable to communicate with her mother across time, hearing and telling both.

If Florens' relationship with the blacksmith, her quasi-family at Jacob's farm, and her ability to read and write are all broken, Morrison also activates metaphors of rebirth, of an organic recreation that allows people to come back together the way Jacob and Rebekka once supported each other like trees, "root and crown." Though Florens concludes that she cannot hear what her mother is telling her, in the final chapter of *A Mercy*, as I said above, Florens' mother speaks. She describes her enslavement, and what happened when the slave ship arrived in the Americas, disgorging her and her kin onto the slave market:

> One by one we were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths. The children were best at this. Like grass trampled by elephants, they sprang up to try life again. They had stopped weeping long ago. Now, eyes wide, they tried to please, to show their ability and therefore their living worth. How

> unlikely their survival. How likely another herd will come to destroy them. A herd of men of heaped teeth fingering the hasps of whips. (193-4)

The children, as blades of grass, can unbend and begin "life again," but they also remain permanently damaged, unable even to weep any more. Even "try[ing] life" lies outside their control, necessary just to prove "their living worth." Florens' mother presages their ultimate doom, another herd of slave masters mowing them down, only to replace them with new slaves, "what burns to ash is refueled" (35). Rebirth is life, but also a cycle of endless suffering.

Florens' mother, though, works to save her daughter. On their plantation in Maryland, Florens' mother knows, Florens, not far from adolescence, will be raped, soon and repeatedly. So when Jacob Vaark visits to collect on a loan from the plantation's Spanish owner, Florens' mother offers Florens as payment, seeing in Jacob a chance for her daughter to be treated far better as a slave, "Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes" (195). Throughout *A Mercy*, Florens, now much older, rages at her mother for casting her off, sending her north as a child. In the concluding chapter, though, Florens' mother frames her act as one of salvation. "It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God," Florens' mother claims, giving the novel its title,

> It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing.
>
> Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe [your mother]. (195-6)

Second-person address here, the plea to "hear" in the novel's very last line, tries to bridge an unbridgeable gulf, to speak with Florens across years and colonial borders. And yet Florens' mother speaks to the novel itself, echoing the blacksmith's demand that Florens "own yourself." Florens' mother explains why she sent Florens away in order to give her daughter the strength to claim and possess herself. It seems an open question whether we should read the final chapter as Florens' mother talking to us, or as Florens merely imagining hearing her

mother. Communication seeks to heal, to rebuild Florens' bond with her mother like the slave children jumping back up, but it never quite manages to do so, the blades of grass ultimately doomed to die, Florens unable to hear. Florens' mother imagines the ethical and spiritual communion of hearing "a tua mãe," but that hearing remains marked by its own failure.

The image of the grass rebounding echoes with two of Morrison's other novels as well. The last chapter of 1992's *Jazz* begins with the mysterious narrator declaring,

> Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweettooth for it. Bolts of lightning, little rivulets of thunder. And I the eye of the storm. Mourning the split trees, hens starving on rooftops. Figuring out what can be done to save them since they cannot save themselves without me because—well, it's my storm, isn't it? I break lives to prove I can mend them back again. And although the pain is theirs, I share it, don't I? (219)

Having narrated her characters' broken lives, the narrator figures them as "trees" "split" by the "lightning" of her storytelling. She has broken them, she says, "to prove I can mend them back again," her narration bound up with violence and the ethics of storytelling, like Florens' opening declaration in *A Mercy* that "my telling can't hurt you" (3). *Jazz*'s last words draw on this mending, "say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (229). The narrator shatters herself and opens herself to remaking, through the presence of hands, here and now, in a second-person relationship with the reader. Morrison's 2012 novel *Home* likewise opens with second-person address, as Frank Money, a traumatized black veteran of the Korean War, recalls as a child seeing a murdered black man's illicit, crude burial after Frank and his sister watched a field full of horses. Frank concludes the opening chapter, "Since you're set on telling my story, whatever you think and whatever you write down, know this: I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men" (5). Frank continues to narrate every-other chapter, in italics, in the second person, as the other interspersed chapters narrate his journey to find his sister Cee, who is sexually assaulted by a white eugenicist doctor and nearly dies. Frank's interlocutor remains mysterious, but he

clearly intends his story to be retold, and he emphasizes questions of truth in storytelling, narratively recovering the murdered, buried black man from the repressed depths of his own memory.

In *Home*'s penultimate chapter, Frank and Cee, whom Frank has rescued from the eugenicist, return home to exhume the buried body, a figure for more a general post-traumatic recovery. They find the body in the field, "such small bones. So few pieces of clothing. The skull, however, was clean and smiling" (143). Simultaneously grotesque and affirmative, the smile both terrifies Frank and Cee and unites them in human solidarity with the dead man. While Cee couldn't watch the original burial, now, "Cee bit her lip, forcing herself not to look away, not to be the terrified child who could not bear to look directly at the slaughter that went on in the world" (143). They place the exhumed bones in Cee's quilt, Frank "doing his level best to arrange them the way they once were in life," and "the quilt became a shroud of lilac, crimson, yellow, and dark navy blue" (143). They carry the quilt-shroud and its burden "toward the stream," and "quickly they found the sweet bay tree—split down the middle, beheaded, undead—spreading its arms, one to the right, one to the left" (144). Frank sets down the quilt so that he can dig at the base of the tree. The sun is nearly set, and "when finally it was done a welcome breeze rose. Brother and sister slid the crayon-colored coffin into the perpendicular grave" (144). Frank nails a board to the tree, "Here Stands A Man" (145). "Wishful thinking, perhaps," the chapter ends, "but [Frank] could have sworn the sweet bay was pleased to agree. Its olive-green leaves went wild in the glow of a fat cherry-red sun" (145). Frank's act of reburial refigures the murder's brutality as the beauty of the horses, who "stood like men," except the murder victim *is* a man standing, the metaphor literalized. And the sign ambiguously describes the tree, too, "beheaded, undead," itself a kind of standing man—as the tree will eventually metabolize the man buried among its roots.

Frank's "wishful thinking" is likewise ambiguous, either wishing that the tree agrees

with him, or that the man has been made to stand—either having restored a kind of dignity to the dead, or merely imagined doing so. Despite being "split" and "beheaded," the tree bursts to life in the sun's dying light, and the novel ends with a chapter that is just a poem:

> *I stood there a long while, staring at that tree.*
> *It looked so strong*
> *So beautiful.*
> *Hurt right down the middle*
> *But alive and well.*
> *Cee touched my shoulder*
> *Lightly.*
> *Frank?*
> *Yes?*
> *Come on, brother. Let's go home.* (146)

The tree is both "hurt right down the middle" and "alive and well," the way the buried man both stands, with his dignity restored in death, and remains dead, the way Frank and Cee both continue to live, heading "home," despite their revenant traumas. Like the lightning-bolt-split tree of *Jazz* and the grass springing to life again in *A Mercy*, the tree is fundamentally broken, but it also continues to grow, restoring Frank and Cee's familial bonds with one another to something like the trees leaning on each other with which Morrison figures Jacob and Rebekka's relationship in *A Mercy*. Florens' writing in *A Mercy*, like the split tree, then, works to rebuild her relationships with the blacksmith and her mother, even though it also utterly fails to do so, ultimately unable to be read. Her community, rebuilt through literature, coalesces while remaining in a state of "debris," shattered and rebuilding its coherence at one and the same time. Describing her gang-rape on the plantation, Florens' mother says that "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (191). Morrison probes the "open wound[s]" of black and female experience in the United States, the overt racism of slavery in *A Mercy* and the mid-20th-century structural racism depicted in *The Bluest Eye*. Simultaneously, Morrison envisions characters carving a space in the world for themselves to belong together with one another, telling stories to reassemble fragmented bits of lost selves and damaged worlds into temporary

communities. But these rebuilt communities are merely "scars" that "fester" somewhere "ever below." Rebirth is not Christian salvation, but just new skin waiting to be torn away too.

Communal scars

Cormac McCarthy, I've argued, depicts and metafictionally theorizes how his characters phenomenologically rebuild their worlds by telling stories. This rebuilding connects, in McCarthy's fiction, with an ethical imperative to transcend the horizons of a particular world and empathize with another person's perspective, so that even if violence doesn't shatter our world, we should still constantly recreate it in the process of opening ourselves to others. Michael Ondaatje similarly, I've said, portrays the act of reconstructing the self by reading and writing, overcoming a constitutive fragmentation in the subject by literarily rhyming the self with its own past. As it does for McCarthy, this rhyming interweaves the self with others, whose embodied presence intersubjectively grounds the self as it imagines itself into its own past and others' perspectives. Lina's "self-invention" in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, and the "way to be in the world" that it helps her to reassemble from the shards of her lost childhood (57), resonate philosophically with Ondaatje and McCarthy's models of self- and world-re-making. Florens' writing, attempting to commune with the blacksmith and her mother, echoes McCarthy and Ondaatje's emphasis on ethics as a literary process, contradicting Rorty by uniting ethics and self-creation. And Morrison's images of split-but-still-growing trees embody what I have called the becoming of being, a simultaneous disintegration and reconstructed presence, refusing to evacuate ethics or belief, or to defer them into the future, *pace* Attridge, Ratti, McClure, and Hungerford's analysis. Like Ondaatje and McCarthy, Morrison represents a major link in a strand of postmodern fiction primarily concerned not, as Grausam or Wood would have it, with entropy and inconclusiveness, but with how literature helps us start over again when violence brings things crashing to a halt.

Morrison takes the additional step, though, of reframing the basic Nietzschean self-

creation pursued by McCarthy's judge Holden and Ondaatje's Anna as a primarily and essentially communal activity of rebuilding the relationships in and by which characters only, always, and already exist. Florens' and Frank Money's second-person addresses make literary self-fashioning inherently a process in which the people in relationships reconstitute their bonds. This belies the individuality of Page and Duvall's descriptions of identity in Morrison's fiction, while expanding what Page labels as the oscillation between the fusion and fragmentation of the self into a constantly self-re-creating community. In *Paradise*, published in 1997, and *Beloved*, published a decade before, Morrison plays out the scarred-yet-festering wounds of racism and misogyny in her most explicit visions of community. She broadens the familial space she limns in *A Mercy* and *Home*, as well as her continuous interest in houses and the people that they shape within them, into entire towns. As she depicts Ruby, Oklahoma in *Paradise*, and Cincinnati, Ohio in *Beloved*, Morrison explores the often violent dynamics by which communities come apart, pull themselves apart, and work to put themselves back together. In the process, Morrison calls attention to the unequal distribution of resources that determines who has the capacity to rebuild their lives like Anna in *Divisadero* or the judge in *Blood Meridian*. The blacksmith's illiteracy in *A Mercy* highlights the problem of black illiteracy and education in the antebellum, Jim Crow, and contemporary worlds, while Florens' reclamation of Jacob's mansion highlights the post-Civil War problem of black property, wealth-accumulation, and home-ownership so devastatingly described by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his May, 2014 feature in *The Atlantic*, "The Case for Reparations." As the black communities of Ruby and Cincinnati try to rebuild themselves, sometimes giving up and starting whole new settlements, Morrison portrays the structural violence that leads to ghettoization and mortally impinges on the rebuilding of cities like Detroit and post-Katrina New Orleans. My study's emphasis on reconstruction and reparation then takes on a specific historical resonance, echoing the brief, largely failed attempt during Reconstruction to rebuild the

United States while fundamentally rearranging its social compact. Morrison imagines how fiction can help such failed communities come together and remake themselves through and against their failure, reconstructing ethical solidarity precisely out of their ruins and "debris."

In *Paradise*, with its recursive chapters that repeat, revise, and fill in (some of) the gaps in each other's history, we learn the long genesis of the town of Ruby, founded by the former residents of Haven, Oklahoma, itself founded by ex-slaves moving west. After World War II, Haven's veterans return home, and a group of fifteen families sets out to build a new city, laying out Ruby as a single straight road with churches, houses, and stores. Outside Ruby lies a bootlegger's mansion that has been turned into a convent and an assimilationist school for Native American girls. Ruby grows and prospers, but the school's pupils slowly dwindle and its nuns are reassigned. Eventually, only the Revered Mother and her assistant Consolata, who goes by Connie, remain. Then, a series of misfit girls arrive at the Convent, one by one, and are taken in by Connie after Reverend Mother dies. Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas live with Connie in freedom and safety at the Convent. Meanwhile, in Ruby, fault lines form between the younger and older generations. In the center of town sits an oven, forged by the original residents of Haven and transported to Ruby decades later. It bears an inscription, "…the Furrow of His Brow," and the older generation interprets the inscription as "Beware the Furrow of his Brow," while the younger generation, caught up in political activism, see it as the more militant "Be the Furrow of His Brow" (86). Graffiti and loose behavior begin to show up in Ruby, enraging the elders, whose own sexual misdeeds hide more deeply. Eventually the anger at youthful rebellion explodes as men from the town scapegoat the Convent. Steward Morgan, whose twin brother Deacon is Connie's former illicit lover, shoots Connie in the head, and like the split that then emerges between Deacon and Steward, Ruby's fault lines gape open. Anna, an adult resident with allegiances toward the younger generation, thinks, "they were sorting out what looked like the total collapse of a town" (304).

Though the last we hear of Ruby is about a town in the process of collapse, the women who once lived at the Convent offer a model of communal reinvention. Each woman has her own psychological and physical scars, but toward the end of *Paradise*, Connie reclaims her Spanish name, "I call myself Consalata Sosa," and leads them in a search for healing, "I will teach you what you are hungry for" (262). In the Convent's basement, they create a group art project, "That is how the loud dreaming began. How the stories rose in that place. Half-tales and the never-dreamed […] Life, real and intense, shifted to down there" (264). They draw themselves on the floor, and Seneca, who routinely cuts herself, now "chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor," transmuting her self-mutilation into art (265). "With Consalata in charge," we hear, "they altered. They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below" (265). The women embrace their artistically recreated bodies, the images they make with one another as they tell their stories, and, eventually, "unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted," their communal art exorcising their demons (266). They are hunted, though, and when Connie dies and the other women scatter, Billie Delia, whom they had previously helped, "was perhaps the only one in town who was not puzzled by where the women were or concerned about how they disappeared. She had another question: When will they return?" (308). Billie Delia thinks that Ruby's men "had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them," and she expects the Convent women to "reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint, and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town" (308). *Paradise*'s final chapter envisions the women returning, but not as vengeful Valkyries swooping down on Ruby. Instead, Gigi sees her father Manley with his prison gang (310), Pallas recovers her huaraches from her mother Dee Dee's house (312), Mavis visits with her daughter Sally (313), and Jean sees her daughter Seneca, but they don't quite connect (317). Like Florens' mother impossibly speaking to her in *A Mercy*'s conclusion,

Paradise ends with the women, like apparitions, recovering, in some small way, their lives.

McClure argues that the violence at the Convent is of a fundamentally hermeneutical kind. The narrative of Ruby and its history, contested by the younger generation's challenge to "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," becomes, McClure says, a totalitarian master narrative that controls community members' lives (113). The women at the Convent have each escaped the violent narratives of their lives, and recreated new stories and body-images for themselves, but Ruby's master narrative ultimately won't let them, imposing itself again through bullets. For McClure, then, the promise of *Paradise*—indeed, the location of Paradise—lies in a blending of narratives. "One way to read *Paradise*," he writes, "would be as a postcolonial narrative of recovery and return, a triumphant story of the resurgence, in spite of Protestant preachers and Catholic missionaries, of an older knowledge and human-divine community," represented by the images scrawled on the Convent's basement floor (115). "Ultimately, then, *Paradise* endorses (but does not demand)," McClure says, "an exodus from the monotheistic terrain of traditional Christianity into the spacious beckoning wilderness of that radical ontological pluralism sketched out by William James" (117). McClure's reading of ontological pluralism in *Paradise* seems to me spot on, but his interpretation fails to account for the specific mechanics by which Morrison portrays that pluralism opening, collapsing, and reopening again. In *Paradise*, we view a cyclical series of violent events, from slavery to the world wars to Vietnam to the shooting at the Convent. The opening chapter stresses that it is World War II veterans who "shoot the white girl first" (3), in the same kind of repetitive violence that Ondaatje portrays in *Divisadero*. Morrison shows how the women at the Convent repeatedly reestablish new collective narratives, working together to tell and depict themselves, in order to reclaim themselves. And she shows how dispossessed ex-slaves, despite having nothing, build Haven, then rebuild it as Ruby, then, in the upheaval of the fight for civil rights, confront another collapse. These communities carry within themselves the seeds of their own

self-destruction, but also the possibility, through an opening onto the plurality of beliefs and ways of life, of reconstructing themselves anew, in new neighborly and ethical relations.

Beloved concludes with just such communal recreation. When Sethe, her two sons, and her two daughters escape from slavery in Kentucky to freedom in Cincinnati, Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs takes them in and holds a massive party. As a result of the party's abundance, though, Baby Suggs' black neighbors grow jealous, and no one warns Sethe and Baby Suggs when Sethe's master arrives with a posse to recapture her. Sethe kills her baby daughter rather than see her taken into slavery, and *Beloved* dramatizes how Sethe wrestles with her murdered daughter's ghost. Sethe's two sons run away, and Baby Suggs dies, leaving only Sethe and her daughter Denver in their house at 124. Years later, after the Civil War, Paul D, one of Sethe's fellow slaves in Kentucky, arrives at 124, and he violently throws out Sethe's daughter's ghost. Shortly thereafter, a striking young woman arrives, barely speaking and incoherent, and Sethe takes her as her daughter given flesh. She calls her Beloved. Sethe devotes herself completely to Beloved, giving up her job to spend more time with her, which drains Sethe's life away, "Denver saw the flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb fade away. Saw Sethe's eyes bright but dead" (242). To save her mother and herself, Denver turns at last to outside help. She tells her story to Janey, who spreads the word

> among the other coloredwomen. Sethe's dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. […] It took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated and then to calm down and assess the situation. They fell into three groups: those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through. (255)

Sutured together by gossip and making sense of the world through stories, the townswomen, who previously abandoned Sethe after the party and then spurned her when she became a murderer, coalesce as a group to help Denver and save Sethe.

The women work together as a chorus figure, and wrap Sethe back into their fold, in order to exorcize Beloved from 124. "It was Ella," the narrator says, "more than anyone who

convinced the others that rescue was in order. She was a practical woman who believed there was a root either to chew or avoid for every ailment" (256). Ella judges Sethe harshly—"When [Sethe] got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody, and lived as though she were alone, Ella junked her and wouldn't give her the time of day" (256)—but she is willing to help Denver, who she thinks has "some sense after all. At least she had stepped out the door, asked for the help she needed" (256). Ella rejects Sethe because Sethe ignores the community, but she acts on Denver's behalf when Denver seeks help. Ella gathers thirty women to save Sethe, and when the women arrive at 124, they flash back to an earlier time:

> When they caught up with each other, all thirty, and arrived at 124, the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep. Catfish was popping grease in the pan and they saw themselves scoop German potato salad onto the plate. Cobbler oozing purple syrup colored their teeth. They sat on the porch, ran down to the creek, teased the men, hoisted children on their hips or, if they were the children, straddled the ankles of old men who held their little hands while giving them a horsey ride. Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more. Mothers, dead now, moved their shoulders to mouth harps. The fence they had leaned on and climbed over was gone. The stump of the butternut had split like a fan. But there they were, young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs' yard, not feeling the envy that surfaced the next day. (258)

The women recur to the party the day before Sethe killed her daughter, and now they help instead of hurt, praying and wailing against Beloved. Ella—who herself had a child fathered in rape by her master, and then let the child die—begins shouting, and the other women, joining her, "took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (259). The women form a primal community bonded together by pure sound, trying to rescue their neighbor.

At the same time, Edward Bodwin, who owns 124, is on his way to pick up Denver for work. Sethe and Beloved come to the door when they hear the women's sound, and

> For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave

> of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

Like the women re-experiencing the past as they reach the house, Sethe feels that this moment is another time, recalling the communal worship Baby Suggs led in "the Clearing" behind 124. The memory "wash[es]" Sethe clean. Bodwin's wagon pulls up to the house in the midst of Sethe's reminiscence, and Sethe flashes to another memory, seeing Bodwin as her old master coming again to take Beloved away. She charges at him with an ice pick, this time attacking her tormentor instead of her daughter, and the women pile on top of her. Ella punches her in the jaw, and Bodwin claims not to even realize that Sethe had charged at him (265). During the furor in front of the house, Beloved disappears. Later, Paul D, who left Sethe when he learned that she killed her daughter, returns to 124. He bathes Sethe, piece by piece, and she wonders, "will the parts hold?" (272). Paul D thinks that "there are too many things to feel about this woman," then he remembers what his friend Sixo said about his own woman, "'She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind'" (272-3). Sethe and Paul D both fragment into pieces here, with their own traumatic pasts that they have locked away. But just as the women's communal noise saves Sethe, Sethe and Paul D also piece each other together again, through their togetherness. Paul D, we hear, "wants to put his story next to hers" in order to heal (273).

Simultaneously depicting Sethe and her neighbors remembering the past and exorcizing Beloved's memory, Morrison establishes a paradoxical dialectic between what she calls "rememory" and "disremembering." "Some things go. Pass. Some things just stay," Sethe tells Denver, "I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there" (36-7). Through "rememory," the absent past remains present, not just in Sethe's memory, but in a kind of always already repeated re-memory. In contrast, when the women at the end of the novel

drive out Beloved, Beloved falls apart: "Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her […] the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (274). Then the novel delivers its most famous line, "It was not a story to pass on" (274). "They forgot her like a bad dream," we are told, "After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. […] Remembering seemed unwise" (274). Later, the injunction against memory metafictionally shifts from the characters forgetting Beloved to the readers, "This is not a story to pass on" (275). For Sethe to honor Beloved's death and remember the violence of slavery, that is, requires also an act of repression, "As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (6). Memory recreates the past in present form, rememorying it, as Sethe and the women both experience the present and the past at once. At the same time, an act of forgetting disremembers and dismembers Beloved in order for Sethe to survive and rejoin her neighbors, whom she "never" thought would "come back" to her again (173). Sethe, Paul D, Denver, and the women put themselves back together and reunite as a community by paradoxically remembering and forgetting the past, reforming their community out of its ruins, as the story both shouldn't be "pass[ed] on" nor be "pass[ed] on" from. Reflecting on "the ravages of Vaark's death" at the end of *A Mercy*, Scully "saw dark matter out there, thick, unknowable, aching to be made into a world. […] it was enough to imagine a future" (183). Morrison envisions the shattered pieces of a community as such insubstantial substance, waiting to be made again into a "world" and a "future" by the activity of storytelling and remembering that Florens and her mother and Sethe and Sethe's neighbors and Paul D and the women at the Convent undertake together.

In the introduction, I quoted bell hooks's call for a critique of the subject that doesn't eliminate the voices of black subjects just as they gain the right to speech and an identity.

"Postmodern culture with its decentered subject," hooks says, "can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding" (31). By locating her characters' subjectivity within a communal tapestry that they work, through storytelling, to stitch back together when its threads have been "severed," Morrison opens up these "new and varied forms of bonding," showing Florens or Denver trying to create alternative ways of being with their neighbors. Morrison decenters the subject by placing it within a protean community—her novels depict the fragmentation of the selves and communities they portray, undermining the unitary, authoritative voice Hungerford identifies in Morrison's fiction—but she thereby retains the subject's presence as part of that constantly self-re-creating neighborhood. As Ondaatje and McCarthy use their fiction to imagine fiction's ethical role in human life, a literary tool capable of recreating broken selves and worlds, Morrison's fiction imagines fiction's power to reshape the narratives by which communities construct themselves in order to rebuild broken communities out of their own rubble. In my next and final chapter, on Philip Roth's novels, I examine this basic underlying fiction shared by Morrison, McCarthy, and Ondaatje: the fiction of whether fiction has any efficacy at all.

5. Disowning Fiction: Philip Roth

Since at least his first novel, 1962's *Letting Go*, whose own Jamesian tale of dashed hopes and suffocating relationships begins with a flirtation veiled as a debate on *The Portrait of a Lady*, Philip Roth's fiction has taken as perhaps its central topic and theme the complex, convoluted, and ultimately, for Roth, obscure relationship between life and literature. That Roth complicates, interrogates, and lampoons literature's relationship with life is by now a critical commonplace roughly on a par with pointing out stream of consciousness in *Ulysses*. But Roth's deepest concern, I think, at an ontological level that critics have yet to describe, involves a Sisyphean attempt to recover, through fiction, the very possibility of thinking about life in and through literature. I therefore want to use Roth's writing, now, to examine the mechanics by which novelists like McCarthy, Morrison, Ondaatje, and Roth himself imagine that fiction can help us make sense of and rewrite the outside world. Roth's work both strips away illusions about the literariness of life and the real-world efficacy of literature even as it simultaneously strives to recreate exactly those illusions. If chapters 2, 3, and 4 describe literature's failure to construct our lives precisely in order to envision literature reconstructing our lives after violence of various kinds, Roth asks what acts of artistic self-deception go into imagining such a continuing faith in fiction. But Roth also poignantly demonstrates the absolute necessity of these self-deceptions, and the faith in fiction that they enable, in order to continue to live. Roth's novels pursue modes of being capable of generating life-affirming illusions, and in that imaginative act they are themselves such illusions, necessary but self-consciously empty fantasies of the possibility of making meaning, as Roth's novelist alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman converts his newfound nihilism about literature in *The Anatomy Lesson* into his excessively vital impersonation of the literary critic-cum-pornographer Milton Appel. Roth, I'll argue, paradoxically disowns fiction in order to reclaim the illusions that it creates.

Across his career, Roth repeatedly questions and refigures literature's role in life. In

the introduction to his 1975 collection of essays and interviews *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth says that the assembled "pieces reveal to me a continuing preoccupation with the relationship between the written and the unwritten world," two realms "I feel myself shuttling between every day […] cast somewhat in the role of the courier Barnabas" in Kafka's *The Castle* (xiii-xiv). Characteristically for Roth, the already self-referential act of reading himself—including an 'interview' he conducted with himself in 1973—becomes in his introduction an insightful, meta-essayistic act of rereading his own previous readings of himself. Compiling and describing his earlier nonfiction writings, themselves mainly concerned with his own novels, "reveal[s]" to Roth his own obsessions and thereby crystallizes his intertextual perception of his life as a Kafkaesque "shuttling." In his fiction, Roth likewise "shuttle[es]" between changing portraits of "the relationship between the written and the unwritten world." Roth blasts his own early, naïve view of literature as "a religious calling," as well as the New Critics who inspired it (*Reading*, 67-8). He depicts the failings of psychoanalytic narratives in pyrotechnically fantastic and frustrated tales from *Portnoy's Complaint* to *The Breast* to *My Life as a Man* to *The Anatomy Lesson*. He satirizes and baits readers and critics who misapprehend his fiction as autobiography in the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy and his three 'Philip Roth' novels, *Deception*, *Operation Shylock*, and *The Plot Against America*. And he pokes fun at literary theory in the figure of Delphine Roux in *The Human Stain*, while Amy Bellette—herself nominally a gentle satire on *belles lettres* whom Zuckerman once reimagined as Anne Frank, the Jewish writer with the greatest 'real-world' impact—attacks politically correct reading in *Exit Ghost*: "The Nietzschean prophecy come true: art killed by resentment" (177). Roth undermines each of these models of life and literature in a mix of humor and rage. What then is "the relationship between the written and the unwritten world," itself enacted meta-essayistically when Roth's introductory essay about his essays "reveal[s]" his life to him?

Roth's unstable, self-undermining conception of literature itself revolves around

change. Roth describes his impersonations of Zuckerman in the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy as a kind of ventriloquism, and he claims that the ventriloquist's "art consists of being present *and* absent," even as he glosses his literary impersonation of Zuckerman by giving himself a new persona as a ventriloquist (*Reading*, 124). Roth both is and isn't Zuckerman, both is and isn't a ventriloquist, both is and isn't himself as a writer: "I am like somebody who is trying vividly to transform himself out of himself and into his vividly transforming heroes. I am very much like somebody who spends all day writing" (*Reading*, 148). Roth's protagonists have "to be in a state of vivid transformation or radical displacement," he says, present to themselves only by being absently other to themselves in the same kind of ceaseless kinesis by which Roth "shuttl[es]" between realities (*Reading*, 142). Roth's novels, like his protagonists, embody such constant change and self-contestation—epitomized by *The Counterlife*'s multiple contradictory plotlines—and he identifies this "sensibility" as what makes his fiction "Jewish, if anything does: the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatizing, the indignation, the obsessiveness, the touchiness, the play-acting—above all the *talking*" (*Reading*, 140). If we believe Roth that arguing and dramatizing are uniquely Jewish, then we might read him alongside Jonathan Freedman's claim, in his article on *Angels in America* that I quoted in my introduction, that "Jews are doubtless different—but somehow differently different, in ways that differ markedly over time" (90). Jewishness here becomes a cipher for de-essentialized identity, a mode of being that defines itself through difference and through difference from 'normal' modes of difference, in a "radical displacement" from itself. The hyper-self-conscious and -self-contesting form of Roth's meta-essayistic nonfiction would, then, within this schema, represent a supremely Jewish form, protean, obsessive, nervous, "*talking*."

Critics have made much of Roth's multiplicity—of his protean views on identity, history, literary style, embodiment, or sexuality. Hermione Lee cites Roth's rapid and varied stylistic developments and his "versatile" approach to American culture to justify her 1982

study *Philip Roth*, anchoring Roth's literary greatness in his differences from himself (10). Debra Shostak's 2004 *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives* similarly argues that "Roth seems to view the enterprise of fiction-making as a multi-dimensional and multi-voiced dialogue. The writer talks to himself, through a diverse population of fictive avatars, in order to pry out the many selves he inhabits and embraces and thus to sketch out a host of counterlives" (3). David Brauner's 2007 *Philip Roth* extends this line of analysis by emphasizing "the idea of paradox, both as a rhetorical device of which Roth is particularly fond, and also as an organising intellectual and ideological principle that inflects all of his work" (8). And most recently, in his 2012 article on Roth's connection with Nietzsche that I cited in my introduction, Patrick Hayes argues that Roth's portrayal of identity refuses "to foreclose on any particular way of exploring the self's possibilities" (510). This multiplicitous strategy for interrogating the many and varied "possibilities" of the self allows Hayes to find in Roth's work a way of deliberating evaluatively on the "manifold" potential ways of being (510). Paradox, counterlife, manifold, versatility—these critics all respond to the "shuttling" nature of Roth's work. But they all approach Roth, I want to argue, at what we might call a merely ontic level, examining the competing perspectives and possibilities between which he shuttles, and his strategies for such shuttling, without attending to the way that Roth's writing, on something like an ontological level, probes, undermines, and attempts to reconstruct faith in the very possibility of having a perspective or imagining a possibility at all. In his Nietzschean connection, Roth indeed writes paradoxical counterlives, but like Nietzsche, he also agonizes over what illusions and self-deceptions enable, at a basic level, such self-displacement.

Like Hayes, and in keeping with my overarching themes, I want to offer a Nietzschean interpretation of Roth. But while Hayes begins with Amy Bellette's "Nietzschean prophecy" about the death of art in order to deploy Nietzsche's perspectivism against new literary ethics, I want to explore at greater depth how Roth's work depicts literature

constructing perspectives at all. In *The Human Stain*, as Zuckerman semi-fictionally narrates Coleman Silk's fall from grace as a Classics professor at a small-town college, he has Silk declare that he doesn't read from particular ideological perspectives, "never even from the fashionable Nietzschean perspective about perspective" (191). Silk's New Critical ideology faces (admittedly limited) criticism elsewhere in Roth's oeuvre, but the barbed adjective "fashionable" here should, I think, be read as Roth's own view, in conjunction with the novel's satire on modish literary theory. As Hayes shows from Roth's papers in the Library of Congress, Roth follows Nietzsche's thinking in various ways, so we should read this line about perspectivism—which Nietzsche, as I said in the introduction, calls "the fundamental condition of all life" (*Beyond*, preface)—as Roth's call for a more nuanced attention to Nietzsche. "There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing,'" Nietzsche writes in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, "and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, *the more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our 'concept' of this matter, our 'objectivity,' be" (III, §12). Like the arguing, play-acting, paradoxical voices of Roth's fiction, Nietzsche envisions the construction of as many different, countertextual perspectives on a "matter" as possible, an "'objectivity'" in scare-quotes and under erasure that exists through its own transformation and displacement from itself, a different difference that "differ[s] markedly over time." And like Nietzsche, Roth probes the acts of literary self-deception that let us believe in perspectivism and imagine, despite knowledge to the contrary, that we have constructed a perspective from which to see and be.

Using fiction

Roth's characters consistently treat literature as a tool for deciphering and altering "the unwritten world" (*Reading*, xiii), defining literature functionally as the activity by which we shape external reality. They also repetitively fail to shape their lives as they desire in and

through literature. Nevertheless, Roth's characters, and Roth himself, continue to embrace literature's efficacy in "the unwritten world," a faith in fiction that I will describe as a Nietzschean will to ignorance in Roth's work: a disillusioned accession to illusions that are known to be false simply in order to survive. "Literature got me into this and literature is gonna have to get me out," Peter Tarnopol, the writer-protagonist of Roth's 1974 novel *My Life as a Man*, at one point declares (194). The main section of *My Life as a Man*, "My True Story," narrated by Tarnopol in the first person, records Tarnopol's vicious, abject battles with his wife Maureen. The scene in which Maureen tricks Tarnopol into marrying her by faking a pregnancy, Roth writes in his autobiography *The Facts*, "more precisely duplicates the autobiographical facts" than anything else in his fiction—"Those scenes represent one of the few occasions when I haven't spontaneously set out to improve on actuality" (107). Her fake pregnancy was Roth's wife Josie's "single great imaginative feat," he says in *The Facts*, rendering her, "if for a moment only, a literary rival of audacious flair" (107). ('Josie,' as Zuckerman points out in his fictional response to Roth at the end of *The Facts*, is itself a fake name for Roth's real wife [179].) Part of Roth's response to Josie's literary invention in the world of "actuality," then, is to invent and narrate Tarnopol's response to Maureen's invention in *My Life as a Man*. And Tarnopol, likewise, responds to Maureen partly by writing, composing the two short stories, "Salad Days" and "Courting Disaster," that form the opening section of *My Life as a Man* overarchingly entitled "Useful Fictions." These stories feature the first appearance of Nathan Zukerman—not quite the same character who would soon appear in Roth's many Zuckerman novels—a writer who, unsurprisingly, deals with his own relationship troubles partly by narrating his autobiography in "Courting Disaster." If literature helps "get" Zuckerman or Tarnopol or Roth "out" of their jambs, then, it apparently does so by exposing and meditating on the metafictional layers by which it attempts to be "useful."

In the Zuckerman novels that follow *My Life as a Man*, Roth draws out the paradoxical efficacy of "useful fictions" like his own and Tarnopol's, which become useful precisely by metafictionally undermining their own usefulness. At the beginning of 1979's *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman tells us, "I was twenty-three, writing and publishing my first short stories, and like many a *Bildungsroman* hero before me, already contemplating my own massive *Bildungsroman*" (3). Writing a work of literature now, Zuckerman perceives and creates his past self as a literary character whose own self-perception and self-creation involve both planning to write a novel and contemplating his life as a *Bildungsroman*. Zuckerman mocks his early faith in literary self-invention even as he constructs himself through literature, framing self-creation as the "useful" result of fiction's inability to create the self. In *The Counterlife*, Roth portrays self-fashioning as an even more radical failure to create the self. The novel's five chapters revise and contradict one another, and it closes with Zuckerman imagining himself exchanging letters with his wife Maria, whose letter he himself invents (315-16). Toward the end of his own letter in response to Maria, Zuckerman riffs at length on the literary nature of the self:

> All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self. […] What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself—a troupe of players that I have internalized, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required, an ever-evolving stock of pieces and parts that forms my repertoire. But I certainly have no self independent of my imposturing, artistic efforts to have one. Nor would I want one. I am a theater and nothing more than a theater.
>
> Now probably this is all true only to a point and I am characteristically taking it too far […] But it *is* INTERESTING trying to get a handle on one's own subjectivity. (324-5)

The self exists in the "imposturing" by which it both fails and succeeds at being a present self, even as Zuckerman both claims and negates his claim that he is only "a theater." "It's all error," an older Zuckerman says at the end of 1998's *I Married a Communist*, "There's only error. *There's* the heart of the world. Nobody finds his life. That *is* life" (319), while in 1997's *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman declares, "That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong" (35).

For Zuckerman, fiction is "useful" because it utterly collapses. Not having a life "*is* life."

Roth works through this paradox in relation to his own literary vocation in a 1994 essay called "Juice or Gravy? How I Met My Fate in a Cafeteria." Published in the *New York Times Book Review* for the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Portnoy's Complaint*, and shortly after the release of Roth's faux-autobiographical novel *Operation Shylock*, "Juice or Gravy" purports to explain the origin of Roth's nineteen books to date. The essay pivots around Roth's desire and inability to create himself autonomously. At the beginning of the essay, after describing his start in "adult life" with his discharge from the Army, Roth declares that he "was about to manufacture a future" (3). Hoping to become an author, Roth writes that he "wished to dazzle in my very own way and to dazzle myself no less than anyone else," manufacturing his future by manufacturing unique literature that would surprise even himself (21). This pursuit of self-determination, however, disintegrates when confronted with uncontrollable events. First, Roth learns that his body can betray him, as chronic back pain inhibits his ability to write: "I discovered that I was no longer governing my body" (3). Then Roth introduces his wife, who "amplified this education with a vengeance" (3). As detailed in *The Facts* and refracted in *My Life as a Man*, Roth's spectacular battles with his wife utterly rewrite his expectations for himself and his future. "I was learning," Roth writes, "how things happen independently of one's own massive exertions, how all one's planning, tenacity, ingenuity and forcefulness can mean nothing and come to nothing" (3). "In a mere square mile of Chicago," he says, "there was enough of the counterpressure of the limitless Anti-You to make of my mighty and estimable young will something about the size and strength of a minnow" (3). Having realized that his reality doesn't perfectly reflect his will, Roth admits that "it could well be the future that would be manufacturing me" (3), trading in his bold pursuit of literary self-creation for determination by "the limitless Anti-You."

In "Juice or Gravy," though, Roth also tries to recover some form of faith in the will's

power to create the self through literature. Roth describes his belief as a young writer that "where mine was the imagination totally in charge, I could not but become exactly what I wanted" (21), then he narrates his discovery of a piece of paper that would become his "fate." Roth goes to eat in a local diner, attracted by "the voice of the small Sicilian man with the big serving dippers who stood to the side of the guy who sliced and served the roast beef and whose job it was to ask each and every roast beef customer, 'Juice or gravy?'" (21). "This mesmerized and delighted me," Roth says, "three words. That was the whole verbal job" (21). On the night in question, Roth recalls, he went to the diner, "only so as to hear—before I settled in correcting comma faults in all those faulty student papers—the poet himself speak aloud the four-syllable haiku that always cheered me up" (21). Roth substitutes the Sicilian server's verbal poetry for his composition students' literary faults, finding in that "haiku" the strength for his own "imagination" to be "in charge." Then, at his table, Roth comes across a piece of paper, with nineteen disparate sentences written on it, and he thinks that it "must be the work of a neighborhood avant-gardist with an interest in 'experimental' or 'automatic' writing" (21). Like his reinterpretation of the server's job as poetry, Roth immediately interprets the sentences that he encounters as a consciously constructed, even if "'automatic'" work of art. Consequently, he searches for order within the sentences, "scanning for an underlying design that would disclose an overall meaning" (22). But Roth is disappointed, realizing "that these sentences, as written, had *nothing* to do with one another. I saw that if ever a unifying principle were to be discernible in the paragraph, it would have to be imposed from without rather than unearthed from within" (22). Roth then discovers the ability to shape himself by interpreting someone else's writing, ordering his life by ordering the words into which he has been thrown: "What I eventually understood was that these were the first lines of the books that it had fallen to me to write" (22). Roth recovers his ability to "become exactly what I wanted" as an author by imagining that he has come across an external fate,

and then reinterpreting that fate as his own power to impose order on himself and the world.

But Roth also recognizes that his fantasy of fate-cum-self-determination is arbitrary and unjustifiable. Unable to describe the paper simply and objectively, Roth instead elaborates various possible perspectives on it: "this document—this gift—this burden—this prank—this incomprehensible whatever-it-was—this *nothing*—came my way some dozen years before the words 'coronary catheterization' [in the fifteenth sentence on the paper] referred to anything real in the medical world" (22). Roth simultaneously admits the nullity of the piece of paper, "this *nothing*," and attempts to maintain the fiction that it inspired his books, pointing out how uncannily it anticipates medical advances that play a central role in *The Counterlife*. Roth even claims that the final sentence on the paper—which is identical with the opening line of *Operation Shylock*, published the year before—is impossibly and presciently true-to-life, reinforcing *Operation Shylock*'s playful claim to be autobiography. Yet Roth also backtracks, contradicting himself again: "I am even willing to concede that my conclusion was completely mistaken and my whole career has been grounded in a baseless premise. An idiotic premise. An *insane* premise" (22). The paper, Roth felt, "charged" him "to make a life's work," shaping his life as a writer through the piece of writing that he discovered (22). But this life and its premise, which he admitted was an order imposed by him on external phenomena, are "insane." "Orderly expectations and a rational outlook are as great a fantasy as anything cooked up in the rotting brain of a paranoid schizophrenic" (3), Roth says early in "Juice or Gravy," and so the order that he creates in his own life through his interpretation of the piece of paper represents the mere "fantasy" of "a paranoid schizophrenic."

Roth is clearly having us on with the idea of the piece of paper that inspired his career, the same way that his 'Philip Roth' characters in his two previous novels, *Deception* and *Operation Shylock*, tease us and make for a clever metafictional laugh. But his essay is also haunted by a serious edge, the idea that in constructing his life by writing a series of fictional

counterlives, Roth has operated baselessly, with no 'right' to his interpretations or self-creations—"there's only error." I want to read Roth's simultaneous belief in and evacuation of his fictional counterlives as a Nietzschean will to ignorance in his work, both stripping away and desperately clinging to what Nietzsche calls the "veil of illusion" (*Birth*, §7). In a chapter of *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* entitled "Untruth as a Condition of Life," Nehamas declares that "Nietzsche writes that truth is created and not discovered. […] But he still believes that we must think of it as something we discover in order to go on to create it" (59). This belief, Nehamas argues, represents a "will to ignorance," a "will not to know that one is failing to know many things in the process of coming to know one" (69)—a power of self-deception that pretends not to know that one only ever knows perspectivally. Nietzsche's career, in fact, may be seen as a meditation on how to maintain our illusions of objectivity, staving off nihilism even as we demythologize inherited metaphysics. Nietzsche begins *Beyond Good and Evil* with a question, "granted, we will truth: *why not untruth instead?* And uncertainty? Even ignorance?" (§1). He then declares that "it could be possible that appearance, the will to deception, and craven self-interest should be accorded a higher and more fundamental value for all life," before proposing that the will to truth and the will to ignorance "are even essentially the same" (§2). Just as Hamlet can only act under illusion, "untruth" possess a "more fundamental value for all life" than any truth, in fact allowing us to believe in truth. Nietzsche recognizes the life-negating nihilism that haunts his perspectivism—"when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you" (*Beyond*, §146)—and so turns, as we saw in chapter 3 on Michael Ondaatje, to the self-deception of "art," a "mask" that lets us stare into the abyss.

Roth's depiction of the piece of paper in "Juice or Gravy" enacts such a Nietzschean will to ignorance. He simultaneously reveals the nothingness of the paper—both within the essay when he calls it "*nothing*" and outside the essay, when we know that the paper is just a

joke—and covers it back up again under the self-consciously "baseless" fiction about his "fate" (22). Roth therefore reveals the nothingness lurking beneath his own fictions, their baselessness, and at the same time creates the fiction of the piece of paper to ground his fiction writing on another made-up story. Roth attempts to recover fiction's power to shape his life and his vocation by imagining a fiction that he recognizes, within the very essay in which he describes it as shaping his life, as itself failing justifiably to shape his life. He thus concludes "Juice or Gravy" with the line, "Free at last. Or that's what I would probably be tempted to think if I were either starting all over again or dead" (22). He sees freedom and literarily-self-shaping autonomy as an impossibility that he also believes in, even as, in fact precisely because, he disillusions himself about it through his writing. In Roth's subsequent novel, *Sabbath's Theater*, which Hayes calls "Roth's most explicitly Nietzschean novel" (496), Mickey Sabbath composes his own obituary, which claims that after retiring from puppeteering, he "worked on little else but a five-minute puppet adaptation of the hopelessly insane Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*" (194). In Roth's drafts for *Sabbath's Theater*, he repeatedly reworks the reference to Nietzsche (typescript, p. 19), while dropping a number of other literary allusions from the same section, indicating the reference's importance. At the novel's conclusion, Sabbath decides not to kill himself, because "everything he hated was here" (451). Sabbath revalues his nihilistic hatred as an attachment to life, as he makes the "hopelessly insane" into an impulse to his puppeteer's art, as Roth makes the "insane" piece of paper a fictional justification for his fiction writing. Roth's novels and essays, like Sabbath's puppeteering, struggle to recuperate the illusion of fiction's usefulness, a recuperation that is itself merely a "useful fiction," the tale that Roth tells himself and us in "Juice or Gravy."

Roth's embrace of the paper's nothingness in "Juice or Gravy" indicates the overly optimistic reading that critics have given to Roth's self-contesting counterlives. Brauner, for example, argues that Roth sees "acting not as an imitation of life, but, paradoxically, as its

only authentic expression" (65), meaning that the multiple, contradictory, theatrical selves that Roth portrays compose "a series of co-existing fictional possibilities" (69). In the dialogue between these potential selves, Brauner writes, Roth's oeuvre "reads and revises itself, not in a self-consuming, nihilistic manner but as a means of illustrating the infinite, life-enhancing possibilities of fiction, and the fiction-enhancing possibilities of life" (58). Shostak draws a similar conclusion about the life- and literature-affirming multiplicity of Roth's fiction:

> The counterlife embraces contradictions: that a person can invent many selves to accommodate both desire and the environment to which that person must or will answer […] and that the many selves or positions one occupies nevertheless do not deprive the subject of always, in some sense, being singularly *itself*. (19)

Because Roth sees the self accommodating itself to the contradictions of desire and circumstance, diversity and singularity, Shostak argues that "Roth's fullest access to the sense of reality is from standpoint itself" (10). Roth, Shostak thinks, approaches "the unwritten world" from a blank standpoint before the taking up of particular perspectives, the contradiction-embracing "standpoint itself" of fiction. In the end, then, Shostak asserts on the last page of her study, concluding on a note of ecstatic optimism, "What emerges from the conflict of selves and realities, perhaps more than anything else, is Roth's sheer joy in writing. […] 'Writing is le vrai for me. That's what I conclude! My nostalgia for le vrai is an illusion,' Roth writes in notes for what was to become *The Facts*" (268). Multiplicity of selves and perspective, on these accounts, while it potentially subtends mere illusions and relativistic nihilism, ultimately breeds a kind of infinitude of joyful play, a life-affirming theater of selves.

Where Shostak and Brauner see pure affirmation in Roth's fiction, Hayes thinks that Roth additionally finds a means of evaluating the alternative modes of being that his novels portray. Reading Roth alongside Nietzsche, Hayes asserts that "Nietzsche tended to think of art as a type of action that enables a form of heightened becoming: art brings an increased formal ordering to experience, and enables the 'transfiguration' of seemingly evil affects into

powerful self-creations" (510). Roth pursues such a Nietzschean project, Hayes argues, but Roth also "pursues a more complex view of the work of art than Nietzsche," because Roth uses literature "to compare, with unusual deliberateness, some of the manifold ways in which identity might be differently cathected with power" (510). Roth thus combines a "celebration of performative vitality with a rich evaluative intelligence," winning, in the process, according to Hayes, "a new form of credulity for the longstanding idea that literature is the most rewarding way of thinking about the self" (510-11). Critical evaluation of various positions through fiction ends in a generic affirmation of the "standpoint itself" of "literature" too.

With his central emphasis on "error," though, Roth remains very far indeed from a purely affirmative view of "writing" or its "evaluative" capacity. Roth's repeated refigurations of the piece of paper in "Juice or Gravy" paradoxically represent, to borrow Brauner's phrases, both a "self-consuming, nihilistic" recognition of the paper's nullity and a celebration of "the life-enhancing possibilities of fiction" (58). What Shostak takes as the "sheer joy in writing" indicated by Roth's claim that "writing is le vrai for me" thus seems at a deeper level bound up with his Nietzschean embrace of "untruth": "My nostalgia for le vrai is an illusion," as Roth puts it, so that if "writing" is reality, then the desire for reality through writing is a mere illusion, a self-deception, a play-acted affirmation. "I *want* belief, and I work hard to try to get it," Roth declares in *Reading Myself and Others* (111), which Shostak reads in reference to "the credibility of art," asserting that Roth wants us to believe in his fiction's "verisimilitude" (188). But what Roth's really getting at here is a more basic belief, not in the ontic reality created in his novels, but, at an ontological level, in the capacity of a novel to create anything at all, to be "present" even when it is "*nothing*." The illusion that literature can create such realities is itself an illusion that Roth creates by writing, in a dialectical drama of disillusioning and re-illusioning to which his novels, autobiography, interviews, essays, stories, and memoir all make us privy. Instead of evaluating possible lives through literature, as Hayes would have

it, then, Roth repeatedly evaluates whether literature can do anything at all. And he comes to the conclusion, like Nietzsche, that the order that literature allows us to impose on the world is merely imagined—but that we must keep up the "insane" charade if we want to live.

Letters from no one

If for McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison we imaginatively reconstruct our selves, our worlds, and our communities through literature after they have been violently taken apart, then Roth's Nietzschean will to ignorance unveils both the vertiginous baselessness of this literary imagination and a further, deeper literary imagination that covers up its baselessness in what Nietzsche variously labels as "art," "a mask," or "illusion." When the narrator of *All the Pretty Horses* says that "good will" has the "power to protect […] and to heal men" (221), or when Anna in *Divisadero* says, "I find the lives of Coop and my sister and my father everywhere (I draw portraits of them *everywhere*)" (280), or when Florens' mother at the end of *A Mercy* intones, "Hear a tua mãe" (196), Roth's view reminds us that these represent empty fantasies of remote communication, mere dreams of ethically "tabernacl[ing]" others. And yet Roth also shows the necessity of believing in such fantasies, of using literature to tell ourselves a story about how stories might helps us shape and reshape "the unwritten world" (*Reading*, xiv). Hungerford places Roth in a separate canon from the one that she describes in *Postmodern Belief*, arguing that while writers like McCarthy and Morrison frame postsecular literature as constructing a "belief in literature" itself, Roth represents "a strain of contemporary fiction" that may bring "us beyond the impulse to appeal to a religious belief in literature in order to assure its value" (137). Roth's struggle to believe in the "useful[ness]" of fiction, though, indicates his deeper affinity with the kinds of questions that Morrison and McCarthy's novels raise. Roth depicts "useful fictions" whose efficacy lies precisely in their "error," and so he is forced again and again to reconstruct his very belief in literature, using fiction to rebuild his faith in fiction. Turning now to longer works than "Juice or Gravy," in

The Facts and *Operation Shylock* both, Roth portrays imaginative acts similar to Anna's recreation of her past life or Florens' mother trying to communicate with Florens. Roth peers into the abyss behind these fictions of remote communication, highlighting their essential quality as acts of self-deception. And yet he also works hard to imagine that they represent real and meaningful dialogue, deceiving himself that the fantastic conversations that he creates are not in fact simply acts of self-deception.

Long frustrated by critics who misread his fiction as thinly- or even poorly-veiled autobiography, when Roth wrote his autobiography *The Facts* in 1988, he brazenly framed it with fiction. Having published his fifth Zuckerman book, *The Counterlife*, two years before, Roth opens *The Facts* with a letter from himself to his fictional avatar:

> Dear Zuckerman,
>
> In the past, as you know, the facts have always been notebook jottings, my way of springing into fiction. For me, as for most novelists, every genuine imaginative event begins down there, with the facts, with the specific, and not with the philosophical, the ideological, or the abstract. Yet, to my surprise, I now appear to have gone about writing a book absolutely backward, taking what I have already imagined and, as it were, desiccating it, so as to restore my experience to the original, prefictionalized reality. Why? (3)

In both *The Counterlife* and *Deception*, the next novel that Roth was to write in 1990, bookending *The Facts*, an author's notebooks blend inextricably with his reality. When Zuckerman dies in chapter 4 of *The Counterlife*, his brother Henry discovers a series of notebook entries that we recognize as having made up chapter 1 of the novel, and Henry sees Zuckerman's draft, in notebook form, of what will then be chapter 5. As the novel's chapters counter, revise, and erase one another's plots, what is to be read as the novel's 'reality' and what is to be read as merely fantasized by Zuckerman in his notebooks becomes indeterminable. In *Deception*, the indeterminacy of notebooks and novel becomes even rifer, as the novel's scenes seem often to be notebook jottings by Philip, even as those notebook jottings record scenes in which Philip explains to Claire that some of his notebook jottings record real events and some are merely imagined. Claire teasingly stands in for Roth's

longtime partner Claire Bloom, and Philip similarly stands in for Philip Roth, multiplying the ontological confusion between notebook, novelistic reality, and reality in "the unwritten world." The non-teleological, pluralistic form of the notebook, a magpie genre to record "jottings" of all kinds, here violates generic boundaries to disrupt the novel. *The Facts* invokes a similar relationship between notebook and "unwritten world," casting Roth's notebooks as a space of transformation, both "present *and* absent," where "the facts" are recorded and transmuted into "genuine imaginative event[s]." *The Facts* then casts itself as an opposite gesture, a "desiccating" de-transformation from fiction to reach "the original, prefictionalized reality." But *The Facts* begins that desiccation with a letter to a fictional character, implicitly exposing the fantasy of any "prefictionalized reality" that it might present, and we know that the "notebook jottings" that Roth tries to restore already hybridize fiction and nonfiction too.

Answering the question "why?" to justify writing *The Facts*, Roth explains to Zuckerman in his opening letter that his attempt to recover his "original" experience stems from a devastating confrontation with the limits of fiction. Roth tells Zuckerman that "until now I have always used the past as the basis for transformation, for, among other things, a kind of intricate explanation to myself of the world" (4). By transforming "the facts," fiction paradoxically explains them, for "life, like the novelist, has a powerful transforming urge" (*Reading*, 162). But in *The Facts*, Roth describes an emotional crisis that dissolves his ability to transform himself or the facts. "I'm talking about a breakdown," he writes, "an extreme depression that carried me right to the edge of emotional and mental dissolution" (5). This "dissolution"—which he later realized resulted from a prescription for the sleeping pill Halcion, banned not long afterward—leaves him unable to transform anything: "Far from feeling capable of remaking myself, I felt myself coming undone" (5). Roth wrote *The Facts*, he tells Zuckerman, "in order to recover what I had lost," "to repossess life" (5). "Here," Roth says, "so as to fall back into my former life, to retrieve my vitality, to transform myself into

myself, I began rendering experience untransformed" (5). Where before Roth alters the facts in fiction in order to get at their facticity, here he alters the fictionalized facts in order to get at a pre-transformed self and thereby paradoxically to recover the capacity to transform.

Again, though, Roth indicates that this "prefictionalized reality" is itself a fiction, always already occupying the kind of ontologically ambiguous space generically epitomized by the notebook. Roth writes in his letter to Zuckerman in *The Facts*:

> I recognize that I'm using the word 'facts' here, in this letter, in its idealized form and in a much more simpleminded way than it's meant in the title. Obviously the facts are never just coming at you but are incorporated by an imagination that is formed by your previous experience. Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imagination of facts. (8)

Far from simply presenting the undisguised "facts" of a life, Roth says, autobiography involves "construct[ing] a sequence of stories to bind up the facts with a persuasive *hypothesis* that unravels your history's meaning" (8). Fiction always intervenes—in our memories of the past, through the way that those fictionalized memories mediate and form present experience, and in the way that narrative sequencing remains necessary for understanding. Roth's retrieval of the vital ability to transform himself in his fiction thus depends on a recovery of a prefictionalized, untransformed self that is itself always already fictive. And the very belief in a "prefictionalized reality" represents a "simpleminded," unreal, fictional ideal.

Yet "to repossess life," to regain his coherence and autonomy, Roth also must believe in the fiction that his autobiography is not mere fiction. He accomplishes this through Zuckerman. After his introductory letter to Zuckerman, Roth narrates his life up to the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969, then he concludes *The Facts* with a forty-page 'letter' from Zuckerman back to Roth. In his letter, Zuckerman first describes his relationship with Roth, framing himself as "someone through whom you [Roth] can detach yourself from your biography at the same time that you exploit its crises, themes, tensions, and surprises" (161). Zuckerman constitutes the mask by which Roth paradoxically approaches his life by

distancing himself from it. "I am your permission," Zuckerman writes, "your indiscretion, the key to disclosure" (162). Because Roth writes autobiographically in *The Facts* without the explicit mask of fiction, lacking his "key to disclosure," Zuckerman says that Roth tries "to pass off here as frankness what looks to me [Zuckerman] like the dance of the seven veils" (162). Roth thus speaks autobiographical truth about the untruthfulness of his autobiography through a letter that he writes to himself from his fictionalized alter-ego, indicating in that letter the impossibility of truth without such fictions. "There's always another text, a countertext, if you will, to the one presented" (172), Zuckerman says, then he asks Roth to distinguish his real from his adopted positions: "Is all this manipulation truly unconscious or is it pretending to be unconscious?" (164); "Which am I to believe is the posturing: the fiction or this?" (170). But the very device of the Zuckerman letter allows Roth to propose and undermine his positions at one and the same time, presenting text and countertext, deceitful autobiography and truthful fiction, simultaneously—a device, of course, that Roth has Zuckerman reveal: "Having this letter at the end is a self-defensive trick to have it both ways. I'm not even sure any longer which of us he's set up as the straw man" (192). Roth preserves his ability to believe in the illusion of the facts as he writes *The Facts* by creating an illusory Zuckerman to disillusion himself about his ability to access and portray the facts. Roth locates the facts of his autobiography in the fictional critique of his autobiography's deceitfulness.

In *Operation Shylock*, published five years after *The Facts*, Roth layers masks upon masks in order to imagine the possibility of pulling himself back together again after his "breakdown." In these metafictional, self-erasing layers, Roth exposes the self-deception by which fictional characters like Anna in *Divisadero* convince themselves of the efficacy of the fictional stories that they tell in recreating their selves. Roth thereby exposes as well the deeper fiction maintained by novelists like Ondaatje as they depict and theorize literature's transformative impact on human life. Subtitled "a confession," *Operation Shylock*'s first words

are, "for legal reasons, I have had to alter a number of facts in this book" (13). Echoing *The Counterlife*, *The Facts*, and *Deception*, Roth says, both reinforcing and undermining the legal disclaimer's claim to (altered) confessional truth, "I've drawn *Operation Shylock* from notebook journals" (13), the kinetic space in which fact and fiction indecipherably intertwine. Roth then renarrates the breakdown that he narrated in *The Facts*. "My mind began to disintegrate," he writes, "the word DISINTEGRATION seemed itself to be the matter out of which my brain was constituted, and it began spontaneously coming apart" (20). The "Halcion madness" (26) from his sleeping pills erases his very self: "'Where is Philip Roth?' I asked aloud. 'Where did he go?' I was not speaking histrionically. I asked because I wanted to know" (22). Going off the medicine, Roth begins to achieve, he thinks, "the return of the person I formerly had been" (26), something like the recovery of "prefictionalized reality."

Having split open his identity both while on Halcion and in describing the "Halcion madness," though, and having at least claimed to have countertextually rewritten "a number of facts" in the novel, Roth paradoxically and fantastically multiplies his identity in the course of recovering it from chaotic "disintegration." Roth trebles himself (at least) in the novel, and Brauner refers to Roth and 'Roth' to distinguish the author from the character in *Operation Shylock*. But within the novel, 'Roth' also meets another character who impersonates him: "I learned about the other Philip Roth in January 1988" (17). Roth has 'Roth' call up this other "Roth" on the phone, as 'Roth' fears that his doppelganger represents a hallucinatory relapse. 'Roth' never tells "Roth" who he is, instead hanging up the phone, then 'Roth' says,

> My prudence in hanging up seemed, moments afterward, to have been nothing but the expression of helpless panic, a jolting indication that, nearly seven months after coming off Halcion, I might not be detraumatized at all. 'Well, this is Philip Roth, too, the one who was born in Newark and has written umpteen books. Which one are you?' I could so easily have undone him with that; instead it was he who undid me merely by answering the phone in my name. (28)

'Roth' defines "Roth" through his nothingness, the ease with which he can be "undone." But

simultaneously, 'Roth' worries that "Roth," "the imposturing other," is "a specter created out of my fear of mentally coming apart. […] a nightmare about the return of a usurping self altogether beyond my control" (29). 'Roth' and "Roth" become, at least potentially, an infinite loop referring back to one another's nothingness, each undoing the other. 'Roth' then goes to Israel, to conduct an interview with his novelist friend Aharon Appelfeld—an interview by Roth in "the unwritten world" that did in fact appear in the *New York Times Book Review* and is excerpted faithfully in *Operation Shylock*—and to confront his impersonator "Roth." Hijinks ensue, including 'Roth' impersonating "Roth," so that we briefly have a "'Roth'" as well, a multiplicity of layers reminiscent of John Barth's quintessentially postmodernist "Menelaiad" in *Lost in the Funhouse*. At the end of the novel, "Roth" disappears, and 'Roth' is left wondering who he really was, still worried that he was just hallucinating.

In response, like the piece of paper in "Juice or Gravy" or the letter from Zuckerman in *The Facts*, 'Roth' makes up a story about "Roth" in order to piece his own broken self back together and to make sense of events. "Roth" was always accompanied by his girlfriend Jinx, who carries on a brief affair with 'Roth' as well, so 'Roth' invents a letter from Jinx to himself to explain who "Roth" was: "I came up with this. I imagined a letter from Jinx turning up in my mailbox" (362). But having invented the letter from Jinx to satisfy his curiosity about who "Roth" was and what happened to him, 'Roth' also begins to question it, "to query the likelihood of the narrative so peepingly revealed there" (362). In fact, due to the graphic sex scenes reported (by himself) in the letter, 'Roth' comes to think that "Roth" wrote the letter on Jinx's behalf, impersonating her—"He and no one else had written this letter to plunge me back into that paranoiac no-man's-land where there is no demarcation between improbability and uncertainty" (363). The letter that 'Roth' writes to himself, impersonating Jinx, in order to imagine the demise of "Roth," turns out, 'Roth' paranoiacally convinces himself, to be a letter from "Roth," also impersonating Jinx, in order to proclaim, "with his

usual sadistic ingenuity the resurgence of ["Roth"]'s powers and the resumption of his role as my succubus" (363). It isn't the fictionality of the letter that 'Roth' writes to himself that disturbs him, it is rather the additional layer of paranoiac fiction, which he takes as a haunting truth, an absent nothingness that proclaims the continuing presence of "Roth."

With the letter from no one at the end of *Operation Shylock*, Roth plays on postmodern tropes of ontological indeterminacy to demonstrate that only more writing, more fictions can ever pretend to justify the "baseless" "*nothing*" that is fiction. 'Roth' asks himself why he imagined a letter that would end up, in his paranoia, erasing itself and its usefulness:

> And why go to the trouble even to imagine a letter like this if, instead of taking heart from the news of having outlasted him, instead of being fortified by your victory over him, you self-destructively build into the letter egregious ambiguities that you then exploit to undermine the very equanimity you are out to achieve?
>
> Answer: Because what I have learned […] is that any letter less dismayingly ambiguous (or any more easily decipherable) that failed to belie itself in even the minutest way, any letter whose message inspired my wholehearted belief and purged, if only temporarily, the uncertainties most bedeviling me, wouldn't convince me of anything other than the power over my imagination of that altogether human desire to be convinced by lies.
>
> So here is the substance of the letter I came up with to spur me on to tell the whole of this story, as I have, without the fear of being impeded by his reprisal. Someone else might have found a more effective way to quiet his own anxiety. But, ["Roth"]'s dissent notwithstanding, I am not someone else. (364)

'Roth' then describes, for nine pages, the imagined contents of Jinx's letter. *Operation Shylock* concludes with a legal disclaimer, a move by which Roth playfully tries to collapse author, character, and impersonator. 'Roth,' that is, finds enough certainty to write by stripping himself of certainty, investing his invented letter with enough ambiguity that it leads to another invention, the fantasy that it was written by "Roth." Driven by his will to ignorance, "that altogether human desire to be convinced by lies," 'Roth' lies to himself in the letter that he writes to himself in order to let himself write truths in *Operation Shylock* that he then claims are lies in the legal disclaimer. But what he lies about in the letter draws attention to the fact that it is a lie, and his response to this self-conscious lie is more writing, just another set of lies.

Fiction generates fiction by exposing and then covering up its mere fictionality.

These are also games, of course, like the "trap to catch reviewers" that Mary McCarthy says that Nabokov constructs in *Pale Fire* (v). Brauner sees *Operation Shylock* as simultaneously postmodernist and a parody of postmodernism: "These ambiguities as to the nature of reality arguably owe less to the prevailing ontological skepticism of postmodernism than to the parody of it that Roth mounts in *Operation Shylock*" (102). *Operation Shylock* is Roth's "most postmodernist novel," Brauner says, "and also the novel in which he disowns postmodernism; both a defence of traditional realism and a parody of the classic realist novel; both a self-indulgent, self-obsessed book and a book that parodies its own self-indulgence and self-obsession" (115). Brauner's reading is correct—almost. Roth writes a classically postmodernist novel in order to "disown" postmodernism, but also to reclaim it. The joke is deadly serious. Roth writes fictions that disillusion us about fiction in order to re-illusion us about fiction. He disowns the idea of literarily constructing the self in order to hold onto the possibility of writing a self into being. His empty letters to himself unmask themselves as nullities in order to be fictional somethings that let him keep transforming himself, and believe that he can keep transforming himself, in his writing. Like Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, who drives home the absurdity of existence in order to argue that we "must" nevertheless "imagine Sisyphus happy" (593), Roth undertakes the Sisyphean task of unveiling and then hiding again behind the "veil of illusion" the emptiness of what we make in and through literature. Roth shows the metafictional layers of belief that underpin the vital fictions of literarily-re-constructed worlds, selves, and communities that I explored in chapters 2, 3, and 4. He demonstrates and theorizes the self-deception that goes into imagining this faith in fiction for McCarthy, Ondaatje, Morrison, and himself. And he tries to wrap us into his own life-affirming yet nihilistically empty faith in fiction by so revealing his frantic battle to maintain it, his Sisyphean struggle to repeatedly disown and rebuild his belief in literature.

Coda: Exit Fiction

If we place my analysis of Roth's fiction in dialogue with the three chapters that preceded it, which trace how McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison imagine literature repetitively reconstructing lives and worlds and communities that it never manages to hold coherently in place, we can see how even the paradoxical faith in fiction articulated in McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison's novels is itself a fiction, a necessary self-delusion that their novels, like Roth's, continually rebuild. McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison rework the Nietzschean idea of literary self-creation to show how, contra Sloterdijk, selves rebuild themselves when they fall apart, and how, contra Rorty, this rebuilding is deeply intersubjective and communal. In contrast to Attridge, Ratti, and McClure's views on community and ethics, which emphasize deferral and futurity, this model of rebuilding imagines a simultaneous presence and development into the future, a being that becomes, contra Deleuze's "being of becoming" (48). And in contrast to Hungerford's description of postmodern belief as a "belief in meaninglessness" (xiv) and Grausam's description of postmodern fiction as entropically inconclusive, the model of rebuilding that I have developed in this study locates the reconstruction of meaning precisely in its ruinous confrontation with a series of violent conclusions. What my analysis of Roth adds to this mix is the idea that the entire model of recreating selves, worlds, and communities analyzed in this study is itself a fantasy of which we must repeatedly re-convince ourselves. The strain of postmodern fiction defined by McCarthy, Ondaatje, and Morrison's depictions of reconstruction is underpinned by a deeper reconstruction of the faith in fiction penetratingly probed by Roth's writing.

I want to argue more broadly, too, that postwar American fiction, whatever its incarnation, possesses at least a small but critical interest in considering how we can rebuild the world. The recent literary spat between James Wood and Zadie Smith offers a nice framework. On the one hand, Wood, as I said in my introduction, derisively describes writers

like Pynchon, Rushdie, and Smith as "hysterical realists" who write novels that are merely "perpetual-motion machine[s]" (178), zany series of loosely-related events that try to stave off entropy. On the other hand, Smith, in her 2008 essay "Two Paths for the Novel" in the *New York Review of Books*, derisively describes "a breed of lyrical Realism," epitomized by Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, that "has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked." Six months earlier, Wood had whole-heartedly endorsed *Netherland* in *The New Yorker*, and Smith's "two paths" neatly divides up contemporary fiction into Pynchonian "hysterical realism" and O'Neill-style "lyrical Realism." Though it doesn't fit as neatly into the schema, I want to add what Stephen Marche has recently called "the social realist novel of the moment" to the mix as well. Writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Marche describes a contemporary style defined by "writers like Adelle Waldman, Meg Wolitzer, Chad Harbach, Rachel Kushner, Claire Messud and, above all, Jonathan Franzen." These novelists' social realism, Marche says, chronicles "the emerging meritocratic class and its new economic reality," as they trace the post-collegiate lives of struggling upper-middle-class American elites. Each of these strands of contemporary fiction, the classically postmodernist "hysterical realists," the "social realists," and the "lyrical realists," like the writers I've analyzed in this study, consider, at base, I want to argue, even if only glancingly, how characters can respond to the repetitively violent context of the postwar world in which they live by rebuilding themselves, their worlds, and their social relations through literature.

Let me start with the more contemporary of these writers, and then work back to an extended reading of Thomas Pynchon's *V* in order to argue that Pynchon depicts the same endeavor to rebuild as McCarthy, Morrison, and Ondaatje. In *Netherland*, O'Neill explores the fallout of 9/11, the nihilism that his first-person narrator Hans feels when his family falls apart under the post-traumatic pressure of living in New York City after the attacks—"disintegration was irresistible," Hans thinks (37). Implicitly drawing on the excavations of the

Twin Towers' rubble and the planned rebuilding of the Freedom Tower, Hans describes "a hidden and incalculable process of construction or ruination" all around (24), and he responds by turning to masks, illusions, "so that our daily motions always cast a secondary other-worldly shadow" in the world of dreams (136). Hans commissions a photo-album of his young son's life, and in its pagination, Hans thinks, "the story of my son is one that begins continuously, until it stops" (312). O'Neill here, I think, envisions the kind of becoming of being, the constant fictional recreation of a self in response to various forms of violence, that I've been describing throughout this study. Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, another novel with 9/11 at its heart, likewise explores how characters start over again when their lives fall apart. Early in the novel, Marina, a drifting Brown graduate with a book deal that she can't manage to fulfill, repeatedly convinces herself that she's about to start writing. "Maybe Marina was so busy bucking herself up," we hear, "that she had forgotten, or never noticed, that she was standing on nothing, poised in the void. The way, earlier, she had been talking so vividly, so amusingly, to no one at all" (60). After 9/11, Marina's cousin Bootie disappears, pretending to have died in the attacks, and begins his life and identity entirely anew in Florida. This sense of starting over again after violence resonates with the authors that I've focused on in this study, and Marina's position, "poised in the void" yet somehow supporting herself, imagining a ground to stand on by talking "to no one at all," echoes Roth's sense of how we reconstruct ourselves by pretending not to notice the merely imaginary nature of such self-re-construction. O'Neill's "lyrical realism," carefully interrogating Hans's reminiscences, and Messud's "social realism," unraveling the identity-crisis of elite college graduates trying to find a new way in the world, both represent, to at least a small but fundamental extent, rebuilding fictions like McCarthy, Ondaatje, or Morrison's.

And Pynchon's *V*, despite its postmodernist entropy, represents a rebuilding fiction too. *V* haphazardly follows the career of a mysterious woman named V, who embroils herself

in political and military crises from the late 19th century to the end of World War II. In chapter eleven, we read the memoir of Fausto Maijstral, a poet who watched V being physically dismembered in a bombed-out basement in Malta during the Blitz. In his memoir, Fausto argues that life is "a successive rejection of personalities," and says that in writing a memoir, "all the successive identities taken on and rejected by the writer as a function of linear time are treated as separate characters. The writing itself even constitutes another rejection, another 'character' added to the past" (306). With his classically split postmodern self, Fausto tells his story in the third person, with multiple personalities: Fausto I, Fausto II, etc. He describes the Blitz and the rubble it leaves, then he writes, "Fausto III had taken on much of the non-humanity of the debris, crushed stone, broken masonry, destroyed churches and auberges of his city. / His successor, Fausto IV, inherited a physically and spiritually broken world" (307). Fausto subjectively mimics the broken buildings around him, just as David Alworth argues in "Pynchon's Malta" that Pynchon's novel formally mimics the fractured landscape of post-World War II Malta, an Atomic Age vision of reality itself as rubble. From this rubble, though, emerges a new, a reconstructed Fausto, who writes in his memoir, "Surely if war has any nobility it is in the rebuilding not the destruction" (315). Like Ondaatje's vision of cyclical medieval warfare in the 20th century, Pynchon portrays such rebuilding from violence and trauma as a world-historical process, repeated again and again after each of the crises in which V participates, so that we hear, just after World War I, that "the Armageddon had swept past…. Despite all attempts to cut its career short the tough old earth would take its own time in dying" (461). The world goes on, we rebuild, and from our historical vantage we know that WWII succeeds WWI like Fausto IV after Fausto III.

Critically, this rebuilding, according to Fausto, covers up various truths. When asked about V's last location, he says, "I could never find that cellar again. If I could: it must be rebuilt now. Your confirmation would lie deep" (445). Recovering from war buries the truth

of V deep down, and it buries the truth of the war itself just as deep: a group of children play at being RAF pilots defending Malta, and Fausto tells us that "The RAF game was only one metaphor they devised to veil the world that was" (331). Metaphor covers up their violent reality, allowing the children to survive, and Fausto argues that we depend on metaphor to cover up all reality in order to live at all: he writes,

> Living as he does much of the time in a world of metaphor, the poet is always acutely conscious that metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice. So that while others may look on the laws of physics as legislation and God as a human form with beard measured in light-years and nebulae for sandals, Fausto's kind are alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the 'practical' half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie, confident that their machines, dwellings, streets and weather share the same human motives, personal traits and fits of contrariness as they. (325-26)

Like the will to ignorance in Roth, Fausto here argues that literature works in the world by covering up our raw contingency and existential vulnerability. Literature helps us rebuild our lives and communities and built environments by masking the world in metaphor, and it's up to the poets like Fausto to remember that these metaphors are merely masks—we might remember Nietzsche arguing that truth is "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms […] truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour" ("Truth and Lying," 146). Alworth identifies in *V* a "logic of the ruin," layering one historical catastrophe on another in order to make sense of it. And drawing on Grausam, Alworth sees the main catastrophe in *V* as Pynchon's horror at the Bomb, establishing in the novel "a context of pervasive nuclear fear. This context shapes scenes of nonnuclear ruination, endowing them with an anxiety that predominated only after 1945." Pynchon indeed traces cyclical ruination, able to give it a world-historical atmosphere because of the utter devastation that the Bomb enables. But he also emphasizes the way that metaphor, by masking its own metaphoricity, helps us rebuild.

Pynchon, that is, like McCarthy, like Ondaatje, and like Morrison explores how literature like his own might work to reconstruct a repeatedly ruined world, under the threat of World War, Cold War, environmental calamity, and the colonial situation of Malta under bombardment. And like Roth, Pynchon highlights how literature must mask its own literariness, in another layer of pretend, in order to rebuild a world, or ethics, or belief. In one of Roth's last novels, and Zuckerman's last hurrah, *Exit Ghost*, the possibility of shaping the self through literature dissolves into nothing. Zuckerman returns to New York City after years of exile in the countryside, and says that in the ascetic renunciation of his exile, "I had got rid of myself in the process" (27). Despite the incontinence induced by his prostate surgery, however, Zuckerman longs for his lost virility, pursuing the beautiful writer Jamie—"I experienced the bitter helplessness of a taunted old man dying to be whole again" (67). So Zuckerman writes imaginary seduction scenes between himself and Jamie to cover up his body's failure, arguing for the real possibility of their love in his fiction, "until I had come to believe it myself" (201). But Zuckerman, who has become so forgetful as an old man that he has to write everything down or forget it—"If I lost touch with my pages, if I could neither write a book nor read one, what would become of me? Without my work, what would be left of me?" (106)—ultimately leaves the stage alone, disappearing without Jamie. The novel's final words are stage directions for the play he was writing between himself and Jamie in his notebooks, again drawing on that genre's ontological hybridity: "*He disintegrates. She's on her way and he leaves. Gone for good*" (292). The simple facticity of Zuckerman's body undoes him, and no fiction can stitch him back together again. *No* fiction can offer anyone any more than that, either, Roth implies. And without the will to ignorance, Roth demonstrates, without the ability to cover up our recognition of fiction's nullity, we must let fiction, and the selves, worlds, and communities that it rebuilds, exit too. Fortunately we can, as Pynchon's Fausto shows us, always keep pretending. And by pretending, write.

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